ИКОНОМИЧЕСКИ ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ
ECONOMIC STUDIES

Volume 30 (2), 2021

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# BUYER BEHAVIOUR IN THE CASE OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

*The aim of this research is to study the consumer's attitude and buyers' behaviour towards organic (bio) agricultural products as key factors to influence the market development and market potential, especially for supply to other regional markets in the particular country, and for export. Three regions have been studied, all of them with production and export potential for organic products. Two of them are in Central Asia – Altay region in the Russian Federation (Barnaul and the region) and Eastern Kazakhstan (Semey and the region). Bulgaria (Sofia and Varna) was included in the research, with the idea to contrast the findings from Siberia with those from Europe. The three regions, which are covered by this survey, have the production capacity to supply the local and foreign markets with organic agricultural products. The findings of this research lead to a better understanding of the consumers' specifics, as well as – the gender specifics, and by this, it provides the producers and sellers with ideas about optimisation of their marketing communication and pricing strategies.*
*JEL: M31; Q13; L66; F18*

## Introduction

The intensive development of organic farming (e.g. Jürgensen, 2019; Shahbandeh, 2019; Coppola, 2019; Wunsch, 2019; Ministry of agriculture of Bulgaria, 2019) in the last decade, and based on that – the significant increase of the production of agricultural organic (bio) products, have changed significantly the market of agricultural products. The customers are exposed now to a new category of organic agricultural products, with different characteristics in terms of buyers' health and quality considerations. At an individual level, this new category of products triggered changes in buyer behaviour. At a business level, it developed new markets, both local and international. Many farmers, and related intermediaries, went or planned to go international, to explore the new intensively developing market opportunities.

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On the other side, the development of the organic farming depends heavily on the consumers' attitude and buyer's behaviour, which change in favour of the organic products (e.g. Wunsch, 2019; Basha et al., 2016; Mervin, Velmurugan, 2013). Mervin and Velmuragan (2016) argue that the attitude towards the organic food is derived by the "interest to healthy and quality food with high nutritional value, environmental concern and food safety". This seems to be a universal set of considerations, as these factors are valued all around the world. We share this view as well. Therefore, we decided to study the factors that influence the consumers' attitude and buyer behaviour in three regions, which have the potential to develop very intensively as organic farming regions.

## Goal

The goal of this research is to study the consumer's attitude and buyers' behaviour towards organic (bio) agricultural products of the customers in three different regions. These are:

- Barnaul area in Central Siberia;
- Semey area in East Kazakhstan;
- Sofia and Varna regions in Bulgaria.

The focus on the consumer attitude and buyer behaviour towards organic agricultural products is based on the understanding, that the development of such farming and sales is limited to a large extent to the attitude of the customers, which frames the market potential for the sales of these products. The above stated basic interest of the consumers towards healthy and quality food with high nutritional value, obviously characterises not the entire market, but rather a few market segments. The market segmentation could be made based on different segmentation variables, including health concerns, disposable income, style, demographic factors, such as age and gender, etc., parts of these segments overlap, as it is clear that there are customers, who are health-cautious, have good disposable income, and who are well educated as well. It is clear that the customers belonging the each of these segments have a different attitude and buyers' behaviour towards the bio-products. This research aims to clear on a comparative basis whether the customers in the three analysed regions have a similar attitude, especially gender-based. Any specifics of the customers' attitude and buyers' behaviour by regions and by gender could be used in the development of relevant and successful marketing strategies to develop and maintain sustainable organic farming business.

The two neighbour agricultural areas with export potential, Altay and Eastern Kazakhstan, are of significant interest from the point of view of the development of the regional economics. They have the farming/production potential for bio farming, as well as export potential – to the other regions of the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan.

Bulgaria has been selected for this research as a European version of the same – country with production and export potential for organic products.

## Method

*Research approach*

There is not much research done of this topic, considering the orientation to critically analyse the consumers' attitude and buyers' behaviour in three different geographic and cultural regions, and in addition – to study the gender differences in them. Because of that, the inductive approach has been selected (Bryman, Bell, 2015; Kothari, 2005; Eriksson, Kovalainen, 2008), which relies on gathering and analysis of quantitative data, which should provide statistical validity to the results.

*Data collection*

The data collection included both primary and secondary research (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2016; Briman, Bell, 2015; Bryman, 2008). The secondary research was applied mostly for the literature review. The primary research was used for collecting data for the analysis directly from the respondents.

*Research method for the primary research*

The survey has been selected as a research method. We used Google Drive platform for disseminating the special questionnaire to the target people, all of them belonging to the research population (Cooper, Schindler, 2014; Wilson, 2014) – all people above the age of 18, both men and women, living in the studied regions. The sampling frame included academics, students and alumni of Altay State University (ASU), Barnaul, The Russian federation, Kazakh Humanitarian Law Innovative University (KazHLIU), Semey, The Republic of Kazakhstan and Varna University of Management (VUM), Bulgaria.

*Sampling method*

A convenience non-probability sampling method was applied (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2016). The size of the three samples is as following: Altay region – 125, Eastern Kazakhstan – 112, and Bulgaria – 119 respondents.

*Research validity and reliability*

The research validity depends upon the quality of the sample and the sample size. All respondents belong to the research population, because the link to the questionnaire in Google Drive has been emailed directly to the people from the sampling frame. No other participants were allowed to participate. The sample size of the three samples exceed the minimal size for valid results, and the samples from three regions are enough good to meet the statistical requirements.

The reliability of this research depends upon whether the results of it can be replicated in another similar research in the studied regions (Heale, Twycross, 2015). It is believed that the use of the sampling method guarantees the reliability. We have unbiased and statistically representative samples. Therefore, we believe that the results of this research can be replicated in other surveys in the studied regions.

## Organic Farming and Organic Products

According to the regulations of the EU (Council regulation 834/2007) the organic production process is based on number of principles, including:

- prohibition of the use of GMOs;
- forbidding the use of ionising radiation;
- limiting the use of artificial fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides;
- prohibiting the use of hormones and restrict the use of antibiotics and only when necessary for animal health;

In addition, the organic farmers must apply the necessary techniques and approaches to guarantee soil fertility and plant health including:

- crop-rotation;
- cultivation of nitrogen-fixing plants and other green manure crops to restore the fertility of the soil;
- prohibition of the use of mineral nitrogen fertilisers;
- to reduce the impact of weeds and pests, organic farmers choose resistant varieties and breeds and techniques encouraging natural pest control;

The specific provisions for processing organic food and feed include;

- the separation of processed organic products in time and space from non-organic ones;
- a minimum organic content of 95% of organic agricultural ingredients and strict conditions for the remaining 5%;
- clear rules on labelling and on which products can and cannot use the organic logo;
- specific limits to the substances and processing aids to be used in organic production;

The EU regulations also cover animal farming/production, which we will not consider in this research, which is limited to the organic (bio) plants and products.

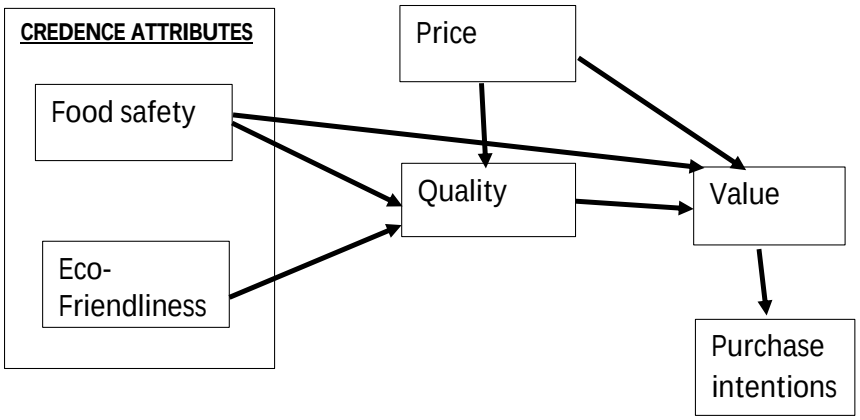
## Consumer Perceptions, Attitude and Buyer Behaviour

It is clear, that the buyer behaviour, including in the case of organic agricultural products, is always based upon the consumer perceptions and attitude towards the particular product or service. Many authors agree that ***the perception*** is "the process by which people select, organise and interpret the information to form a meaningful picture of the world" (e.g. Kotler, Armstrong, Harris, Piercy, 2017, p. 153; Solomon, Marshall, Stuart, 2018, p. 190; Blagoev, 2003, p. 91). Among the factors, which influence the formation of the perception about organic agricultural products as well, the three most important seem to be the consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value (Zeithaml, 1988; Blagoev, 2003). According to

Zeithaml (1988), and many other scholars, the consumers use the visible product attributes, e.g. design, colour, price, brand name, etc., as cues to judge the product quality. It is clear, that the quality perception, which is developed by assessing key product attributes, is essential to product choice decisions (Olson, Jacoby, 1972). Darby and Karni (1973) argue that the attributes could be classified as search, experience and credence attributes. The price and colour, for example, belong to the search category, because the buyer can see and evaluate them directly. There are attributes, such as the taste, which cannot be evaluated before having a direct personal experience. The third category – credence attributes, are those which the customers cannot assess even after the purchase and consumption. Fernqvist and Ekelund (2014), Lee and Yun (2015), Moser et al. (2011), and Lee and Hwang (2016) for example, claim that the organic products fall in credence category, as the consumer cannot control, analyse and assess such key attributes of the organic agricultural products such as the production process, non-genetically modified seeds, industrial and other pollution on the side, etc. Lee and Hwang (2016, p. 144) model of credence attributes in organic food consumption describes quite well the role of the credence attributes in the consumer buyer decision-making process (Figure 1) in the organic food consumption.

Figure 1

Lee & Hwang model of credence attributes in organic food consumption




*Source: Lee & Hwang, 2016, p.144.*

The previous research shows that such product attributes as the nutrition value and non-chemical residues (Tsakiridou, 2008; Lee, Yun, 2015), health safety and quality, which are obviously credence attributes, form the perception, although the buyers/consumers have no other chances to assess them, but based on the provided marketing information. Considering this, we included in the questionnaire, used in the survey, questions which give an understanding about the level of knowledge of the consumers in Barnaul and Altay region, Semey and Eastern Kazakhstan, and Sofia and Varna regions in Bulgaria, to see to what extent that knowledge forms their perceptions.

The next step in the consumer/buyer behaviour is the formation of attitude towards the organic products. According to Solomon et al. (2018, p. 195), attitude is "a learned predisposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to stimuli. Based on relatively enduring evaluations of … objects and issues." This research is focussing on the attitude of the customers in the studied regions towards the organic agricultural products, based on their perceptions and the influence of the marketing and other, e.g. health-related, stimuli. Altogether, they form the buyer behaviour, which is the final point of the decision-making process to buy, or not to buy the bio-product in case of cheaper non-bio alternatives. There is plenty of research of this in different countries, for example in Sweden (Magnusson et al., 2001), Finland (Tarkiainen, Sundqvist, 2005), and USA (Lee, Hwang, 2016). When the consumers associate the organic products with the natural process and non-use of pesticides (Shafi, Rennie, 2012), they chose the bio-products even when the price levels are quite different. As discussed above, such an attitude would be formed on the basis of positive perception about the credence attributes and positive acceptance and interpretation of the marketing and other stimuli. We included in the questionnaire questions, which should give us a better understanding of the consumer attitude in the studied regions.

It is very important for this research, to analyse the respondents' buyer behaviour vs their stated perceptions and attitude towards the bio-products. Based on our previous experience, we expect discrepancy between the declared perceptions and attitude, and the buyer's behaviour at the time of purchase. Considering that, we asked directly if the respondent would buy an organic product in case of a cheaper non-bio alternative? Michaelidou and Hassan (2008), for example, found that food safety is the most important predictor of attitude, "while health consciousness appears to be the least important motive…". Magnusson et al. (2001) found that the most important purchase criterion was the good taste (egocentric orientation), while the least important was "organically produces". Even in such a wealthy country as Sweden, the premium prices were considered to be the major obstacle for buying bio-products if there are tasty cheaper alternatives. The situation has not changed with respect to the disposable income since 2001. Some sources (e.g. Huddleston, 2019) show that even in the USA the price considerations now might be very strong stop-factor for the sales of organic products.

Zagata (2012, p. 86) found that the behavioural beliefs of the Czech consumers "are related to health aspects and taste". Obviously, these different findings raise the question which market segments, and to what extent would go for the organic products, if the health consciousness is not the driving force? Our aim in this research is to contrast the responses to the health-consciousness question to that of buyer behaviour in case of cheaper non-bio alternative. If health-conscious motives, which in many cases (except for the people with health problems) are based on credence attributes, lead to the purchase of organic products, then there is a great potential for strong, intensive development of the regional organic agrobusiness, and respectively – for export. In case that health consciousness is not a strong driving force, the potential for intensive development of the bio agrobusiness will be quite limited.

## Gender Effect

The personal factors are obviously very important in the case of buying food products, and especially food products of a new category, such as the organic products. The gender and age play special roles here, as they are related for example to different biology (men and women), and health issues (young vs old people), which of course lead to different needs, motivation, perceptions and attitude (Treleaven, 2015; Schiffman, Kanuk, Hansen, 2012; Svatošová, 2013; Blagoev, 2010). For example, Brownell (2011) claims, that the women usually express a higher level of security consciousness, which leads to relevantly manifested needs and motivation for secure products.

Although this has changed in the last decades as a result of the socio-economic changes in the society (Galinsky, Aumann, Bond, 2011), but still deep in their minds many women regard themselves as home and family-carers, which influences their consumer behaviour subconsciously (e.g. Otnes, Zayer, 2012; Alexandrova, 2018; Belk, Scott, Askegaard, 2012). At least some of the differences in the consumer behaviour manifest the effect of gender roles in which the males and females feel more comfortable in the habitual processes. Because of that, this research addresses specially the way the respondents address the studied issues based on their gender.

The study on the differences between men and women is the case of organic agricultural products is of interest from one more point of view – the decision making process as part of the consumer/buyer behaviour. Siddiqui (2016) for example, claims that "men usually see a problem as an opportunity to present their own competences", while for the women "there is also an emotional aspect of resolving the issue". The women show much higher emotional involvement in the buying process than men (Dittmar, Long, Meek, 2004).

## Working Hypotheses

Considering all said above, two working hypotheses are postulated:

**Hypothesis 1:** *In spite of globalisation, the people in the studied regions have different knowledge and interpretation of what bio (organic) agricultural product means*

**Hypothesis 2:** *The price and perceived quality of organic products are positively related.*

The analysis of the answers of the respondents to the particular questions will confirm or reject the particular hypothesis. Whatever will be the result, this research will lead to a better understanding of the consumers' specifics, as well as – the gender specifics and will provide the practice with ideas about optimisation of the marketing communication strategies.

## Findings and Discussion

The survey was carried out simultaneously in the three regions: Altay region of the Russian Federation (Barnaul); Eastern Kazakhstan (Semey), and Bulgaria (Sofia and Varna). The three samples included as following: Altay region – 125 respondents, Eastern Kazakhstan –

112 and Bulgaria – 119 respondents.[4] The findings of the research in relation to the defined hypotheses show very interesting results. We will discuss them here one by one.

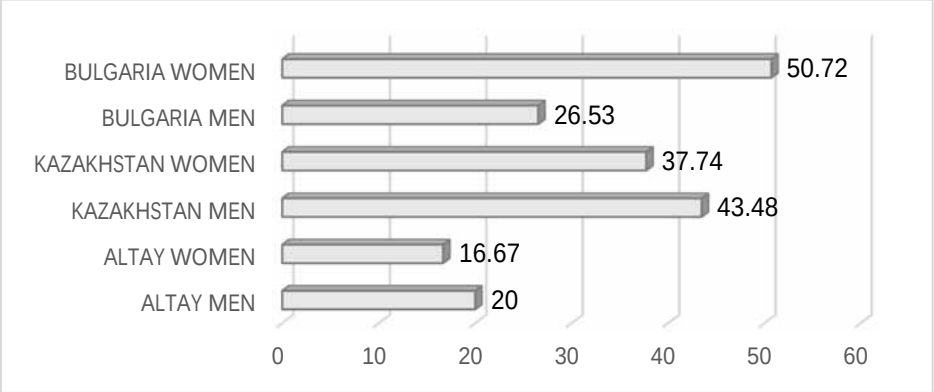
*Results on Hypothesis 1*

*In spite of globalisation, the people in the studied regions have different knowledge and interpretation of what bio (organic) agricultural product means.*

As discussed above, the organic (bio) agricultural products are characterised with credence attributes (e.g. Fernqvist, Ekelund, 2014; Lee, Yun, 2015; Moser et al., 2011; and Lee, Hwang, 2016), as the consumers cannot control, analyse and assess such key attributes of the organic agricultural products such as the production process, non-genetically modified seeds, industrial and other pollution on the side, etc. Therefore, the consumers would hardly have a similar understanding and interpretation of what really the bio-product is. Figure 2 shows the results of asking the respondents do they know what bio-product is and how it differs from other agricultural products on the market. It is quite interesting that there is a significant difference between the level of information/interpretation of the respondents both by regions and by gender. For example, the level of knowledge (based on their personal judgment) of the female respondents differs from 50.7% in Bulgaria, to 37.3% in Eastern Kazakhstan and 16.7% in Altay region of Russia. There is 3 times the difference between the highest and lowest levels of presumed knowledge of the female respondents (Figure 2). The results are quite different for men as well: from 43.5% in Eastern Kazakhstan, who know what bio-product is, to 26.5% in Bulgaria, and 20% of men in Altay region, Russia.

Figure 2

I know what Bio-product means and how it differs from other




[4] For shortness and simplicity, in the charts Altay and Kazakhstan will be used instead of Altay region, and Eastern Kazakhstan.

These results confirm Hypothesis 1. It is clear that the people have a different understanding about this category of products, and obviously, this would lead to different perceptions and attitude towards them in their buyer behaviour.

*Results on Hypothesis 2*

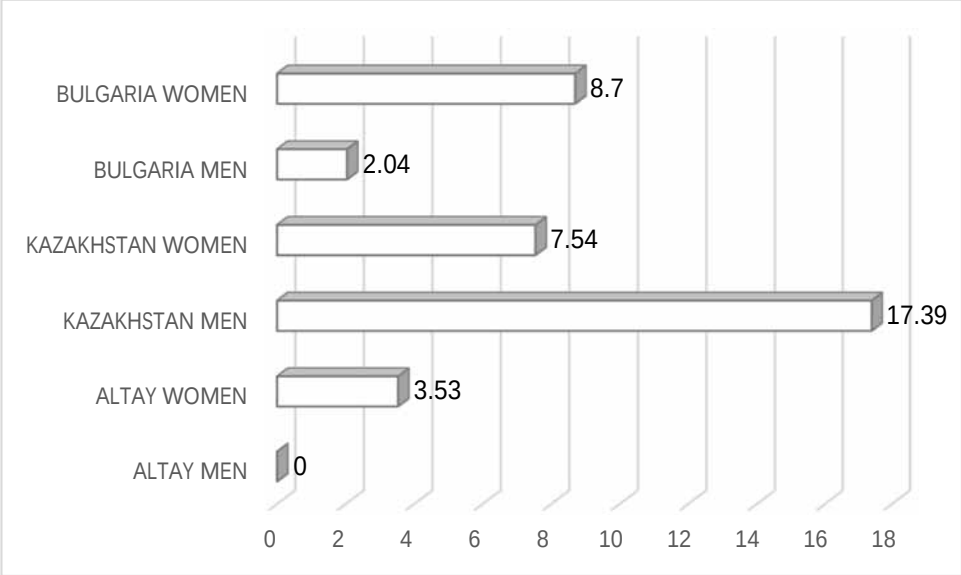
*The price and perceived quality are positively related for the organic products.*

As discussed above, Magnusson et al. (2001) and other researchers have found that the premium price of the organic products affects their sales negatively even in wealthy countries, such as Sweden. This is a serious issue as it affects the buyer behaviour, which is influenced by the health considerations, sometimes concerns, and the price as an economic factor in the decision-making process. The results of the survey on what the respondents would buy – the more expensive bio-product, or the cheaper non-bio-product by country and gender are shown on Figure 3 and Figure 4.

- ***I will always buy bio-product, although more expensive*:** They differ significantly: from 17.4% for Eastern Kazakhstani men, to 2% for the Bulgarian men, and zero % for the men in Altay, and from 8.7% of the Bulgarian women, to 7.5% of the Kazakhstani ladies, to 3.5% for women in Altay (Figure 3).

Figure 3

I would always buy a Bio-product at a higher price, and not the cheaper non-bio-product

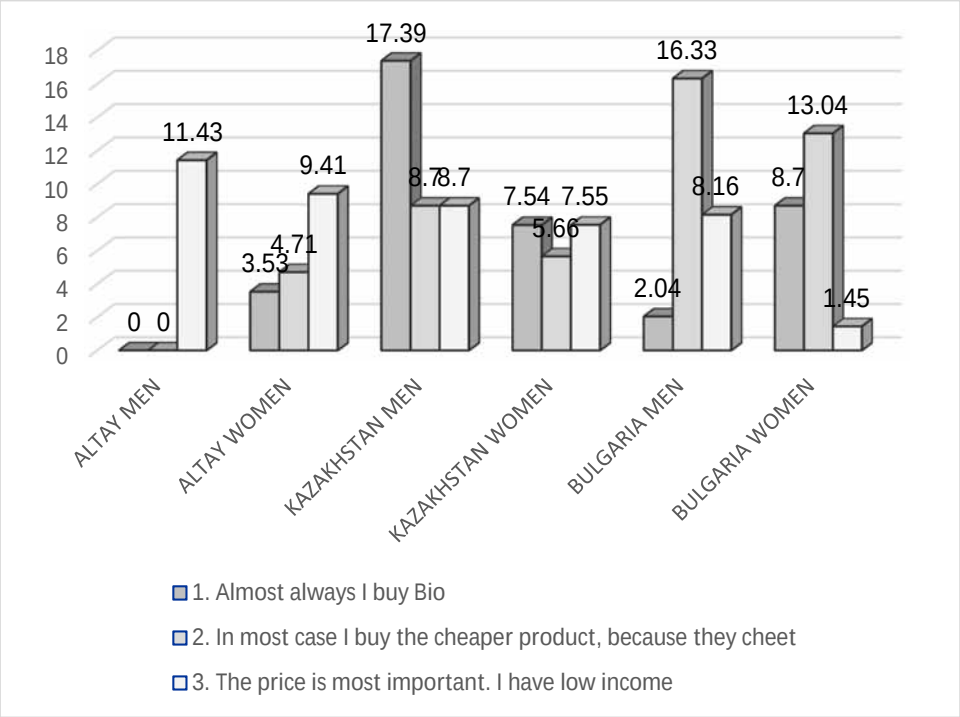



- ***I would not buy bio-product because they do not trust the information of the producers/sellers*:** 16.3% of Bulgarian men, and 8.7% on Kazakhstani men would not

buy bio-products "because they cheat" (Figure 4). Interestingly, no one of the Altay respondents expressed such concerns.

Figure 4

Would you buy a Bio-product at a higher price, or you would but the cheaper non-bio-product?




The responses of the female respondents differ in a similar way: 13% of Bulgarian ladies, 5.7% of Kazakhstani and 4.7% of Altay ladies would not buy bio for the lack of trust. Interestingly, the highest percentage of lack of trust is shown by the Bulgarian respondents, who would be expected to be trustful, as they live in a member-state of the EU, where the rules and regulations on the organic production and products are expected to be well set up, and implemented. As seen, the results from the survey do not confirm our expectations for some low percent of respondents, but the vast majority do not share such concerns.

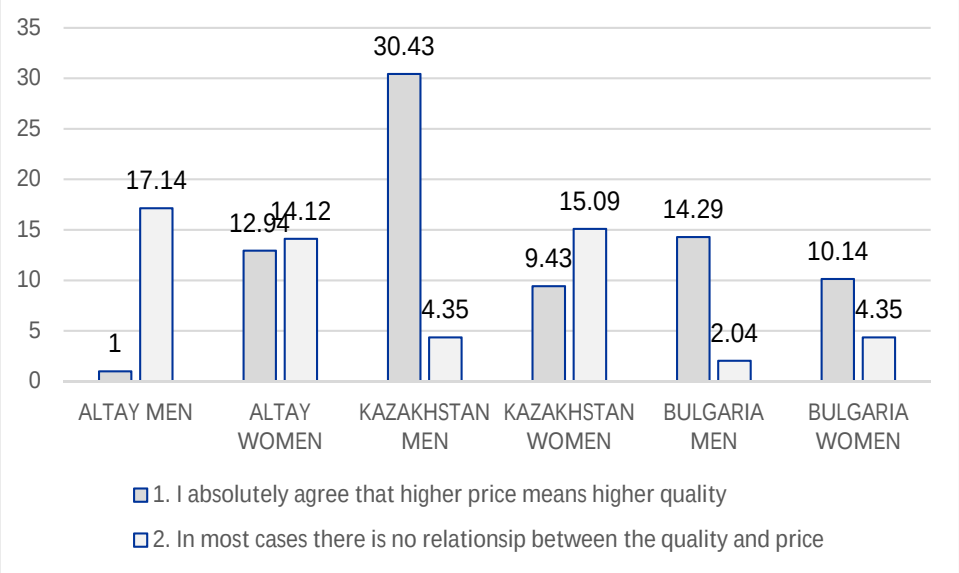
- ***The price is the most important factor as I have low income*:** the results are similar for the male respondents who would not buy because of the low income (11.4% for Altay, to 8.7% for Eastern Kazakhstan, and 8.2% for Bulgaria). For the female respondents, 9.4% of Altay ladies, 7.6% from Eastern Kazakhstan and 1.5% from Bulgaria will not buy for low income. We can guess if the (relatively) higher percent of Bulgarian ladies, who will always buy bio in spite of the premium price, and the low percent of declaring they would not buy for low income, is a result of good information about the effect of bio-products on health, or it is just a coincidence.

The answers to the question: "Do you agree that the more expensive products are of higher quality?" address directly Hypothesis 2 (Figure 4). There is a big difference between the perceptions of the respondents – both by country/region, and by gender.

- ***Higher price means higher quality:*** the results from the male respondents differ from 30.4% for Kazakhstani men, to 14.3% for the Bulgarians, and to 1% for Altay men, who agree that price equals quality. The ladies have a more consolidated opinion: 13% for Altay ladies, 10.1% from the Bulgarians, and 9.4% form Kazakhstani ladies agree that price means quality.
- To the control question "In most cases, there is no relationship between the quality and price" 17.1% of Altay men, 15.1% of Kazakhstani women and 14.1% of Altay women agree with this statement (Figure 5). About 4.4% of Kazakhstani men, 4.4% of Bulgarian women, and only 2% of Bulgarian men disagree with it.

Figure 5

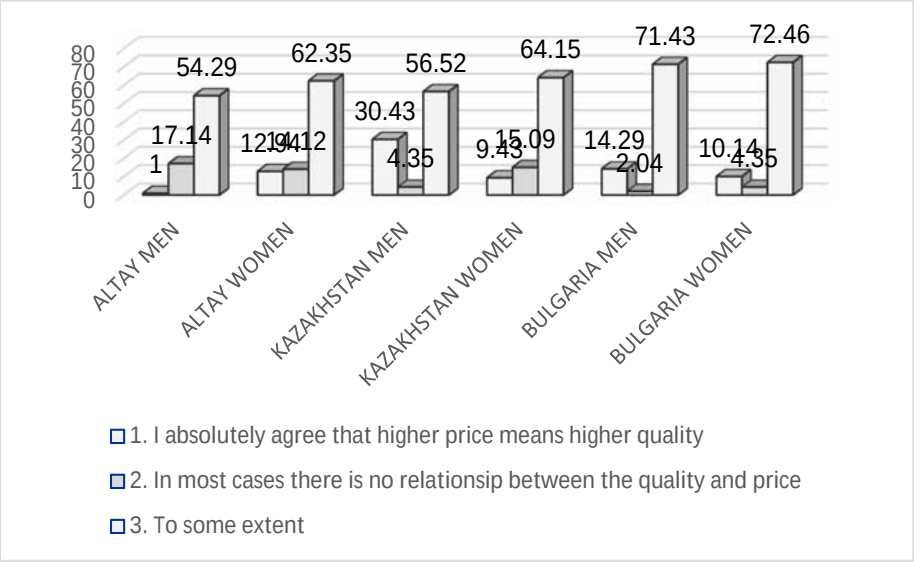
Do you agree that the more expensive products are of higher quality?




Altogether, an average of 63.5% of all respondents agree that the price and quality are related to some extent (Figure 6). Obviously, "to some extent" is a highly subjective feeling, yet altogether with the percent of those who absolutely agree, we can consider Hypothesis 2 confirmed.

Figure 6

Do you agree that the more expensive products are of higher quality?




## Conclusions

As discussed in the previous sections, many researchers found out that in general, we should presume some differences in the needs, motivation, perceptions and attitude of the female and male buyer (e.g. Treleaven, 2015; Schiffman, Kanuk, Hansen, 2012). The findings of this research also show significant differences between the opinion of the respondents (Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5). These differences should be considered as they lead to differences in the interpretation and of the effect of the marketing stimuli and the marketing mix in whole. The three regions, which are covered by this survey, have a production capacity to supply the local and foreign markets with organic agricultural products. Our aim was to study the consumer's attitude and buyers' behaviour towards organic (bio) agricultural products as key factors to influence the market development and market potential, especially for supply to other regional markets in the particular country, and for export. Thus, this research leads to a better understanding of the consumers' specifics, as well as – the gender specifics, and by this, it provides the producers and sellers with ideas about optimisation of their marketing communication and pricing strategies.

Two working hypotheses were postulated and tested in the research:

**Hypothesis 1:** *In spite of globalisation, the people in the studied regions have different knowledge and interpretation of what bio (organic) agricultural product means.*

Many researchers are interested to find out to what extent the globalisation has changed the consumer attitude and buyer behaviour, especially for the products with high local content,

e.g. agricultural products. While it is clear that the people have a different understanding about this category of products, and obviously it would lead to different perceptions and attitude towards them in their buyer behaviour, it is not clear to what extent the global vision about the health value of the organic products has gone across the borders to form a similar perception. A similar level of liking bio-products as findings from the research would mean a universal perception and similar level of production and export potential, and such a result would reject Hypothesis 1. If significant differences would be found, it would mean the markets are at a different level of development – as local suppliers and exporters, and this would confirm Hypothesis 1.

A significant difference was found between the level of information/interpretation of the respondents both by regions and by gender (Fig. 2). For example, the level of knowledge (based on their personal judgment) of the female respondents differs from 50.7% in Bulgaria, to 37.3% in Eastern Kazakhstan and 16.7% in Altay region of Russia, which is 3 times difference between the highest and lowest levels of presumed knowledge of the female respondents. The results for the male respondents are different as well: from 43.5% in Eastern Kazakhstan, who know what bio-product is, to 26.5% in Bulgaria, and 20% of men in Altay region, Russia. Thus, the results confirm Hypothesis 1.

**Hypothesis 2:** *The price and perceived quality of organic products are positively related.*

We asked the respondents to agree or disagree with the statement *"Higher price means higher quality"*. The results from the male respondents differ from 30.4% for Kazakhstani men, to 14.3% for the Bulgarians, and to 1% for Altay men, who agree that price equals quality. The ladies have a more consolidated opinion: 13% for Altay ladies, 10.1% from the Bulgarians, and 9.4% form Kazakhstani ladies agree that price means quality. Most of the respondents claim that "from time to time" there is some relationship between the quality and price.

Our research also found, that 16.3% of Bulgarian men, and 8.7% on Kazakhstani men would not buy bio-products "because they (the producers and sellers) cheat" (Figure 4).

However, an average of 63.5% of all respondents agree that the price and quality are related to some extent (Figure 5). Together with the percent of those who absolutely agree, we can consider Hypothesis 2 confirmed.

An important finding of this research is, that 16.3% of Bulgarian men, and 8.7% on Kazakhstani men would not buy bio-products "because they (producers, sellers) cheat" (Fig.4). Interestingly, no one of the Altay respondents expressed such concerns. This finding suggests, that the farmers and sellers, as well as the state as a whole, have to take special measures to assure the consumers, that the concept of healthy food, in this case – agricultural bio-products, are produced following all the regulations and set quality standards at all stages of the process – seeds, production, storage before and in the market, etc. This is important because any increase of the lack of trust may transform into social and market problems.

*Gender Effect*

This research shows very significant differences between the opinion of the male and female respondents. As seen on Figures 2-5 the findings show differences in the opinion of male vs

female respondents from 50% to several times (for example Figure 4). Such differences raise questions about the effectiveness of the marketing information and marketing stimuli to male or female consumers/buyers, when the advertisements are focussing on one of the genders only. Our suggestion is to consider very seriously the gender of the target customers when planning and developing the specific marketing communication campaigns.

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