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CONSUMER PREFERENCES IN PURCHASING NATURAL HONEY: EVIDENCE FROM A SURVEY IN WEST KAZAKHSTAN REGION

ANNOTATION

This study examines consumer preferences for natural honey in the West Kazakhstan region of the Republic of Kazakhstan, a key region with developed agriculture and beekeeping. The aim of the study was to identify the factors determining consumer choice, their attitudes toward different honey varieties, purchase channels, and additional bee products.

A 15-question survey was used to collect data. The questionnaire was presented in both printed and online versions, ensuring coverage of different population groups. Ninety respondents aged 18 to 65 participated in the study. Data was collected at markets, fairs, specialty stores, and through online surveys. The results were processed using descriptive statistics and visualized in diagrams.

The analysis revealed that flower honey is the most popular variety (67%), followed by linden honey (23.9%), while rarer varieties such as acacia (4.5%) and phacelia (1.1%) are in low demand. The main selection criteria are taste (73.9%) and appearance/consistency (44.3%), while price (20.5%), variety (18.2%), and brand (17%) play a secondary role. Respondents cited disease prevention as the primary purpose of purchase (73.6%), reflecting the perception of honey as a functional product.

Most buyers prefer to purchase honey at markets and from beekeepers (54.5%), indicating a high level of trust in direct producers. Consumers consider high quality to be the main competitive advantage (81.8%). However, the main barriers are related to mistrust of quality (57.5%) and the risk of counterfeiting (54%).

Thus, the study confirms that consumer demand for honey in Kazakhstan is driven primarily by traditional varieties, organoleptic properties, and the product's therapeutic and prophylactic value. The data obtained can be used to develop strategies for promoting domestic honey, increasing market transparency, and building trust in beekeeping products.

Key words: *consumer preferences, natural honey, purchasing behavior, survey, West Kazakhstan Region, market demand, honey quality.*

Introduction. Natural honey is a multifaceted product of great significance not only as a sweetener but also for its profound nutritional and therapeutic benefits. The composition and efficacy of honey are influenced by various factors, including its geographical origin, production methods, and the floral sources from which bees collect nectar. Research has indicated that honey produced locally by beekeepers often exhibits superior antibacterial properties compared to commercial varieties, which frequently lack essential bee-derived components that contribute to its healing capabilities [1, 2]. A study has shown that more than 40% of commercially available honeys have antibacterial activities akin to those of artificial products, raising concerns about their therapeutic effectiveness [2].

The biochemical properties of honey have been explored extensively, demonstrating its role as an immunomodulator and its potential in cancer treatment. For instance, honey has shown promise in enhancing wound healing and combating Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) through its antibacterial actions [3, 4]. Moreover, multiple studies support the claim that honey, particularly when combined with other natural products such as cinnamon or ginger, can yield greater therapeutic effects than each component alone [5]. This synergistic effect highlights honey's versatile role in integrative medicine, where it is utilized not only for its sweetening properties but also as a valuable adjunct in medicinal treatments.

Additionally, honey's nutritional profile plays a critical role in its health benefits. It serves as a source of essential nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, and various bioactive compounds such as phenolic acids and flavonoids, which contribute to its antioxidant activities [6, 7]. The antioxidant properties of honey, which are often linked to its polyphenolic content, have made it a focal point in the study of natural remedies for oxidative stress and related diseases [8, 9]. Furthermore, the consumption of honey is increasingly associated with enhancements in immune function and overall health improvement [10].

Consequently, the authenticity and purity of honey are paramount, as adulteration can compromise its therapeutic qualities. Efforts to ensure honey's integrity include employing advanced analytical methods for detecting adulterants, which is crucial for maintaining consumer trust and ensuring the availability of beneficial natural products [11, 12, 13]. This attention to quality is underscored by the rising consumer awareness regarding the health implications of honey, particularly in the context of increased interest during health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic [2].

In recent years, there has been increased interest in studying consumer behavior and the factors influencing their choices when purchasing bee products. Identifying the key criteria that buyers use when choosing honey not only helps us understand the structure of demand but also identifies areas for improving the competitiveness of domestic honey.

Consumer surveys are one of the most effective methods for collecting primary information on consumer preferences. This study included a sociological survey among residents of the West Kazakhstan region. The purpose of the survey was to identify their preferences when choosing natural honey, identify key criteria (price, quality, taste, packaging, brand name, etc.), and determine the factors that shape the product's competitive advantages.

The obtained results allow us to evaluate current trends in consumer demand, determine the specific perceptions of domestic and imported honey, and develop recommendations for beekeepers, producers, and trading companies on expanding their product range, improving product quality, and developing effective marketing strategies.

Materials and methods of research. The study was conducted in the West Kazakhstan region of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which boasts a developed agricultural and beekeeping tradition. The region is considered a major producer of natural honey, with both domestic and imported varieties widely available on the local market.

Data collection methodology. A survey was used to study consumer preferences. The questionnaire included 15 questions aimed at identifying:

- Significant selection criteria (price, taste, appearance, brand, assortment);
- Preferences for honey types (acacia, linden, flower, mixed-herb, buckwheat, etc.);
- Purpose of honey purchase (food, medicinal, cosmetic, souvenir);
- Purchase channels (market, specialty stores, retail chains, fairs, online);
- Factors that shape competitive advantages (price, quality, assortment, brand awareness, etc.);

- Purchase frequency and average volume of purchased products;
- Level of trust in domestic and imported honey;
- Attitudes toward additional bee products (propolis, bee bread, royal jelly, wax).

The questionnaire was compiled in two formats:

1. Printed version – used when conducting a survey at markets, fairs and specialized stores.
2. Electronic version (Google Forms) – distributed via social networks and instant messengers.

Sample of respondents. The survey involved 90 respondents aged 18 to 65 living in the West Kazakhstan region. Participants were selected randomly from among consumers interested in purchasing honey. The sample was roughly evenly distributed between men and women.

Statistical data processing. The collected data was entered into MS Excel spreadsheets and statistically analyzed using Python (pandas, matplotlib). The following methods were used for processing:

- Descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies, percentage distributions);
- Plotting diagrams (pie and bar graphs) to visually represent the structure of consumer preferences;
- Analyzing relationships between variables (e.g., preferences depending on purchase frequency or price level).

Results. A survey was used to study consumer preferences for natural honey. The questionnaire included 15 questions aimed at identifying preferences for honey types, selection criteria, purchase frequency, purchase channels, perceived medicinal properties, and factors limiting consumption (Figure 1).

Among the options presented, flower honey is the most popular, preferred by 67% of respondents, making it the clear leader in demand. Linden honey ranks second (23.9%), followed by mixed-flower honey (20.5%) and buckwheat honey (17%), which also find their customers but remain niche products. Acacia honey is chosen by only 4.5% of buyers, while phacelia honey has the lowest demand (1.1%), likely due to its low availability and low consumer recognition. Overall, the results show that buyers prefer the most accessible and traditional types of honey, while rarer varieties remain marginal in demand.

The most important criterion for respondents when choosing natural honey is its taste—73.9% of respondents cited this as an option, confirming the priority of the product's organoleptic characteristics. Appearance and consistency are also significant (44.3%), helping buyers visually assess the quality of honey. Price is important for 20.5% of respondents, and variety of products for 18.2%, indicating a secondary role for these factors. Brand name and purchasing experience are least important (17%), highlighting the weak influence of brands on consumer choice. Overall, the results show that buyers are primarily guided by the taste and appearance of honey, rather than price or brand recognition.

According to respondents, the primary purpose for purchasing natural honey is disease prevention—73.6% of respondents chose this option, highlighting the perception of honey as a product with pronounced health benefits. Direct consumption as a food product ranks second (41.1%), meaning almost half of respondents consider honey part of their daily diet. Culinary use of honey was less common—only 11.5% of respondents noted this, while no one (0%) chose cosmetic purposes. Thus, honey is primarily perceived as a therapeutic, preventative, and nutritional product, while its culinary and cosmetic uses remain limited.

Most respondents prefer to purchase natural honey at the market or directly from beekeepers - 54.5% chose this option, demonstrating a high level of trust in producers and a desire to buy the product firsthand. A significantly smaller proportion of buyers rely on specialized stores (13.6%) and retail chains (12.5%), suggesting a relatively limited role for formal sales channels. Fairs occupy an intermediate position (11.4%), while online shopping remains the least popular (8%). Overall, the data shows that consumers value direct contact with beekeepers and guarantees of product authenticity, while modern distribution channels play a secondary role.

According to respondents, honey's greatest competitive advantage is its high quality - chosen by 81.8% of participants, underscoring the dominant role of trust in the product's naturalness and beneficial properties. Also significant is the uniqueness of its composition (31.8%), reflecting consumer interest in special types and medicinal properties of honey, as well as a wide selection (23.9%), which satisfies a variety of taste preferences. Brand awareness was noted by only 13.6% of respondents, suggesting a weak influence of brands on the honey market. Low price and availability throughout the year received equally low ratings (10.2% each), indicating their secondary importance compared to quality. Overall,

the results demonstrate that for consumers, quality remains the decisive criterion for honey's competitiveness, with price and marketing factors playing a secondary role.

The majority of respondents (52.3%) purchase natural honey several times a year, indicating that they perceive it as a seasonal or occasional product. 28.4% purchase honey once a month, forming a segment of more regular consumers. Only 5.7% of respondents purchase it several times a month, thus qualifying as the most active buyers. Meanwhile, 12.5% of respondents make such purchases less than once a year, indicating that honey plays a minimal role in their diet. Overall, the data shows that regular monthly consumption is characteristic of approximately a third of consumers, while for the majority, honey remains a product of occasional demand.

The largest share of respondents (37.5%) preferred plastic containers, likely due to their lightness, ease of transportation, and affordability. Glass jars came in second (30.7%), valued for their eco-friendliness, flavor preservation, and traditional appearance. Almost a third of respondents (29.5%) stated that packaging is unimportant to them, indicating that this criterion is of low importance to a significant portion of consumers. Pre-packaged packaging (tubes, blisters, etc.) proved unpopular, with only 2.3% of respondents choosing it. Ceramic containers, however, received zero votes (0%), likely due to their low availability and practicality.

The most important information on honey packaging for consumers is the product's composition and origin (62.5%) and the presence of quality certificates (eco, organic, halal, etc.), which were noted by 58% of respondents. A significant proportion also pay attention to the honey harvest date (40.9%) and expiration date (35.2%), emphasizing the importance of product freshness and safety. Indication of the region of origin was less popular (21.6%), and the "other" category received only a few mentions (1.1%), indicating the low importance of additional factors. Thus, the primary criteria for packaging information remain transparency of the composition and quality assurance.

The majority of respondents expressed confidence in domestic products: 62.5% prefer to buy Kazakhstani honey, reflecting a high level of loyalty to local producers. Meanwhile, 35.2% of respondents viewed domestic and imported honey equally, indicating that the country of origin was not decisive for them. Only 2.3% of respondents more often chose imported honey, indicating an extremely low proportion of consumers who prefer foreign products. Overall, the results demonstrate a strong trust and loyalty among consumers toward domestic honey.

Most respondents (71.6%) indicated that they use only traditional honey, without resorting to other bee products. Among additional products, propolis (23.9%), valued for its medicinal and preventative properties, is the most popular. Respondents chose wax (8%), royal jelly (4.5%), and especially bee bread (3.4%) significantly less frequently. Thus, the market for bee products remains limited, and consumer preferences are primarily focused on traditional honey, with only a small percentage expressing interest in other bee products.

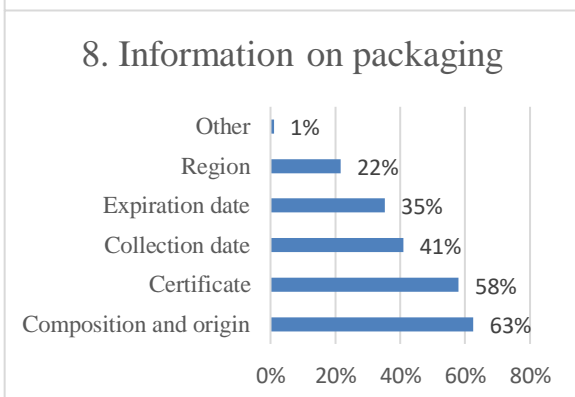
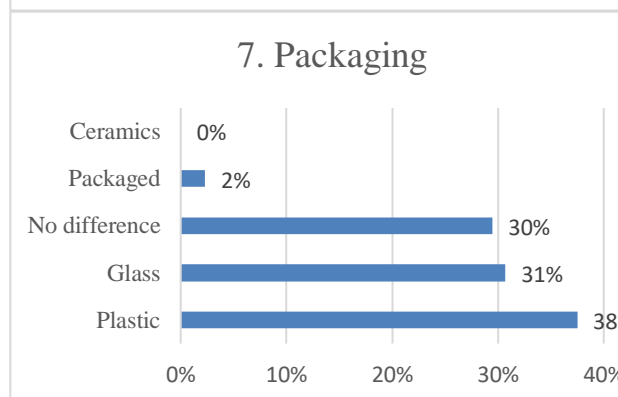
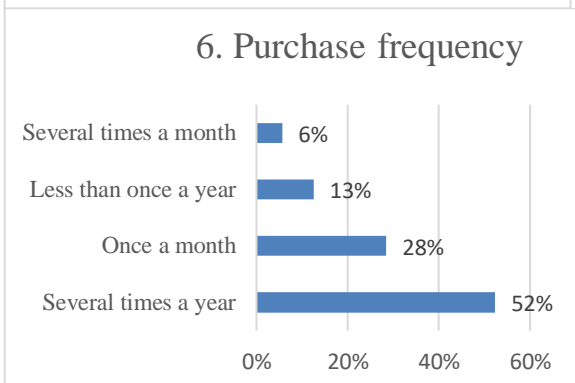
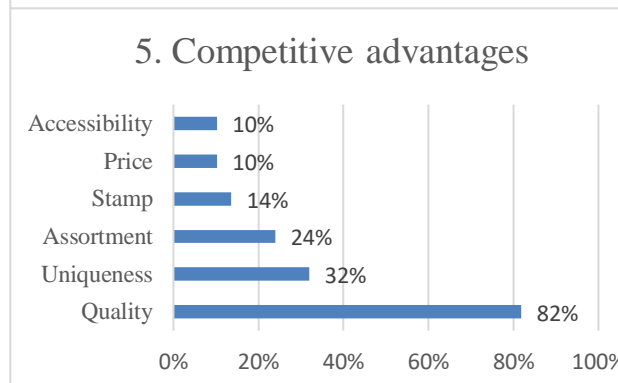
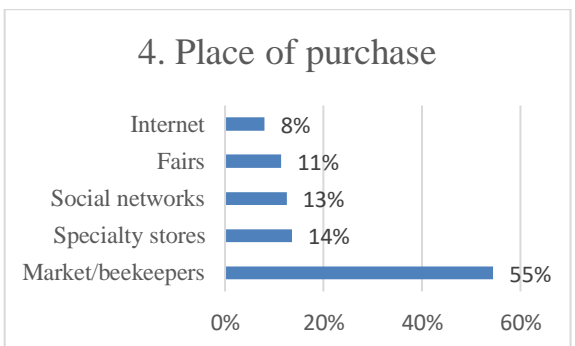
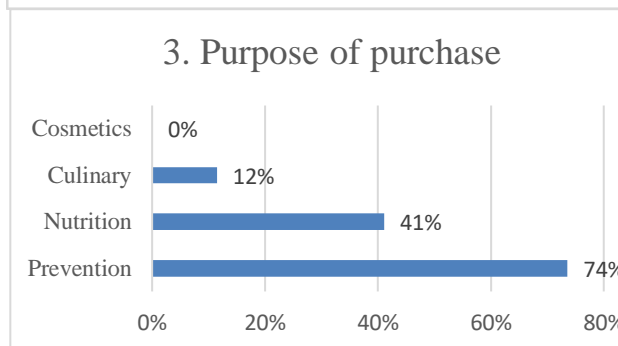
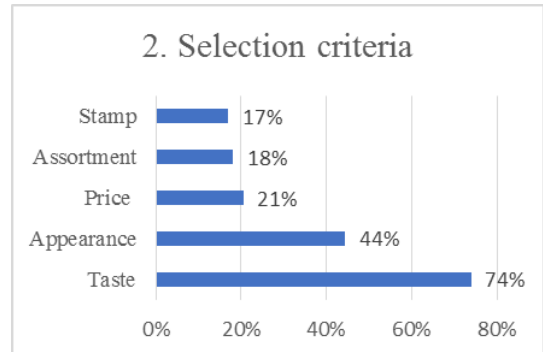
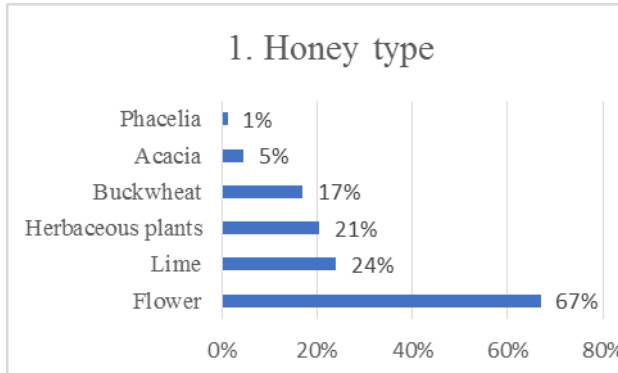
The primary sources of information about natural honey for respondents are friends and recommendations—chosen by 42% of survey participants. A significant portion of consumers also rely on information from the internet and social media (30.7%) and obtain information at exhibitions and fairs (27.3%). However, traditional channels such as television and radio advertising were completely unused (0%). Thus, personal experience and informal communication channels play a key role in informing consumers, while traditional advertising has no impact on consumer knowledge about honey.

Many respondents (59.1%) were willing to pay more for honey with verified quality, highlighting the importance of certificates and laboratory testing in building trust in the product. However, 30.7% of respondents found it difficult to provide a definitive answer, which may indicate a lack of awareness or doubts about the true value of certification. Only 10.2% of respondents stated they were not willing to pay extra for certified quality. Overall, the results show that for most buyers, the presence of official quality guarantees is a significant factor, capable of justifying a higher price for honey.

The overwhelming majority of respondents perceive honey as a medicinal product. For example, 62.5% of respondents use it to treat colds, while another 33% use it primarily for preventative purposes. Only 4.5% of respondents indicated that they consume honey solely as a sweet treat, without regard for its medicinal properties. Thus, for the overwhelming majority of consumers, honey is associated not only with a food product but also with a natural remedy for maintaining health and preventing disease.

Of the respondents surveyed, 27.3% indicated that they regularly include honey in their children's diets, while 30.7% used it only occasionally. Furthermore, 12.5% of participants indicated that they do not give honey to their children, and 29.5% of respondents do not have children. Thus, it can be said that more than half of parents use honey in their children's diets (regularly or occasionally), emphasizing its perception as a healthy and natural product suitable for promoting children's health.

The main factors that may deter buyers from purchasing honey are lack of confidence in quality (57.5%) and suspicion of counterfeit or adulterated products (54%). This underscores consumers' high concerns about product authenticity and safety. High price also plays a significant role, noted by 31% of respondents. Less common reasons include allergies (10.3%) and lack of honey consumption habits (4.6%). Thus, the main barriers to purchase remain concerns about quality and the risk of counterfeiting, rather than economic or physiological factors.



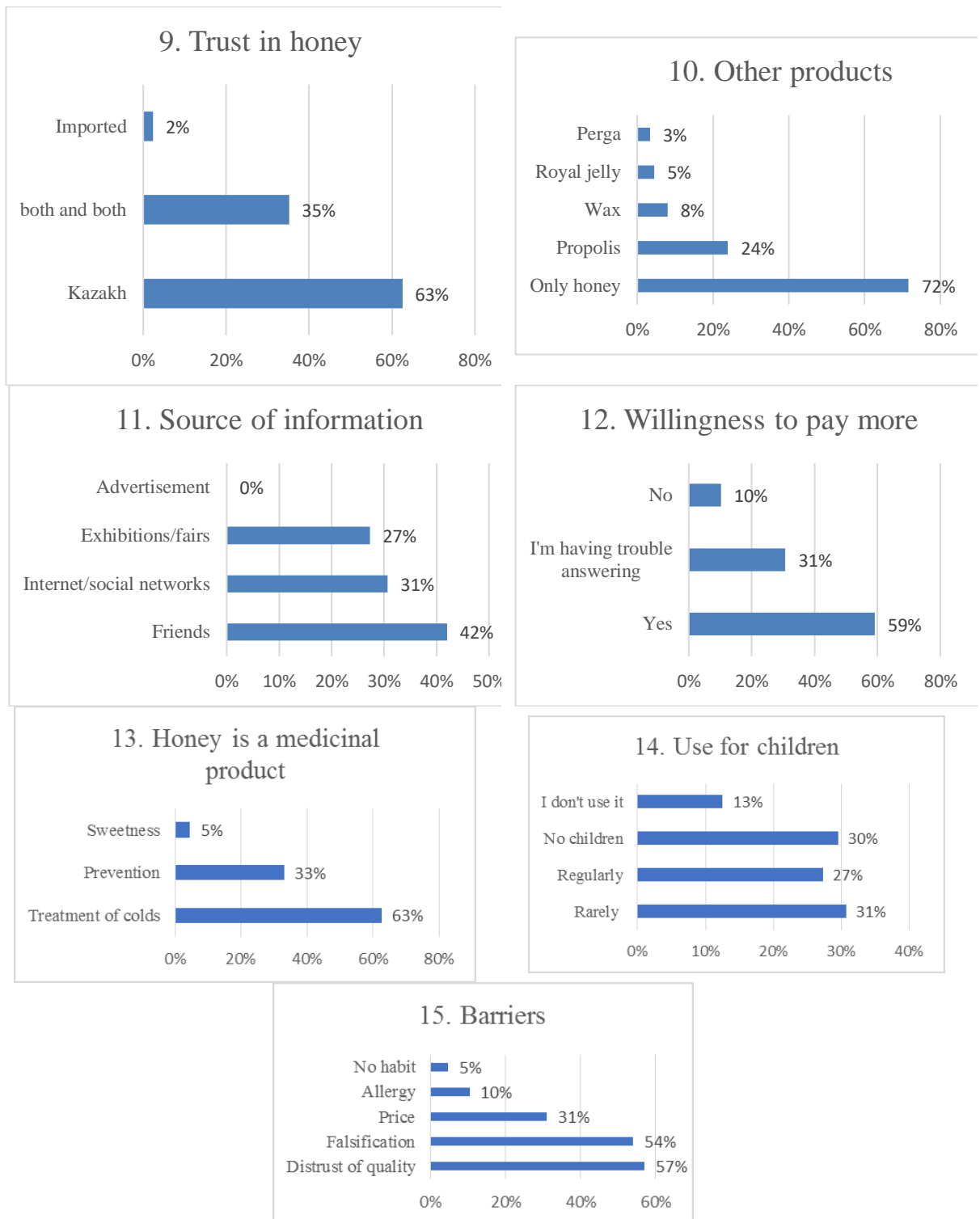


Figure 1 – Survey results

Discussion. The survey results demonstrate that Kazakhstani consumer preferences largely align with global trends, although they do have their own unique characteristics. Traditional varieties—flower and linden honey remain the most popular, while rarer varieties (such as acacia or phacelia) account for a minor share of demand. Similar results have been obtained in studies in European countries, where the main drivers of consumption are also familiar and affordable honey varieties, while exotic varieties remain niche products [14, 15].

Taste and appearance were key factors in honey choice (73.9% and 44.3%, respectively). This is consistent with the results of international surveys: for example, in Hungary and Romania, consumers also value taste and organoleptic characteristics above price or brand [16, 17]. Price, however, is of

secondary importance (20.5%), which correlates with research showing that consumers are willing to pay more for a product with proven quality [18].

A significant proportion of respondents associate honey purchases with its medicinal and preventative properties: 73.6% cited disease prevention as the primary purpose of purchase. Similar data are provided in studies from Turkey and Poland, where honey is viewed not only as a food product but also as a traditional medicine [19, 20]. Thus, honey continues to be perceived as a functional product, not just a natural sweetener.

An interesting finding is the high level of trust in domestic honey (62.5%), highlighting loyalty to local producers. Consumers also prefer markets and direct purchases from beekeepers (54.5%), consistent with the findings of European studies, which view direct contact with the producer as a way to minimize the risk of counterfeiting [21].

Counterfeiting and doubts about product quality remain the main barriers to purchase (57.5% and 54%, respectively). Globally, this is also one of the key factors reducing trust in the honey market [22]. Quality certificates (e.g., organic, halal) and laboratory testing are important criteria for 58% of respondents, which is fully consistent with global trends toward increasing demand for certified food products [23].

Thus, the study's results confirm that for Kazakhstani consumers, as for international consumers, taste, quality, and trust in the producer remain decisive factors in their choice. However, a characteristic feature of the local market is the predominance of traditional varieties and the relatively weak role of brands. To improve the competitiveness of domestic honey, measures are needed to increase production transparency, promote certification, and expand sales channels, including online and through specialized stores.

Conclusion. A 15-question survey revealed key trends in consumer preferences for natural honey. The study revealed that traditional varieties –primarily flower and linden honey –lead to the highest demand, while rarer varieties are virtually unpopular. The primary selection criteria are taste and appearance, highlighting the importance of organoleptic characteristics in shaping consumer demand. Honey is mostly purchased at markets and from beekeepers, reflecting trust in direct producers and a desire to minimize the risk of counterfeiting. Consumers consider high quality and unique ingredients to be the product's primary competitive advantages, while price and brand play secondary roles.

Most respondents perceive honey as having a distinct therapeutic and prophylactic value: it is used to treat colds and promote health, including in baby food. This confirms honey's status as a functional product, the value of which extends beyond food.

However, doubts about the authenticity and quality of the product, as well as the risk of counterfeiting, remain the main barrier to purchase, highlighting the need to improve market transparency and accessibility of certified honey. Overall, the study showed that consumer demand for honey in Kazakhstan is driven primarily by traditional varieties, quality, and the medicinal value of the product, while marketing and pricing factors have limited influence. The findings can serve as a basis for developing effective strategies for promoting domestic honey, strengthening consumer confidence, and enhancing the competitiveness of beekeeping products in domestic and international markets.

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ТҮЙІН

Бұл зерттеу ауыл шаруашылығы мен омарта шаруашылығы дамыған негізгі өңір болып табылатын Қазақстан Республикасының Батыс Қазақстан облысында тұтынушылардың табиғи балға деген талғамын зерттейді. Зерттеудің мақсаты тұтынушылардың таңдауын анықтайтын факторларды, олардың әртүрлі бал сорттарына, сатып алу арналарына және қосымша ара өнімдеріне деген көзқарасын анықтау болды.

Деректерді жинау үшін 15 сұрақтан тұратын сауалнама пайдаланылды. Сауалнама халықтың әртүрлі топтарын қамтуды қамтамасыз ете отырып, баспа және онлайн нұсқаларында

ұсынылды. Зерттеуге 18 бен 65 жас аралығындағы 90 респондент қатысты. Деректер базарларда, жәрмеңкелерде, мамандандырылған дүкендерде және онлайн сауалнамалар арқылы жиналды. Нәтижелер сипаттамалық статистиканы қолдану арқылы өңделді және диаграммаларда бейнеленді.

Талдау нәтижесінде гүлді балы ең танымал сорт (67%), екінші орында линден балы (23,9%), ал сирек кездесетін акация (4,5%) және фаселия (1,1%) сорттары аз сұранысқа ие екені анықталды. Негізгі іріктеу критерийлері – дәм (73,9%) және сыртқы түрі/консистенциясы (44,3%), ал баға (20,5%), сорт (18,2%) және бренд (17%) қосалқы рөл атқарады. Сатып алудың негізгі мақсаты ретінде респонденттер аурудың алдын алуды атады (73,6%), бұл балды функционалды өнім ретінде қабылдауды көрсетеді.

Сатып алушылардың көпшілігі балды базарлардан және омарташылардан (54,5%) сатып алуды жөн көреді, бұл тікелей өндірушілерге деген сенімнің жоғары деңгейін көрсетеді. Тұтынушылар жоғары сапаны басты бәсекелестік артықшылық деп санайды (81,8%). Дегенмен, негізгі кедергілер сапаға сенімсіздікпен (57,5%) және жалғандылық қаупімен (54%) байланысты.

Осылайша, зерттеу Қазақстанда балға тұтынушылардың сұранысы ең алдымен дәстүрлі сорттарға, органолептикалық қасиеттерге және өнімнің емдік және профилактикалық құндылығына байланысты екенін растайды. Алынған мәліметтер отандық балды ілгерілету, нарықтың ашықтығын арттыру және ара шаруашылығы өнімдеріне деген сенімді арттыру стратегияларын әзірлеу үшін пайдаланылуы мүмкін.

РЕЗЮМЕ

В данном исследовании изучаются потребительские предпочтения в отношении натурального мёда в Западно-Казахстанской области Республики Казахстан, ключевом регионе с развитым сельским хозяйством и пчеловодством. Целью исследования было выявление факторов, определяющих выбор потребителей, их отношение к различным сортам мёда, каналам приобретения и дополнительным продуктам пчеловодства.

Для сбора данных использовался опрос из 15 вопросов. Анкета была представлена как в печатном, так и в электронном виде, что обеспечивало охват различных групп населения. В исследовании приняли участие 90 респондентов в возрасте от 18 до 65 лет. Данные собирались на рынках, ярмарках, в специализированных магазинах, а также посредством онлайн-опросов. Результаты были обработаны с помощью описательной статистики и визуализированы в виде диаграмм.

Анализ показал, что наиболее популярным сортом является цветочный мёд (67%), за ним следует липовый мёд (23,9%), в то время как более редкие сорта, такие как акациевый (4,5%) и фацелиевый (1,1%), пользуются низким спросом. Основными критериями выбора являются вкус (73,9%) и внешний вид/консистенция (44,3%), в то время как цена (20,5%), ассортимент (18,2%) и бренд (17%) играют второстепенную роль. Респонденты назвали профилактику заболеваний основной целью покупки (73,6%), что отражает восприятие мёда как функционального продукта.

Большинство покупателей предпочитают приобретать мёд на рынках и у пчеловодов (54,5%), что свидетельствует о высоком уровне доверия к прямым производителям. Потребители считают высокое качество главным конкурентным преимуществом (81,8%). Однако основными барьерами являются недоверие к качеству (57,5%) и риск подделки (54%).

Таким образом, исследование подтверждает, что потребительский спрос на мёд в Казахстане определяется, прежде всего, традиционными сортами, органолептическими свойствами и лечебно-профилактической ценностью продукта. Полученные данные могут быть использованы для разработки стратегий продвижения отечественного мёда, повышения прозрачности рынка и укрепления доверия к продуктам пчеловодства.