

Article

Consumers' Purchasing Determinants towards Mountain Food Products

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Abstract: Mountain agriculture is a very important source of ecosystem services, such as cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and biodiversity. However, traditional farming practices in those areas, particularly dairy livestock, are in sharp decline. For this reason, it is fundamental to find a way to improve sustainability using a holistic approach as indicated by the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategies. The “Mountain product” label can be a suitable tool to reach this aim. However, studies on consumers' opinions concerning mountain food products are scarce. To fill this gap, a logit model was adopted in this study to define factors that influence consumers' purchase intention toward mountain products. Additionally, the open-ended contingent valuation method was used to estimate consumer willingness to pay for milk labelled “mountain product”. The paper highlighted that consumers are interested in buying mountain products and that they are willing to pay a premium price for these products. However, the “mountain product” label is still poorly recognised and applied. Policy makers and institutions should invest more in the training of farmers, so as to improve their knowledge of this label. Furthermore, it is necessary to advertise this label to consumers to support quality local production.

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1. Introduction

The production of local food contributes to rural development and economic regeneration, thereby increasing the sustainability of local economies [1]. This is particularly true in disadvantaged areas such as mountainous regions, where the economy is closely based on territorial resources, and the food products show a set of specific features, such as organoleptic characteristics, which are attributable to the mountain environment and local tradition [2]. However, in recent years, there has been a gradual abandonment of agricultural activities in these areas, particularly dairy farming, due to lower competitiveness and higher production costs compared to intensive production [3–5].

A study of the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention highlighted that of the 570,000 Alpine farms recorded in 1980, only 260,000 remained in 2010 [6]. The loss of traditional agricultural activity, particularly livestock, contributes to the disappearance of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge [7], and has an environmental impact due to changes in land management approaches, such as the abandonment of meadows and pastures that leads to the loss of biodiversity [8].

In recent years, consumers' attention to environmental and ethical issues has increased, leading to a substantial search for traditional, local, and healthier food production [9,10]. These characteristics are usually associated with the collective imagination of mountains, thought to be made up of green valleys, clean waters, and pure air, with a strong cultural identity represented by mountain traditions, ancient rural agricultural

buildings, and traditional processing methods [11]. Consumers' interest and the progressive increase in demand for traditional but green products make mountain food an important resource for the conservation and revitalisation of mountain areas.

According to the Eurobarometer [12], over half of European consumers struggle to identify agri-food products produced in mountain areas. This implies that many products not originating in mountain areas use the "mountain" term, or the associated imagery, in their marketing, and as a result reduce the potential market advantage for products that do originate from mountain areas and create confusion in potential consumers. [13]. This could be linked to the asymmetric information problem [14].

To overcome the market failure and to reduce the actual risks of asymmetric information, the European Union (EU) established the "quality package" [15], a quality food policy aiming to protect the denomination of specific food products to endorse their unique characteristics, linked to the territory and traditional know-how. In the "quality package", the EU settled the grounds and boundaries and introduced the specific quality term "Mountain product" label (MPL). In addition, the conditions and limits for the use of this new label were delineated in Delegated Regulation No 665/2014 [16], in which the EU suggests Member States transpose the EU legislation by adopting it within their territory [17]. In Italy, the EU legislation was implemented by the Decree of the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry of 26 July 2017 [18], and the Italian logo was launched in early 2018 [19]. The introduction of this label is in line with the holistic approach proposed by the EU in the new Green Deal and Farm to Fork strategies. In other words, to achieve more sustainable food production it is necessary to take into account the complexity of these systems, from the environmental and climate crisis to social and economic challenges, on different scales, from local to global.

By promoting mountain food products, the EU aims to protect consumers, and, at the same time, support the mountain agri-food sector and the diversification of local economies, for sustainable development in European mountain regions. As a matter of fact, stakeholders could benefit from the exploitation of the positive image of mountains, increasing not only the added value of their food products, but also of the services that these areas offer [20].

In this context, there are still few studies analysing the consumer perspective of mountain food products [21] and the consumer acceptability of the MPL [22]. In order to fill this gap, this paper aimed to verify consumer attitudes toward mountain products, analyse the degree of appreciation for the MPL and define consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) for a typical labelled mountain product. More specifically, the paper attempted to provide an answer to the following research questions:

1. Which factors influence consumers' attitudes towards mountain products?
2. Do consumers know of the MPL?
3. Is consumer behaviour influenced by the MPL?
4. WTP for a typical labelled mountain product.

To answer those questions, an ad hoc questionnaire was developed. A logit model was adopted to define factors that influence consumers' attitudes toward mountain products. Additionally, the open-ended contingent valuation method was used to estimate consumer WTP for milk labelled "Mountain product". We selected milk because it is a representative product from the mountain areas. This is confirmed by the fact that the dairy industry is one of the sectors with the highest number of products to have joined the MPL certification in Italy [23]. In addition, milk is one of the most important products in terms of food spending in Italy [24]. The consumption of milk as a commodity is decreasing, while the demand for a product of local origin, that is environmentally friendly and with good taste is increasing [25–29].

Even so, the well-known European quality schemes, Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), to date, have not been applied to milk, but only its derivatives. Therefore, the origin of milk can be promoted exclusively

through the use of Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG) “Hay Milk” [30] or through the optional indication of the MPL, which was chosen for this research.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the consumer questionnaire design, data collection and adopted methodologies; the main results are presented in Section 3 and discussed in Section 4; Section 5 concludes the document by highlighting the implications and limitations of this study.

2. Materials and Methods

In this section, the consumer questionnaire design, data collection, and adopted methodologies are described.

2.1. Consumer Questionnaire Design

The analysis was conducted with the use of an online survey. The questionnaire was structured in four main sections with a total of 29 questions.

In the first section, the consumer’s behaviour regarding the mountain product was evaluated. In particular, the respondents were initially asked whether they had ever purchased mountain products. If yes, questions regarding purchase habits, such as frequency, place and the kind of product usually bought, were asked. If the respondents had never purchased a mountain product, they were asked to indicate two main reasons. Then, the attitude towards mountain products was measured with the application of aptitude scales already existing in the literature. Indeed, we chose to use the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) developed by Steptoe et al. in 1995 as a basis [31]. More specifically, from this scale, we used statements aimed at analysing motivation related to the following: “health”, “mood”, “convenience”, “sensory appeal”, “natural content”, “price” and “familiarity”. In addition, this scale was completed with other statements related to various factors influencing the food selection choice among consumers, such as “ethical concepts”, “social and cultural” and “marketing and commercial”. The “ethical concepts” factors were derived from the works of Lindeman and Väänänen [32], and Żakowsja-Biemans [33]. The “social and cultural” and the “marketing and commercial” factors were derived from the work of Ferrão et al. [34]. In total, 31 items corresponding to the mountain food-related statements were considered, which were then listed randomly in the final questionnaire.

Table 1 shows all the statements utilised in this study and the references. All statements were measured on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (Completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree).

Table 1. List of the final statements.

Motivations	N° of Statements	Statements	References
Health	4	<i>Is nutritious (nutritious)</i>	[31]
		<i>Keep me healthy (healthy)</i>	
		<i>Contains a lot of vitamin and minerals (vit_min)</i>	
		<i>Is high in protein (protein)</i>	
Mood	2	<i>Cheers me up (cheers)</i>	[31]
		<i>Makes me feel good (feel_good)</i>	
Convenience	2	<i>Can be bought in shops close to where I live or work (nearby_live)</i>	[31]
		<i>Is easily available in shops and supermarkets (availability)</i>	
Sensory Appeal	3	<i>Tastes good (taste)</i>	[31]
		<i>Looks nice (look)</i>	
		<i>Smell nice (smell)</i>	
Natural Content	3	<i>Contains no additives (no_additives)</i>	[31]
		<i>Contains natural ingredients (nat_ingr)</i>	
		<i>Contains no artificial ingredients (no_art_ingr)</i>	
Price	3	<i>Is not expensive (not_expensive)</i>	[31]

		<i>Is cheap (cheap)</i> <i>is good value for money (good_value)</i>	
Familiarity	2	<i>Is what I usually eat (usually_eat)</i> <i>Is familiar (familiar)</i>	[31]
Ethical concepts	6	<i>Has been produced in a way that animals have not experienced pain (an_no_pain)</i> <i>Has been produced in a way that animals' rights have been respected (an_right)</i> <i>Mountain products respect the environment (env_friendly)</i> <i>Is packaged in an environmentally friendly way (pack_env_friend)</i> <i>Has been produced in a way which has not shaken the balance of nature (resp_net_bel)</i> <i>Contributes to the development of rural areas (rur_dev)</i>	[32] [33]
Social and cultural	4	<i>Food from season (seasonal)</i> <i>New foods (new_food)</i> <i>Food trends (trend_food)</i> <i>Unknows foods (unknowns)</i>	[34]
Marketing and commercial motivation	2	<i>Appealing foods (appealing)</i> <i>Recognise TV commercials (commercials)</i>	[34]

The second section of the questionnaire included questions dedicated to the evaluation of the consumer purchasing behaviour towards the MPL. At the beginning, a definition of mountain food products and the Italian ministerial logo were provided to the interviewee; then, the interviewees were asked to indicate if they already knew of the logo and if they had already bought something with it. After that, we asked questions regarding the purchase habits of labelled products, such as the frequency, the place and the kind of product usually bought. Subsequently, questions about the perception of the label were asked.

The third section was dedicated to analysing the respondents' WTP for labelled fresh mountain whole milk, a product of particular importance in mountain areas [35].

Finally, the final section consisted of a set of questions to collect personal and socio-demographic information, such as gender, age, educational qualification, family income, family unit and the possible presence of children.

2.2. Data Collection

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed online through social networks (Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook) and instant messaging (WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger). This method was chosen because these data collection strategies are cheaper than traditional approaches, such as face-to-face or telephone surveys, facilitate the collection of large amounts of data during interviews straight away, and answers could be easily collected in a database and processed. To minimise the sampling problem, which in internet research studies is not random and could generate selection bias, we distributed the questionnaire link on pages and online groups with a general and specific target audience. Moreover, the questionnaire was restricted to a single compilation per interviewee to avoid double compilations. Another bias is that an online surveys make it impossible to reach people who do not have access to technology [36–38]. However, this problem is increasingly losing importance as internet access is constantly on the rise [39].

Before launching the survey online, it was pre-tested by a focus group of 30 people of the Department of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences (D3A-UNIVPM, Italy). The focus group was asked to debate the comprehension of the questionnaire and to validate its efficacy before launching the survey online. The purpose of the pre-test was

to assess the necessity of restructuring and reviewing the questions, in order to make them more comprehensible.

2.3. Logit Model

To pursue the aim of the work and analyse the factors that influence consumers' intention to purchase mountain food, a logit model was employed.

The logistic coefficient could be interpreted as the change in the logit associated with a one-unit change in the independent variable, while all the other variables remained constant. The exponential of the logistic coefficient is the effect on the odds rather than probability [40]. In this research, the detailed equation of the logit model is:

$$\text{Logit}(\text{model}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1\chi_{\text{socio-demographic}} + \beta_2\chi_{\text{label}} + \beta_4\chi_{\text{attitudes}} + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where " β_0 " is the constant and " β_i " is the coefficient of " χ_i ".

The dependent variable chosen was the consumers' intention to buy, coded 1 if the consumers buy mountain products, or otherwise zero. The independent variables, derived from the literature, represent the factors that might have an influence on the consumers' behaviour. As we can see in Equation 1, the explanatory variables (independent variables) included in the models can be grouped into three main areas:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample:

- Female dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if the respondent is female and 0 otherwise;
- Age, in six groups (1 = <20; 2 = 20–29; 3 = 30–39; 4 = 40–49; 5 = 50–59; 6 = >60);
- Education, a variable that takes ascending values from 1 to 6 from lower to higher education (1 = No formal education; 2 = Elementary school; 3 = Middle school; 4 = Highschool; 5 = Bachelor's degree; 6 = Master's degree; 7 = Ph.D. or higher);
- Occupation, in 11 categories (1 = Worker; 2 = Clerk; 3 = Manager; 4 = Housewife; 5 = Trader; 6 = Entrepreneur; 7 = Lecturer; 8 = Student; 9 = Freelancer; 10 = Retired; 11 = Unemployed);
- Family unit, the number of family members of the respondent;
- Children under 14 years old, dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if there are children in the family unit and 0 otherwise;
- Income range, a variable that takes a value from 1 to 6 and corresponds with increasingly high-income brackets (1 = <10,000 EUR ; 2 = 11,000–20,000 EUR ; 3 = 21,000–35,000 EUR ; 4 = 36,000–50,000 EUR ; 5 = 51,000–75,000 EUR ; 6 = >75,000 EUR);
- Country area, a dummy variable that takes a value 1 if respondents declare they do not live in a city and 0 otherwise.

2. Variables related to respondent's behaviour toward MPL:

- Knowledge of mountain product label, a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if respondents know of the label and 0 otherwise;
- Purchase of labelled mountain product, a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 if respondents had bought labelled product and 0 otherwise;
- Importance of label, which assumes values from 1 to 5 (on a 5-point Likert scale);
- How attractive he/she finds the label, which assumes values from 1 to 5 (on a 5-point Likert scale);
- How easy it is to find products labelled with a mountain label, which assumes values from 1 to 5 (on a 5-point Likert scale);

- Variables that include attitudes and motivation for mountain food choices. They assume values from 1 to 5 (on a 5-point Likert scale) (See Table 1). The internal consistency of the different multi-item components of the model (i.e., behavioural intention) was measured using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient [41].

STATA software (version 15.0) was used for the regression analysis.

2.4. Contingent Valuation Model

The Contingent Valuation method was applied to estimate the WTP, as it is suitable to investigate products recently placed on the market [42]. It is often preferred over other methods, such as experimental markets, for its flexibility and limited costs [43]. In particular, in this study we chose to follow the open-ended elicitation for the following two reasons: this technique is easy to understand for consumers, and the methodology allowed us to create a continuous-bids variable by directly asking the participants about how much more he/she would be willing to pay. This permits the estimation of mean WTP more accurately [44]. Based on these reasons, a hypothetical scenario for whole fresh mountain milk was created, and the consumer was asked about his/her maximum WTP for this product. The WTP was then estimated based on Equation (2) [45].

$$WTP_t = \sum_{i=1}^y WTP_a(n_i)/N \quad (2)$$

where WTP_t is the total willingness to pay; WTP_a is the mean value of willingness to pay for a range; n_i is the total number of consumers willing to pay in the range; N is the total number of consumers questioned; y is the number of WTP intervals and i is one of the WTP intervals.

The WTP figures were stratified in intervals that ranged from EUR 0.00 (no willingness to pay) up to EUR 1.00. The value of EUR 1.35 was chosen as the starting point because it is equal to the average market value of Italian, whole, pasteurised, fresh and high-quality milk. This value comes from a market analysis performed in stores located in central Italy.

3. Results

The final sample was composed of 335 Italian consumers, who were interviewed between September and December 2021. The following sections describe the main characteristics of the sample in terms of socio-economic characteristics, purchase habits, attitudes toward mountain food products and attitudes toward the mountain product label. Then, the model results are described.

3.1. Descriptive Analysis

The sample consisted mainly of females (64%), people of a young age (46% of the sample were 20–29), those with a high level of education (only 3% of the sample had a level corresponding to middle school or less), a medium household (51% with 3 or 4 family units) and with no child (81%). The annual average household income was homogeneously distributed between the six brackets. The majority of the respondents in the sample were from a city (59%). The complete sample profile and reference population are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Socio-economic characteristics of the sample.

Gender	Man	36%	Family units	1	12%
	Woman	64%		2	22%
Age	<20	3%		3	23%
	20–29	46%		4	31%
	30–39	16%		5	9%
	40–49	14%		>5	3%

	50–59	15%		No	86%
	>60	6%	Children < 14 years	1	9%
	Middle school	3%		2	4%
	High school	21%		3	1%
Education level	Bachelor’s degree	23%		<10,000 EUR	9%
	Master’s degree	30%	11,000 EUR–20,000 EUR	20%	
	Ph.D. or higher	23%	21,000 EUR–35,000 EUR	31%	
	Occupation	Student	33%	36,000 EUR–50,000 EUR	22%
		Employees	25%	51,000 EUR–75,000 EUR	11%
Freelancers		13%	>75,000EUR	7%	
Teachers		10%	Area of origin	From a city	59%
Workers		5%		Not from a city	41%
Unemployed	5%				
Other	8%				

Relating to the consumer habits, most of those in the sample stated that they had purchased mountain products (85%). However, the purchase is mostly occasional; in fact, 53% of the interviewees buy such products less than once a month, and 17% at least once a month. The most frequent place where products are purchased is the supermarket (37%), followed by the small grocery stores (30%) and the direct selling from the producer (22%). Dairy products are generally the most purchased, particularly cheese (28%), followed by cured meat (19%) and honey (11%).

Overall, 25% of the sample stated that they did not buy mountain products; the main reasons behind this statement are a lack of knowledge of where to buy such products (37%), such products are poorly advertised and promoted according to the interviewees (18%), and they do not have enough knowledge about them (17%).

To analyse consumers’ attitudes towards mountain products, we asked the interviewees to rank, on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = Completely disagree to 5 = Completely agree), their level of agreement with the statements about mountain foods. The results were classified and grouped into main factors and dimensions to which mountain food statements referred to (See Table 1). Figure 1 shows the results of consumer’s attitudes towards mountain product choices.

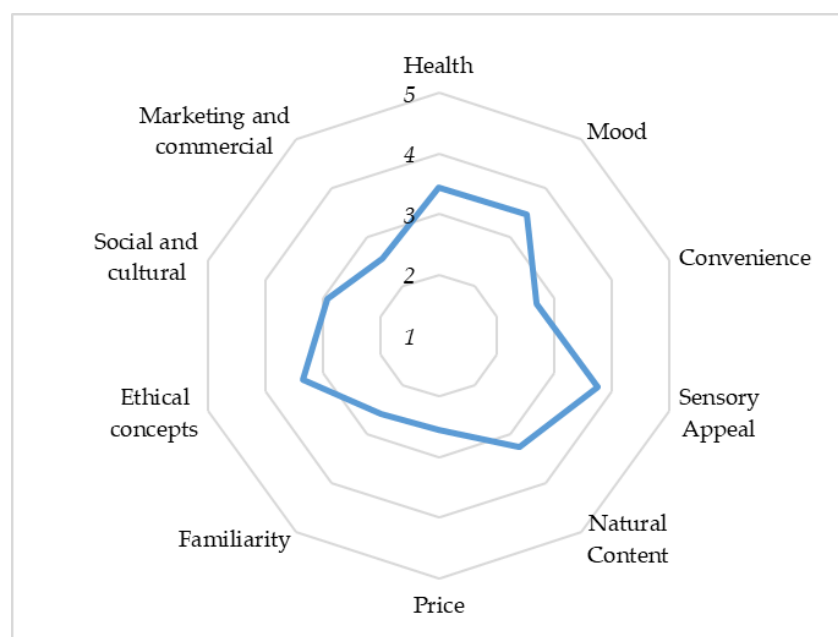


Figure 1. Level of agreement with the statements about mountain food. Level of agreement with the statements about mountain food (1= Completely disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Undecided; 4= Agree; 5 = Completely agree).

It was found that the main factors influencing the purchase of mountain products were sensory appeal (3.8), health and mood motivations (3.5) and ethical concepts (3.4). This indicates that the interviewed sample identified sensory aspects as the main factor in the mountain product, and the particular organoleptic characteristics were recognised. In addition, aspects related to mood take on particular importance, so the consumer associates the mountain with positive experiences and sensations. Finally, the ethical aspects are highly important, due to the association of mountain products with positive characteristics such as animal welfare, the maintenance of rural economies, and respect for the environment (biodiversity and preservation meadow and grassland).

By analysing the results related to the purchasing habits of mountain products with the MPL, it became clear that 75% of the sample had never heard about the MPL, and 85% of the sample had never bought a product labelled with the logo. The purchase of mountain products with the logo is mostly occasional (38% less than once a month), and the main place of purchase is the supermarket (58%). As previously seen for mountain food products, also among the products with the label, cheeses are the most purchased (24%), followed by yogurt, honey, and milk (13%).

The sample, after reading the European definition of MPL, was asked to declare on a Likert scale the importance and the attractiveness of the logo on mountain products. From those questions, the majority of the sample declared that the logo is “very attractive” (50%) and “important” (45%).

Finally, most respondents said that it is difficult or very difficult to find mountain products with the logo in their areas of residence (49%).

3.2. Logit Model Results

To understand which factors influence consumers’ purchase intention of mountain products, a logit model was used.

The internal consistency of the different items utilised in the model was measured using Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient. The validity of the constructs was confirmed by the scale reliability coefficient, which was equal to 0.9466, coinciding with the desirable standard values of 0.95 [46].

The estimated model is presented in Table 3, where it is possible to differentiate the variables that exert a significant influence on the purchase intention of consumers in relation to mountain products.

Table 3. Logit model results.

BUY_MON	Coef.	St. Err.	z	P > z	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
protein	−1.08	0.355	−3.04	0.002	−1.775	−0.384	***
cheers	0.728	0.251	2.90	0.004	0.236	1.22	***
look	1.207	0.366	3.30	0.001	0.49	1.924	***
smell	0.674	0.311	2.17	0.030	0.065	1.282	**
not_expensive	−0.506	0.255	−1.99	0.047	−1.005	−0.007	**
familiar	1.051	0.279	3.77	0.000	0.504	1.597	***
env_friendly	0.523	0.318	1.64	0.100	−0.101	1.147	*
pack_env_friend	−0.608	0.296	−2.05	0.040	−1.189	−0.028	**
new_food	−0.557	0.241	−2.31	0.021	−1.03	−0.085	**
trend_food	−0.574	0.258	−2.23	0.026	−1.079	−0.068	**
unknowns	−0.604	0.207	−2.91	0.004	−1.011	−0.197	***
mpl_availability	0.582	0.262	2.22	0.026	0.069	1.096	**
age	0.574	0.252	2.28	0.023	0.08	1.068	**
female	0.162	0.468	0.34	0.730	−0.757	1.08	

education	0.047	0.199	0.24	0.812	-0.343	0.438	
occupation	-0.113	0.08	-1.41	0.160	-0.27	0.044	
family_unit	0.087	0.172	0.50	0.614	-0.25	0.423	
children	-0.75	0.688	-1.09	0.276	-2.099	0.598	
income	-0.031	0.194	-0.16	0.872	-0.411	0.349	
country_area	0.961	0.483	1.99	0.047	0.015	1.908	**
Constant	-2.564	2.075	-1.24	0.217	-6.632	1.503	
Mean dependent var	0.854		SD dependent var		0.354		
Pseudo r-squared	0.422		Number of obs		335		
Chi-square	117.696		Prob > chi2		0.000		
Akaike crit. (AIC)	203.146		Bayesian crit. (BIC)		283.242		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Among the socio-demographic variables, age and the variable that represents those who do not come from a city (country area) had a significant influence, both with a positive coefficient. The same was the case for the variable *mpl_availability* (*How easy is to find products labelled with mountain label*). Concerning the variables about attitudes and motivations for mountain-product purchase, *Cheers me up* (cheers), *Looks nice* (look), *Smell nice* (smell), *Is familiar* (familiar), and *Mountain products respect the environment* (*env_friendly*) were found to possibly positively affect consumers' purchase intention. On the contrary, *Is high in protein* (protein), *Is not expensive* (*not_expensive*), *Is packaged in an environmentally friendly way* (*pack_env_friend*), *New foods* (*new_food*), *Food trends* (*trend_food*), and *Unknows foods* (*unknows*) were amongst the variables that indicated attitudes that influence the intention to purchase mountain products in a negative way.

3.3. Estimating WTP for Milk with the "Mountain Product" Label

Table 4 presents the aggregate value of WTP.

Table 4. Willingness to pay (WTP) more for milk labelled per range (in EUR).

WTP (EUR)	WTP (Mean)	Number of Consumer (ni)	% of Consumers
0.00	0.00	39	12%
0.01–0.20	0.11	95	28%
0.21–0.40	0.32	102	30%
0.41–0.60	0.51	66	20%
0.61–0.80	0.67	26	8%
0.81–1.00	0.93	7	2%
TOTAL (N)		335	100%

Of the 335 participants in the study, 12% did not show any willingness to pay more for the whole fresh milk with the MPL. However, they were considered in the analysis because they are potential consumers. Most of the sample (30%) declared willingness to pay an amount ranging from EUR 0.21 to EUR 0.40 more than regular whole fresh milk, and just 2% of consumers were willing to pay between EUR 0.81 and EUR 1.00 more for the product. Therefore, based on Equation (2), the results suggest that the surveyed consumers are willing to pay a premium of 30 cents with respect to fresh whole milk.

4. Discussion

From the model results, it emerged that among the variables that included attitudes and motivation for purchasing mountain food products, "looks nice" and "smells nice" were significantly positive. This confirms what emerged from the scale (§ 3.1), that the sensory appeal is one of the key factors recognised by consumers and shows that consumers are attracted to the organoleptic characteristics of mountain products. In fact, when

making food choices, taste, texture, look, smell and flavour remain among the most important attributes [47]. As evidenced in the work of Bentivoglio et al. [48], mountain products have specific organoleptic characteristics such as colour, odour and texture, which are imparted by the place of production. On the contrary, from the model, it emerged that consumers are not influenced in their purchasing behaviour by the nutritional characteristics of the product; indeed, the variable “is high in protein” presents a negative coefficient. The nutritional characteristics are not the key factor for acceptance, and they are often evaluated from the consumers after the sensory aspects [49]. This is in line with the work of De-Magistris et al. [50], who found that consumers prefer products with hedonistic labels (e.g., “mountain product” label) in comparison to products characterised by healthy labels (e.g., nutritional claims), giving more importance to the organoleptic characteristics rather than the nutritional proprieties.

Moreover, the model confirmed that mood is one of the factors that the consumer associates with mountain products (§ 3.1) and it emerged that the consumer is more prone to buy mountain products because their mood becomes elevated upon finding or thinking about this food. The reason behind this behaviour can be related to the fact that mountain products are not only related to their intrinsic characteristics, but also to the place where they are produced, generally associated with moments of vacation or free time for the person, where buying products becomes a pleasurable experience [51]. This is in accordance with the experiential theory [52], in which it is stressed that the choice of a product is strongly influenced by the experience and emotions lived during the phase of purchase and consumption of the product itself. According to Pine and Gilmore [53], selling experiences is the only opportunity for value creation in a world saturated with undifferentiated goods and services.

Another important factor that emerged from the model is that consumers are positively influenced by the variable “mountain products respect the environment”, a variable that fits between the ethical aspects (§ 3.1). In particular, consumers are interested in the preservation of the natural environment, such as grassland and biodiversity, and identify this positive effect in mountain products [51]. In fact, from the literature, it clearly emerges that mountain foods are perceived as environmentally friendly, characterised by traditional practices related to the cultural identity of local communities and specific cultural areas [54–56]. Moreover, recognising environmental problems and values, as well as the perception of the ecological footprint of a product, are necessary but not sufficient conditions to harness pro-environmental consumer behaviours, and, perhaps, not even to encourage them to recognise these positive externalities in a food product [5]. Furthermore, the perception of environmentally friendly products has not emerged in terms of packaging. Indeed, in the model, the variable “is packaged in an environmentally friendly way” was significant with a negative coefficient. This could be linked to the fact that consumers have little knowledge regarding eco-friendly packaging solutions, and several studies provide evidence that environmentally friendly packaging is of little importance as a purchase criterion [57], especially for mountain products.

Moving on to the variables related to purchasing habits, from the data it emerged that the easier the MPL is to find on the product, the more consumers are prone to buy it. Bassi et al. [58] arrived at a similar conclusion, finding a direct relationship between the attitude towards the label and the purchase intentions. This could be a further confirmation of the importance of this label for the promotion of mountain products. Consumers connect the label image with their expectations of the product. If a label is clearly visible, it can help the product surpass its competition and expand its consumer base. Despite this, the analysis shows that, although consumers buy mountain products, the MPL is still poorly known, in line with the existing literature. This therefore confirms the presence of the phenomenon of information asymmetry, which can affect not only milk but also its derivatives. This lack of awareness is not only typical of consumers [22], but it is present at the same time among producers and retailers [59–61]. Suffice to say that eight years after the introduction of the MPL in the EU, only a thousand farms have adopted it in Italy

[23]; so, the label is still not very widespread. It could be related to the limited information and promotion activities carried out by public institutions.

However, the willingness to pay found (1.65 EUR) for the reference product used in this analysis, namely fresh, whole milk with the mountain product label, shows a premium price of 30 cents compared to the same product without the label. This is in line with the results of previous studies on other mountain products [55,62–66], confirming the importance of product identifiability through labels that guarantee a link to the place of origin.

Another important factor is familiarity with the product. Indeed, the model shows that if the consumers consider a product to be familiar, they are more motivated to buy it. On the contrary, if their knowledge about these kinds of products is limited, they are not willing to buy them. This result is in line with the work of Banović et al. [67], Giampietri et al. [68], and Seo et al. [69] who stated that consumers knowing more about and that are more familiar with a product are more prone to buy it.

Among the characteristics that influence the purchase intention, we found that low price is not perceived as attractive, and the consumer is not prone to buy a mountain product that seems to be too cheap. High prices can be an entry barrier to consumers; however, this is not the case in niche markets, such as mountain products [70,71], as also demonstrated by the results of similar research on short food supply chains [72,73] and PDO extra-virgin olive oil [74]. Consumers may distrust mountain-origin low-priced products because they perceive a dissonance between a low price and mountain production, characterised by disadvantaged conditions [75].

“New foods” and “food trends” are amongst the variables that indicate attitudes influencing the intention to purchase mountain products in a negative way. It is probable that the negative influence of these variables could be related to the consumer’s idea of mountain products, generally perceived as traditional products [58].

Lastly, the consumers are influenced in their purchase intention by their socio-demographic characteristics, in particular by the age and the residence area. As previously stated, age has a positive coefficient, which means that older people seem to be prone to purchasing mountain products more than younger people. This is probably related to the increased knowledge and awareness of older people, in line with the literature showing that older people feel more bonded with the territory, have a greater preference for local products [76] and are generally more conscious about the ecological aspects of food [77–79]. Moreover, in the literature, it emerges that younger respondents often have a lower spending budget, so they could be less prone to spend on food [65]. Although, other research found that younger consumers are the most sensitive to environmental issues and sustainability [80,81], which will require further clarification in future research.

Regarding the residence area, people who do not come from a city seem to be more prone to buying mountain food products. This can be explained by the fact that the physical proximity assumes quite an important role in such contexts [72]. In fact, people living in mountain areas have more chances to experience the territorial context and they are more attracted by the products that remind them of it.

5. Conclusions

Mountain areas are very important sources of ecosystem services, such as cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and biodiversity. However, the agricultural activities in those areas, vital for rural development and the sustainability of local economies, are in a sharp decline. For this reason, is fundamental to find a way to assist those areas. The mountain product label can be a suitable tool to achieve this aim.

The findings of this study highlight that consumers attribute a greater willingness to pay to mountain product-labelled foods, at least for milk, so this may be a proof of the importance of this label for the protection and revitalisation of mountain agriculture. At the same time, from the analysis, it emerged that the label is still poorly recognised and applied infrequently. Policy makers and institutions should invest more in the training of

farmers, to improve the knowledge of this label that is easy to apply. Furthermore, it is necessary to advertise this label and encourage consumers to buy MPL products to support local quality production. All of this in the pursuit of overcoming asymmetric information.

From the research, consumers emerged as more sensitive to sensory issues, such as smell and taste, emotional issues, and ethical issues, such as the preservation of the environment. This confirms what has already emerged from the literature, that the consumer concern for environmental and ethical issues has increased, leading to an extensive search for traditional and healthier food production, such as those that can be found in the mountains. These findings might be useful for farmers from disadvantaged areas (such as mountain areas) that want to differentiate their products to gain a strong position on the market.

However, the study shows some limitations that should be considered in the future. Firstly, it could be necessary to extend the research to a sample considerably more representative of the entire Italian population. Secondly, for the estimation of the WTP, a more accurate methodology could be used that is not based on the hypothetical market. Finally, it might be interesting to investigate if the identified price is profitable and viable for farmers, so as to offer new opportunities to preserve mountain agriculture.

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