

Article

# Ajvar in Focus on Branding Based on Consumer Habits

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to identify guidelines for the branding of the Serbian product "Ajvar" based on research on consumer attitudes and habits. Methodologically, the research was conducted by surveying 186 respondents from Serbia and interviewing the manufacturer. A SWOT analysis was used to synthesize the findings. The results indicate that the majority of respondents (96.8%) expressed a preference for domestic Ajvar, while price is the key factor when making a purchase decision (72.6%). The majority of respondents are ready to pay a higher price for Ajvar with the BIO label (56.5%). Also, consumers prefer mild varieties of Ajvar and indicate the need to reduce salt and additives to make the product healthier. It was concluded that the branding of "Ajvar" should focus on educating consumers about the importance of the brand, improving the visual identity, and promoting its traditional and healthy values. This strategy contributes to a more secure placement for producers and greater consumer confidence. The branding of Serbian Ajvar represents an opportunity for positioning on the domestic and international market, which encourages the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of local products.

**Keywords:** *Branding; Ajvar; consumers; producers; research and Serbia.*

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## 1. Introduction

It is known that the production of agricultural food products is being directed to a healthier organic way and that everything is discussed about it. Modern conditions of production are recognizable by continuous changes in the market, as well as cooperation with suppliers, competitors, and behavior toward consumers. So it is necessary to give importance to the branding of certain products. Interrelations of culture, creativity, and economy have always attracted the attention of researchers and experts, but they mostly had a negative connotation [1]. Namely, in today's market economy, the basic paradigms in the field of business have changed, so market players must adapt to the changes. Consumers are becoming aware of and increasingly prefer domestic or organic products [2]. The producers themselves are directing more and more financial resources towards building a brand that gives them recognition on the market and therefore differs from other products. The modern way of doing business is unthinkable without the term branding because it has an important role in assessing the quality of a particular product. Therefore, the brand becomes a decisive factor when making a purchase decision. Food products are not only products for nutrition but show a lot about what the producers are like, but also about the consumers, their habits, lifestyle, cultural and historical characteristics, as well as about the value of the product itself. Consumers recognize brands, and it is up to manufacturers to form brands based on names, logos, and/or designs. Meanwhile, new trends are based on numerous benefits, new research on the relationship

between culture, cultural heritage, and tourism, along with engagements and activities based on the concept of sustainable cultural heritage, along with the economic benefits of tourism as an economic activity are important in branding [3]. This sector is divided into the following categories: advertising and marketing, print media, architecture, craftsmanship and old crafts, design, graphic industry, film, television, radio and photography, then IT and software development and computer services, publishing, museums, galleries and libraries, music industry, performing and fine arts [4]. Branding a product implies in a narrower sense making a decision that includes the selection of identity elements, while in a broader sense, it implies the engagement of strategy and activities with which common and special elements are defined for their unity in the existing portfolio of a particular product, to distinguish the brand not only visually but also awaken consumer awareness. Branding is not intended only for physical products, services, or companies, it also involves the engagement of persons, above all those who are recognizable, i.e. known [5]. Most often, they are actors, famous musicians, writers, politicians, athletes, managers, and other people involved in public affairs. Understandably, there is a great interest in the concept of personal branding because it is necessary to better understand how a personal brand is constituted and managed in the contemporary labor market characterized by frequent changes, dynamic engagements that are project-based, and growing uncertainty [6]. That is why the Spencer [7] notes that we live in a time when more than ever there is a great need to build a personal brand. In the continuation of the work, we will give some of the definitions of the brand: AMA (American Marketing Association -1967), defines a brand in such a way that it considers it a term, sign, symbol, or design, as well as a combination with the basic idea to identify the product or service of certain manufacturers from competitors [8]. IFOAM (2014) concludes that the positive trend from the past is not interrupted: consumer demand is growing (with 10% growth in the world's largest market in the USA), more and more farmers are turning to domestic production (plus 5%) and more and more farmers own production certificate (plus 0.5% compared to 2012) [9], [10]. The increase in the placement of organic agricultural and food products on the market is conditioned by the application of an appropriate branding strategy for organic agricultural and food products as part of the overall marketing strategy of economic entities. In further work, the authors distinguished themselves by basing their research on the branding of "Ajvar".

Ajvar is a delicacy (spread), a specialty of the Balkans, which is becoming increasingly popular in many markets with an increasing demand for vegan, ethnic, and organic food [11]. Ajvar is a delicacy or spread made from sweet peppers, which is especially popular in the Balkans in Serbia, North Macedonia (FYROM), Bulgaria, Bosnia, and Croatia. It is known as "Serbian salad" or "Serbian caviar". The name comes from the Turkish word Hajvar, which means salted fish eggs or caviar. Ajvar is a special type of salad, made from red pepper (Serbian Roasted Eggplant Pepper Spread (Ajvar)). Ajvar has a specific taste and aroma of smoked paprika and should be without other smells and tastes, it can also be made with the addition of hot pepper, when (Ajvar Association, 2011) The minimum content of dry matter should be 15%, except for paprika, the product may contain up to 3% edible oil. Vinegar and 2% salt. Ajvar should have a uniform density without extracting the liquid. The product should not contain preservatives. Namely, producers in Serbia have a traditional "know-how" approach, which is the basis for the initiation of serious production of agricultural products, but there is a serious problem that is reflected in the extremely small number of market producers. Modern conditions have changed the way of life, and therefore the lack of domestic agricultural products on the market, so consumption as well as prices of these products differ from other products, so consumers themselves are not able to afford them. Consumers with better incomes and higher education are more likely to buy domestic products. Consumers now have no opportunity or time to find ingredients for healthy, fresh meals and are constantly searching for food products that would compensate for the lack of fresh home-grown food. Representatives of Generation X are less interested, while the baby boom generation lags on every issue [12]. Food is becoming another platform for branding, both for consumers and food producers [13]. These consumers are more informed and educated than the previous ones because they are aware of the impact of agriculture on the environment. The cultural and historical context plays a significant role in shaping consumption habits related to Ajvar. Studying the traditional customs, rituals, and festivals associated with the consumption of Ajvar can provide us with a deeper understanding of why people

have certain attitudes and preferences regarding this product. In modern society, marketing strategies have a significant impact on consumer habits related to Ajvar. Promotional activities, advertising campaigns, and different packaging and branding can influence consumer perceptions of product quality and value. With the growing awareness of healthy eating, consumers have increasingly paid attention to the health aspects of food consumption, including Ajvar. Studying consumer habits related to Ajvar reveals deep connections with culture, history, and economic factors. While traditional customs and recipes are passed down from generation to generation, in modern society we encounter various marketing strategies and the influence of health trends on consumer habits.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The complexity of studying the creation of the food product brand "Ajvar" implies a greater range of scientific methods. The first part of the work involves the use of a literature review in the field of nutritional data on Ajvar, marketing, and branding, and the second part is a research part. The following methods were used in this paper: analysis, synthesis, and interview with the producer of "Baka Goca's Ajvar". The research was conducted on a sample of 186 respondents residing in the territory of Serbia. Based on the obtained results, conclusions can be made about important facts that are important for the consumer's purchasing decisions. Also, an analysis of the situation was performed using the SWOT analysis method, which summarizes the results.

## 3. Results

A total of 186 respondents participated in the research, of which 40 were men and 146 were women (Table 1). The majority of respondents are aged 36 to 45 (31.7%), while the smallest number of respondents are 56 to 65 (5.4%) and over 65 (1.1%) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents.

		f	%
Gender	Male	40	21.5
	Female	146	78.5
Age	18-25	34	18.3
	26-35	36	19.4
	36-45	59	31.7
	46-55	45	24.2
	56-65	10	5.4
	65+	2	1.1
		Belgrade and surroundings	56
Place of residence	Vojvodina	19	10.2
	Western Serbia	103	55.4
	South Serbia	2	1.1
	Eastern Serbia	1	0.5
	Šumadija	5	2.7
Level of education	Basic education	3	1.6
	High school	94	50.5
	College or university	89	47.8
	Pupil or student	25	13.4
Work status	Employed	141	75.8
	Unemployed	14	7.5
	Pensioner	6	3.2
Monthly income	Until 60000 dinars	74	39.8
	from 60001 until 120000 dinars	91	48.9
	Preko 120000	21	11.3

More than half of the respondents are from Western Serbia (55.4%), while the smallest number of respondents are from Eastern Serbia (0.5%) and Southern Serbia (1.1%) (Table 1). Respondents mostly completed high school (50.5%) and college or university (47.8%) (Table 1). The vast majority of respondents are employed (75.8%) with a monthly income of RSD 60,001 to 120,000 (48.9%) (Table 1).

Also, consumer habits related to ajvar were investigated. More than half of the respondents consume ajvar in winter (53.2%), and then throughout the year (44.1%) (Table 2). Packaging is not important to the vast majority of respondents, but price is more important to them (72.6%) (Table 3) and they prefer domestic ajvar (96.8%) (Table 4). Based on Figure 1, it can be concluded that most respondents prefer the mild type of ajvar (59.81%). Most respondents are willing to pay from 500 to 800 dinars for domestic ajvar (59.1%), while the smallest number of respondents who would pay over 1000 dinars for domestic ajvar (2.7%) is (Table 5). More than half of the respondents are ready to pay more for ajvar labeled BIO (56.5%) (Table 6). The majority of respondents would like to reduce the amount of salt and additives to make ajvar healthier (35.57%) and to have a larger selection of organic and locally grown ingredients (32%) (Figure 2).

**Table 2.** How regularly do you consume Ajvar during the calendar year?

	f	%
Throughout the year	82	44.1
During the winter months	99	53.2
Second	5	2.7
Total	186	100

**Table 3.** How important is packaging and aesthetic appearance to you when choosing a product?

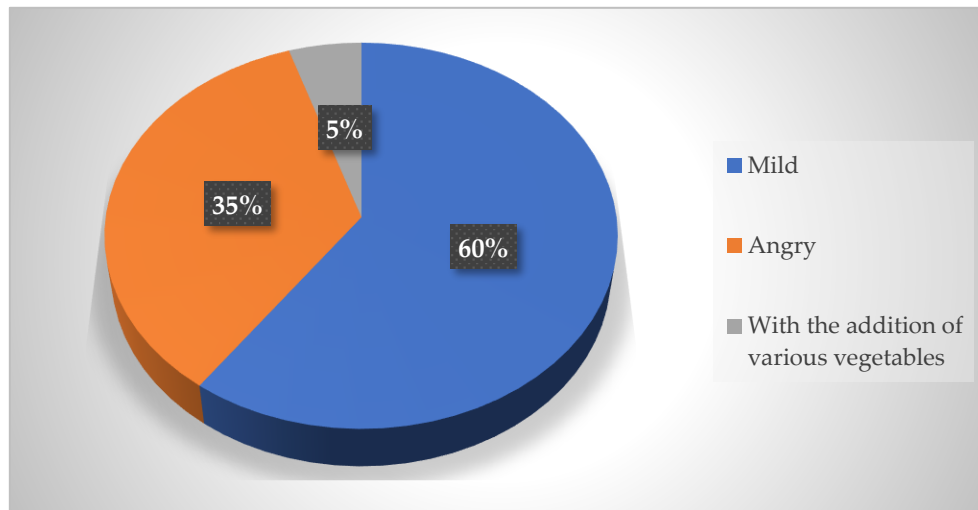
	f	%
It doesn't matter to me, what matters to me is the price	135	72.6
It is very important to me, the price is not important to me	51	27.4
Total	186	100

**Table 4.** Would you rather use homemade Ajvar or opt for ready-made versions available in retail stores?

	f	%
I prefer homemade Ajvar	180	96.8
I prefer buying Ajvar	6	3.2
Total	186	100

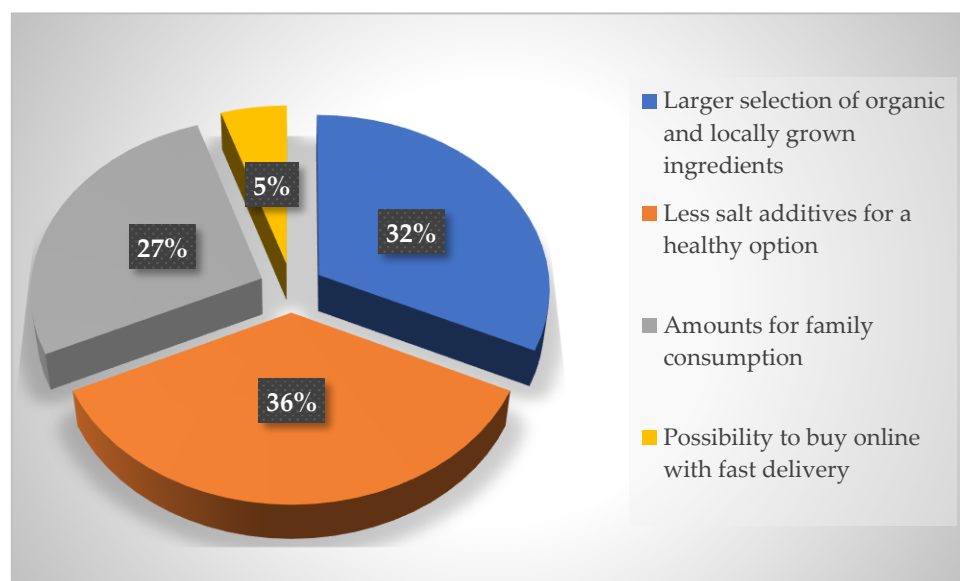
**Table 5.** How much would you be willing to pay for homemade Ajvar compared to purchased options?

	f	%
Less than 500 dinars	42	22.6
From 500 to 800 dinars	110	59.1
From 800 to 1000 dinars	29	15.6
Over 1000 dinars	5	2.7
Total	186	100



**Figure 1.** Which types of ajvar do you prefer?

Mild ajvar (60%): Most respondents prefer mild ajvar, indicating that it is the most sought-after type on the market. This suggests that producers should maintain or increase the supply of mild varieties of ajvar, potentially improving quality and promoting its benefits. Hot ajvar (35%): A significant part of the market is looking for hot versions. There is a possibility for diversification of spicy varieties, such as different levels of spiciness (slightly spicy, medium spicy, extra spicy), to meet the needs of different consumers. Ajvar with added vegetables (5%): This category is currently the least in demand, but it can be an interesting niche. It is possible to experiment with different vegetable additions, such as eggplant, zucchini, or carrots, and promote these varieties as innovative and healthy options. Recommendations: Focus on increasing the visibility of mild and spicy varieties, as they account for 95% of preferences. Improving the variety in the hot ajvar offering, including different levels of spiciness. Manufacturers can test the market with new products from the "vegetable supplements" category through promotional campaigns or limited series to attract new consumers.



**Figure 2.** What changes or additions would you like to see in the Ajvar offering on the market?

Based on the presented data on respondents' preferences for changes or additions to the Ajvar offer: Less salt and additives for a healthy option (36%): The largest percentage of respondents prefer

healthier Ajvar options, which indicates a growing awareness of health and the need for products with less content salt and additives. Producers can develop and promote "healthy" lines of ajvar with natural ingredients and minimal processing. Greater selection of organic and locally grown ingredients (32%): This data points to an interest in sustainable and ecological products. There is room for the introduction of ajvar with the label of organic origin and locally grown ingredients, which can further attract consumers interested in quality and support for local producers. Sizes for family consumption (27%): Respondents want packaging options tailored to larger families or communities. Manufacturers may consider introducing larger packaging (eg 1 kg jars) to meet this need. Ability to buy online with fast delivery (5%): Although this is the least requested option, it represents the potential for the digital transformation of sales. By introducing online sales and fast shipping, manufacturers can win over tech-savvy customers and expand the market. Recommendations: Focus on consumer health (reduction of salt and additives). Promote ajvar with organic and local ingredients. Develop flexible packaging options (family sizes). Introduce and test online sales with promotional actions to increase demand.

**Table 6.** Would you be willing to pay a higher price for a product that has the label "BIO" on it?

	F	%
Yes	105	56.5
No	81	43.5
Total	186	100

Based on the results shown in Table 7, it can be concluded that most respondents have never used online shopping with fast delivery (27.4%), while the smallest number of respondents regularly use online shopping with fast delivery (11.3%). More than half of respondents make purchase decisions based on personal preferences (52.2%), while the smallest number of respondents choose products based on marketing messages (5.4%) (Table 8). For the respondents, the most important information is the method of production (40.9%), as well as the ingredients and nutritional information (30.6%), while the social responsibility of the brand is the least important to them (3.8%) (Table 9). Based on the respondents' answers shown in Table 10, it can be concluded that more than half of the respondents believe that the Internet and social networks do not influence the perception and decisions about buying ajvar and that they prefer traditional sources of information (51.6%). The vast majority of respondents do not attend ajvar fairs (67.2%), while a small number of respondents sometimes (16.1%) or rarely (15.6%) attend ajvar fairs (Table 11). Respondents believe that the quality of ajvar that can be obtained in the local environment is very good (M=3.90, SD=1.04).

**Table 7.** How would you rate the importance of online delivery in the process of purchasing Ajvar?

	f	%
I regularly use online shopping with fast delivery	21	11.3
Sometimes I use online shopping with fast shipping	35	18.8
I rarely use online shopping with fast shipping	37	19.9
I have never used online shopping with fast shipping	51	27.4
Being able to buy online with fast delivery is not important to me in total	42	22.6
Total	186	100

**Table 8.** How would you describe the current marketing influence of Ajvar on your purchasing decisions?

	f	%
I often choose products based on marketing messages	10	5.4
Sometimes I pay attention to marketing actions	46	24.7
I rarely consider the marketing aspects when making a purchase	33	17.7
I make purchasing decisions based on personal preferences in total	97	52.2
Total	186	100

**Table 9.** Which information on the packaging of Ajvar do you consider crucial when making a purchase decision?

	f	%
Origin of the product	46	24.7
Method of production	76	40.9
Ingredients and nutritional information	57	30.6
Social responsibility of the brand	7	3.8
Total	186	100

**Table 10.** How the internet and social networks influence your perception and decisions about buying Ajvar.

	f	%
They make a big difference - I regularly research products and read reviews online	18	9.7
They have a mild effect - I occasionally look for information on the Internet	33	17.7
Minimal influence - I rarely use online sources for information about Ajvar	39	21.0
They don't influence - I prefer traditional sources of information	96	51.6
Total	186	100

**Table 11.** How often do you visit Ajvar fairs and similar events dedicated to traditional products, and what factors influence your decision to attend such events?

	f	%
I regularly visit Ajvar fairs, because I like to discover new brands and tastes	1	0.5
Sometimes I attend Ajvar fairs, depending on time and location	30	16.1
I rarely or never visit Ajvar fairs, because it is not a priority choice for me to buy	29	15.6
Going to the Ajvar fair depends on the presence of specific brands or events at that fair	1	0.5
I do not attend Ajvar fairs	125	67.2
Total	186	100

The final part of the work was done with the Ajvar producer. We spoke with Slobodan and Olivera Jelesić, the producers of "Baka Gocin Ajvar". "Baka Gocin Ajvar" is our family brand of domestic ajvar. In 2017, we started production and sales, and in 2018, sales began under the name "Baka Gocin Ajvar". Also, considering that our grandmother has been making ajvar for as long as we know, it was logical to name the brand after her. In the first year of sales (2017), around 500-600 jars were sold, while this year 6000 jars were sold. In 2020, "Baka Gocin Ajvar" started exporting to Austria, where we sell 1500 jars annually. In Serbia, we supply many grocery stores (e.g. "Karađorđe") and various markets, while in Austria we supply one store and one restaurant chain. "Question no. 1: How did your interest in the production of domestic ajvar begin and what prompted you to get into that business? "Ajvar is a traditional dish in our house. We have been consuming and making it since we can remember. The interest in the production of ajvar started at the moment when the guests at our celebrations asked to buy ajvar, and then we realized that it could be a good financial moment for our family." Question no. 2: What are the biggest challenges you faced in the process of producing homemade ajvar and how did you overcome them? "One of the biggest challenges is certainly and always to provide quality raw materials for the production itself. And we overcome them by now working with several suppliers so that if one fails, we find raw materials from another because production must not stop." Question no. 3: How important is the local community to you in your business and how has your production of domestic ajvar contributed to the local community? "The local community is very important. After all, due to the volume and needs of production, we came up with the idea of hiring seasonal workers from the local community, thus helping both the community and the workers through the financial moment." Question no. 4: What marketing methods do you use to attract new customers and maintain existing ones? "We use word-of-mouth marketing exclusively. Until now, we have not been able to do better marketing because we would not be able to meet the demand, at least for now."

**Table 12.** SWOT analysis display.

<b>Strength</b>	<b>Weakness</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ajvar production tradition,</li> <li>- Product quality,</li> <li>- Reasonable price,</li> <li>- Distinctive taste,</li> <li>- Availability on the European market</li> <li>- Unique recipe,</li> <li>- A well-known recipe,</li> <li>- Differentiated products on the market.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small production capacities,</li> <li>- Insufficient state support in production,</li> <li>- Producers do not know modern marketing practices,</li> <li>- Unfavorable financing conditions from banks,</li> <li>- Insufficient cooperation of large trade chains,</li> <li>- Weak education of producers,</li> <li>- Technological obsolescence.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunity</b>	<b>Threat</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High demand for domestic product,</li> <li>- Marketing of products to EU countries,</li> <li>- Cooperation with large and small trade centers,</li> <li>- Positive impact on the gastronomic tourism offer,</li> <li>- Improvement of mechanization.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Competition between neighboring countries,</li> <li>- Increase in Ajvar prices,</li> <li>- Climate change,</li> <li>- Uncertified production of Ajvar,</li> <li>- Investments that can bypass the entire market,</li> <li>- Market with economic and political risk.</li> </ul>

Question no. 5: What are your plans for the future regarding your domestic Ajvar production and how do you plan to develop in the coming years? "Our plans in the future are, of course, to grow

the basic raw materials for production - peppers and eggplants, as well as to expand production capacities and to expand the range of pepper products." SWOT analysis is a method used to evaluate a company's strategy and includes four key factors: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. The most important external and internal factors for the future of the company are called strategic factors. The external environment consists of opportunities and threats that lie outside the firm and are usually not under the short-term control of management, and the internal environment consists of strengths and weaknesses.

The results of the analysis point to the strong potential of Ajvar as a product with deep-rooted tradition, quality, and recognition on the market. Tradition, unique recipes, and availability on the European market provide the basis for differentiation and competitive advantage. However, weaknesses such as small capacity, lack of technological innovation, and poor knowledge of modern marketing strategies limit the growth potential. Opportunities are reflected in the growing demand for authentic products, placement on the European market, and cooperation with trade chains, while the improvement of production technologies and inclusion in the gastro-tourism offer can further increase visibility and sales. However, threats such as competition from the region, climate change, and economic risks require proactive management. The key strategy should include investments in technology and education of producers, product certification, and strengthening cooperation with trade networks to reduce risks and take advantage of all opportunities for further growth and development of Ajvar as a recognizable product.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of research on consumer habits and brand perception of Ajvar provide important insights into understanding consumer behavior and their preferences towards this traditional product. First of all, the dominance of female respondents (78.5%) and the largest number of respondents between the ages of 36 and 45 (31.7%) indicate the profile of the target group that most often consumes Ajvar. Additionally, the fact that more than half of the respondents come from Western Serbia (55.4%) suggests a regional connection with this product and perhaps a stronger traditional connection with Ajvar consumption. Respondents with secondary and higher education (98.3%) and those with stable monthly incomes between 60,001 and 120,000 dinars (48.9%) represent a key group that can contribute to the popularization and further commercialization of Ajvar. As expected, the majority of respondents are employed (75.8%), which implies that Ajvar can be perceived as a premium product, especially in the context of preferences for domestic versions (96.8%) versus store-bought ones. Interestingly, 56.5% of the respondents expressed their willingness to pay a higher price for a product labeled "BIO". This indicates a growing consumer awareness of healthy eating and appreciation of natural, organic products. On the other hand, the fact that 72.6% of respondents put price before packaging and aesthetics suggests that the functional value of the product is still dominant when making purchasing decisions. Another interesting aspect is the temporal seasonality of Ajvar consumption. More than half of the respondents (53.2%) consume ajvar during the winter months, while 44.1% use it throughout the year. This indicates the potential for market expansion through the promotion of Ajvar as a product for everyday use. The results of preferences indicate that the largest number of respondents like a mild type of Ajvar (59.81%) and that they are ready to pay from 500 to 800 dinars for a domestic product (59.1%). This can be a guiding factor for manufacturers when choosing a pricing strategy and market segmentation. Also, the results indicate the desire of consumers to reduce the amount of salt and additives (35.57%) and increase the availability of organic ingredients (32%), which opens up space for innovation in the production of Ajvar. Marketing aspects show that more than half of respondents make purchase decisions based on personal preferences (52.2%), while only 5.4% of respondents choose products based on marketing messages. This indicates the need for a personalized approach and the creation of campaigns that will emphasize the authenticity and quality of the product. Additionally, 51.6% of respondents believe that the Internet and social networks do not significantly influence their purchasing decisions, which indicates the importance of traditional communication channels, such as recommendations and direct contacts. It is interesting to note that the majority of respondents (67.2%) do not attend

Ajvar fairs, which suggests the need for greater promotion of these events to increase consumer awareness and engagement. The quality of locally available Ajvar was rated as very good ( $M=3.90$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ), which indicates a potential competitive advantage for domestic producers. This research confirms the importance of Ajvar branding in the context of increased consumer awareness of healthy nutrition, price, and local origin of the product. Recommendations for further research include a deeper analysis of the impact of traditional and digital marketing strategies, as well as expanding the sample regionally and internationally to explore the possibility of building Ajvar as a global brand.

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the collected data, the research indicates the increasing importance of branding in the agri-food sector, with a special focus on traditional and organic products such as Ajvar. Consumers are increasingly valuing local and healthy nutrition, which is reflected in their preference for domestic Ajvar and willingness to pay a higher price for products with the "BIO" label. Also, the results show that consumers give priority to the quality and nutritional value of the product over the aesthetics of the packaging. Respondents recognize the importance of tradition and local origin, while modern marketing tools, including social networks and digital promotion, have limited influence on their decisions. This points to the need to design branding strategies that will align product authenticity with modern consumer trends. In conclusion, branding Ajvar as a traditional Balkan product has the potential to increase its recognition in the domestic and international markets. Key recommendations include focusing on promoting health benefits, reducing additives, introducing more organic ingredients, and educating consumers about the importance of local production. Additionally, the emphasis on sustainable practices and cultural heritage can further contribute to the success of this product in a competitive market.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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