



Consumer preference, behavior and perception about meat and meat products: An overview



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ABSTRACT

Meat and meat products currently represent an important source of protein in the human diet, and their quality varies according to intrinsic and extrinsic parameters that can sometimes be shaped to make a product more desirable. Because consumers are the final step in the production chain, it is useful to identify which factors affect their behavioral patterns. This would allow the meat sector to better satisfy consumer expectations, demands and needs. This paper focuses on features that might influence consumer behavior, preferences and their perception of meat and meat products with respect to psychological, sensory and marketing aspects. This multidisciplinary approach includes evaluating psychological issues such as attitudes, beliefs, and expectations; sensory properties such as appearance, texture, flavor and odor; and marketing-related aspects such as price and brand.

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1. Introduction

Meat and meat products are an important source of protein in human diets, and their consumption depends on socio-economic factors, ethics or religious beliefs, and tradition. Globally, pork is consumed the most (15.8 kg/capita/year), followed by poultry (13.6 kg/capita/year), beef (9.6 kg/capita/year) and finally sheep and goat meat (1.9 kg/capita/year) (FAOSTAT, 2014). The consumption varies among and within countries. For instance, in Muslim countries pork consumption is extremely low or absent, whereas it can exceed 50 kg/capita/year in countries such as Austria, Poland, Germany and Lithuania (FAOSTAT, 2014). Fig. 1 shows the distribution of meat consumption by continent, and it is possible to see important differences in both quantity and type of meat.

Consumers are the last step in the production chain, and having their expectations met is an important part of their satisfaction and shopping behavior. It is therefore important to understand the factors affecting consumer behavior. In this paper we will divide the issues that explain these factors into three types: psychological (individual factor), sensory (product-specific factor) and marketing (environmental factor) (Fig. 2). These aspects are interrelated and, in turn, depend on additional factors that affect consumers' decision-making. The importance of the components of the model depends on the consumer, context, culture or available information and might influence individual behavior to

different degrees. In this paper we focus only on some of these aspects and how they affect consumer behavior and preferences for pork, beef and lamb and/or their acceptance. We also examine preferences for some meat products, especially dry-cured ham.

The following general and theoretical overview of the psychological aspects will be examined in order to better understand the sensory and marketing variables, which are presented afterwards via specific examples.

2. Psychological factors

Consumers as rational beings are affected by many external inputs that can modulate their cognitive, emotional, volitional and even automatic actions. The role of psychological influences on people's behavior has been widely analyzed and described in the scientific literature, especially in relation to the selection and purchase of different products, services or experiences (Axelson & Brinberg, 1989). Factors such as motivation, perception, attitudes and expectation drive our ordinary life and make our individual conduct predictable from a social, economic, cultural or psychological perspective. In the next paragraphs, some of these factors—attitudes, beliefs and expectations—are examined in the context of the selection and consumption of meat and meat products.

2.1. Beliefs and attitudes

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), beliefs represent the information that a person possesses about an object, action or event that can

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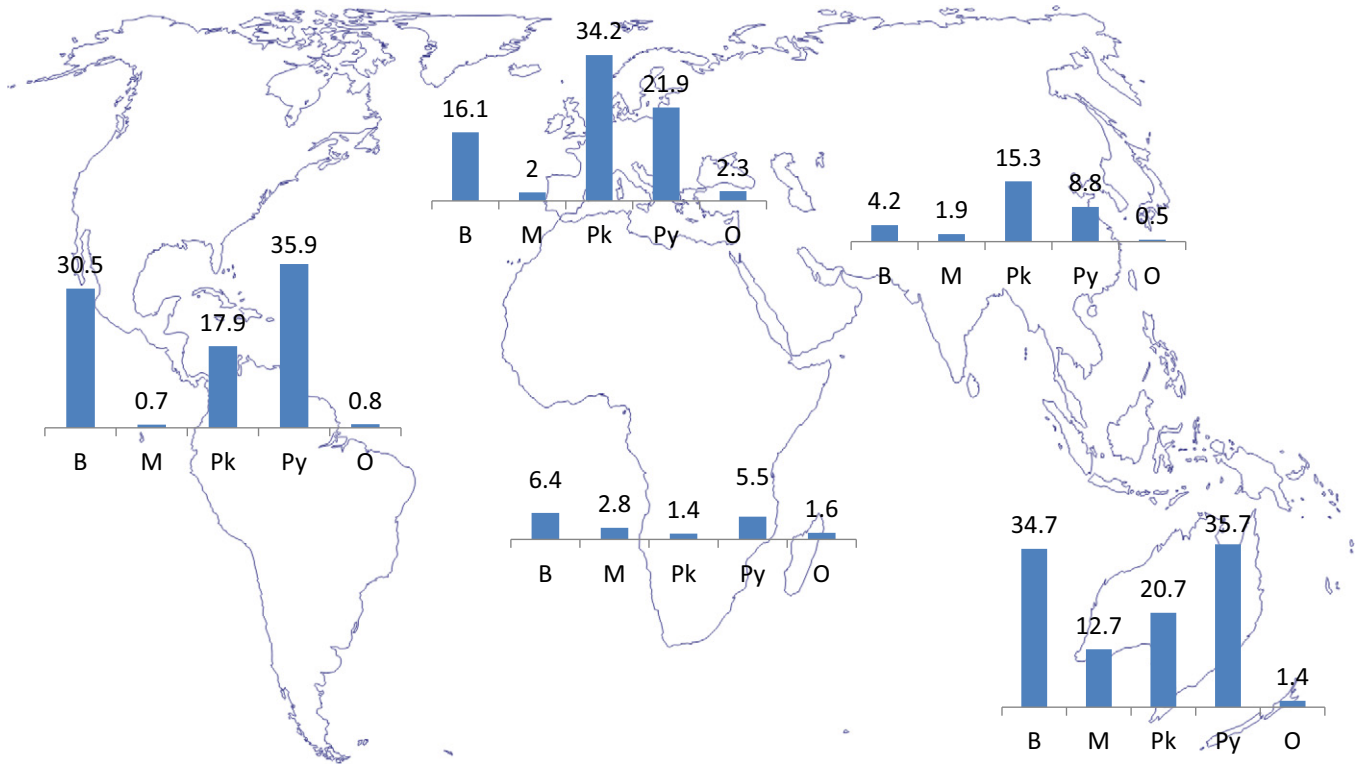


Fig. 1. Consumption (kg/capita/year) in 2009 of bovine meat (B), sheep and goat meat (M), pig meat (Pk), poultry meat (Py) and other meats (O) by continents (Source: FAOSTAT, 2014).

be therefore linked to some attribute. Beliefs can be conceptualized as “cognition” (Axelson & Brinberg, 1989) and represent an individual’s perception (opinion) of the relationship between the given object, action or event and the particular attribute associated with it (Smith, Walker, & Hamidova, 2012). Belief formation is a lifelong dynamic process (Castelfranchi, 2004) that can be developed by direct observation (descriptive beliefs about products are mainly formed by consumers through their experience with them), by information (informational

beliefs are formed by accepting information provided by an outside source such as mass media, relatives, friends, doctors, etc.) and by inference (inferential beliefs are formed by inferential connections through previously acquired experience and knowledge) (Finn, 1981; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Smith et al., 2012). Beliefs are founded on experiences or acquired knowledge and the personal characteristics that determine consumer attitudes, buying intentions and preferences (Friedler & Bless, 2000; Ivan & Penev, 2011; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988), even though

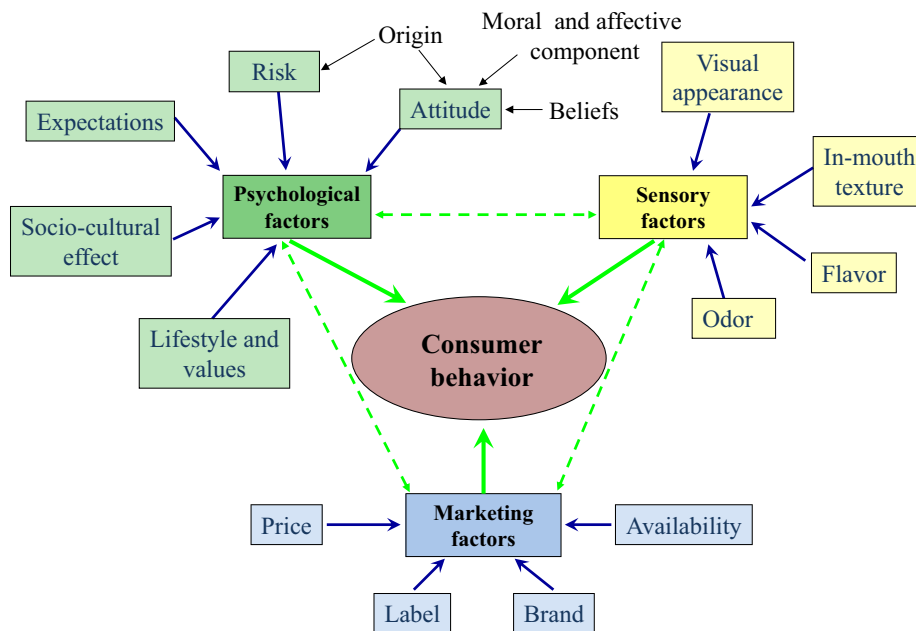


Fig. 2. Multidisciplinary model of the main factors affecting consumer behavior in a food domain.

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