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Certification Labels in Shaping Perception of Food Quality—Insights from Polish and Belgian Urban Consumers

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Abstract: Food quality is considered to be one of the most important determinants of food choice. Given the variety of food products and the overflow of information in the market, certification labels are intended to encourage consumers to select healthier and more sustainable product options. This study focuses on how urban consumers from Poland and Belgium perceive food quality and whether certification labels shape their views on it. Research material was collected using quantitative (Paper and Pencil Interviews (PAPI)) and qualitative (focus groups (FGs)) methods. The survey was conducted among people visiting sustainable food fairs, on a sample of 701 adults in the cities of Warsaw, Brussels and Ghent. This study confirms that consumers are interested in food quality when choosing food, but their perception varies depending on the place of residence and other socio-demographic characteristics (age, income, education, household structure). Certificates were important for consumers if their message clearly signals exceptional quality and is consistent with awareness of sustainability challenges. Consumers from Belgium (a country with a long-established market economy) reveal deeper knowledge and a more favourable approach to certification labels than Poles. The role of labelling in shaping consumers' perceptions of food quality depends on their awareness, experience and understanding of sustainability issues. This, in turn, is determined by the cultural environment of consumers, which in the case of our study was the country of residence.

Keywords: food quality; certification labels; sustainable food consumption; urban consumers; Poland; Belgium



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1. Introduction

The quality of food products is a complex concept that has evolved over the years, depending on the scientific field in which it was analysed. There is no absolute, universal definition of food quality [1]. Initially, product quality was identified with the absence of defects or falsifications, but today it goes far beyond meeting the basic requirements and is understood as an added value of the product, distinguishing it from others in a given category. Nowadays, it can be interpreted in relation to objective parameters, which concern the product (measurable physical and chemical characteristics and the resulting properties of food), method/process and place of production, health safety/quality assurance, as well as subjective perception from the consumer's point of view [2,3]. In a subjective context, quality is defined not only by the functional needs of the consumer but also by the needs linked to the sphere of social, political, cultural, ethical or environmental relations and takes on a broader, more abstract meaning [4]. From the consumer's perspective, food quality can be seen as a set of specific attributes that a product should have in order to meet its expectations [5]. These expectations should be considered in terms of obtaining both immediate and future benefits, including the impact on health and life expectancy [6]. The perception of food quality by the consumer is a result of his

or her previous experience, product knowledge and sensory sensitivity [7] and does not necessarily result from rational premises [8]. Differences in quality perception have many consequences in terms of consumer behaviour, beliefs and attitudes, influencing current and future purchasing decisions, eating patterns and food preparation [9]. The consequences may have a dimension of economic benefits as a result of food choices, a health dimension, both for the individual consumer and the population as a whole, and an environmental dimension, associated with the ecological footprint of selected products [10]. Some consumers perceive quality through the foodstuff's country of origin (ethnocentric attitudes), its production method or lack of preservatives and other additives. Others trust different marks and claims displayed on the packaging or look for the so-called pure labels.

The reputation of European food was severely damaged in the 1990s by numerous scandals and crisis that affected the food industry (such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy—so-called “mad cow” disease, “swine flu” virus H1N1, benzene-tainted mineral water or the “chickengate” crisis related to dioxin contamination of poultry, eggs and pork). In the current decade, the European food market has been shaken by further abuses, including the E. Coli scare, the horse meat scandal, the Lactalis scandal and the fipronil-egg scandal. Moreover, some companies applied “dual quality” practices for identically-branded and similar-looking products offered on the markets of the old and new (post 2004) member states. The nature of the globalized agri-food supply chain and the economic incentive to supply cheaper food products should also be highlighted as factors that increase the possibility of food fraud. This led to reduced consumer confidence in food products from large-scale industrial production, raised concerns about food safety [1,11] and prompted the development of voluntary Food Quality Assurance Schemes (FQAS) [12]. Quality or certification labels shortly become a central component of modern consumer policy in the European Union (EU) [13].

The labelling rules for food of animal origin offered on the EU market (e.g., Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers) [14], are in principle consistent with the One Health strategy. This globally endorsed holistic approach aims to address simultaneously aspects of human health care, animal health and environmental protection in order to best manage the risks related to zoonotic diseases [15–17]. Currently, approximately 75% of newly emerging infectious diseases are zoonoses that result from various anthropogenic, genetic, ecologic, socioeconomic, and climatic factors [18]. Thus, within the framework of the EU's agricultural and food policy, further improvements to sustainability-oriented labelling were adopted in May 2020 as part of the Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy.

In the European Union, as a part of its complex agricultural quality policy, the schemes for identifying and protecting the names of specific agricultural products and foods with unique characteristics, linked to their geographical origin as well as traditional know-how have been launched. The labels PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) and PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) represent the excellence of European agricultural food production and are both the result of a unique combination of human and environmental factors that are characteristic of a specific territory. The third label TSG (Traditional Speciality Guaranteed) highlights the traditional aspects such as the way the product is made or its composition, and protects it against falsification and misuse [19]. The granting of these certificates is governed by relevant legislation, creating specific quality standard systems that protect consumer confidence and aim to provide producers with instruments to better identify and promote products with specific characteristics and protect them against unfair market practices [20].

The internationally accepted definition of a food label “any tag, brand, mark, pictorial or other descriptive matter, written, printed, stenciled, marked, embossed or impressed on, or attached to the packaging or container of food” [14,21] makes it clear how many possibilities there are to attract consumer attention. As labelling is a basic and integral part of every process of introducing a foodstuff to the market [22,23] it becomes a unique opportunity to communicate product information at the exact moment of food choice [24–27]. Therefore, in addition to the mandatory information, more and more voluntary certifica-

tion labels covering the ethical, environmental and social aspects of production processes appear on the front of food packaging [28,29]. Labels on food quality in many cases signify sustainable production which protects the environment, high nutritional value and low level of processing [30]. Recent FAO (The Food and Agriculture Organization) and WHO (World Health Organization) publications point to the link between high quality foods and sustainable healthy diets which promote all dimensions of individuals' health and wellbeing, have low environmental pressure and impact, are accessible, affordable, safe and equitable, and are culturally acceptable [31]. According to WWF (World Wildlife Fund), sustainable food behaviour implies not only eating more plants, fewer foods high in fat, salt and sugar, choosing a variety of foods, wasting less food, moderating meat consumption but also buying food that meets a credible certified standard [32]. The choice of food labelled with the logo of good accreditation schemes, which are clearly defined, is among the principles of a sustainable and high quality diet [33].

These type certification labels are addressed to responsible and conscious consumers who are looking for natural, low-processed or ethical products that are suitable for their diet (e.g., plant-based diet, gluten-free, vegan) [34], for whom caring for their own and their loved ones' health is a form of intergenerational responsibility [35]. The percentage of these consumers in society is not large, albeit growing, as a result of increasing public awareness of the shared responsibility for the state of the planet that the current population will leave for future generations.

Certificates help reduce the uncertainty that arises in the process of evaluating product quality before buying [36], thereby facilitating choice and purchasing decisions. Certification schemes are used to ensure marketing claims for unobservable quality attributes. Under asymmetric information, process-oriented quality characteristics such as organic farming, animal welfare, or fair trade raise the question of mislabeling [37]. From the manufacturer's point of view, certificates are a tool of nutritional marketing and competitive struggle, even if their acquisition is dictated by concern for sustainable development and is embedded in the company's mission of being a responsible manufacturer. More and more companies understand the imperative to prove their social and environmental commitment as the number of consumers who are aware of the social and environmental impact of their purchasing decisions grows [38,39]. The Ipsos report [40] identifies more than 900 food labelling schemes used in the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway. Worldwide the largest eco-labelling catalogue [41] describes 456 labelling schemes available in 199 countries, 148 of which relate to organic food. Food producers use these various opportunities to attract consumer attention, but research shows that food buyers are overwhelmed by the amount of information on labels and there is some kind of immunisation to the perception of certificates [29,42,43]. The proliferation of certification labels contributed to generate consumer doubts and confusion, especially if they do not have much knowledge about the certificates, who awards them and on what terms and if they are trustworthy, there can be a "label fatigue" effect [13,44–46].

In this context, some authors point to a common refrain in research on the role of certification labels due to their great number and diversity [46]. Others, on the contrary, argue that there is still a need to deepen the investigation on the extent to which quality labels are important to consumers and if they are perceived as a guarantee of product safety and/or quality [13]. We share the latter approach, especially in the context of the commitment to the 17 global sustainable development goals and the New Green Deal strategy in the EU.

With this in mind, the aim of this paper was to understand how consumers from two EU countries with different cultural and economic backgrounds—Poland and Belgium—perceive food quality and determine if certification labels shape their views on this issue. After the change of the economic system and the adoption of a strategy for the development of a democratic state, Poland became a member of the EU in 2004, while Belgium was one of the founding states of the European Economic Community (former name of the EU). Poland represents a country with a young market economy, while Belgium is a country

with a mature market. The purchasing behaviour of Polish consumers differs from that of the Belgian ones as it is deeply rooted in the culture of both nations. The development and structure of the food retail market also influences different purchasing behaviours. In 2017, households in Belgium and Poland spent 13.4% and 16.8% of their total consumption, respectively, on food and non-alcoholic beverages [47]. These percentages indicate that economic determinants play a greater role in the purchase decisions of Poles. In Poland, the leaders in retail sales are two discount store chains. Biedronka (of Portuguese Jeronimo Martins Group) is the dominant chain with the largest number of stores with over 3000 outlets in 2020. Its revenues are three times higher than those of Lidl (second place, owned by the German Schwarz Group), which also has almost three times fewer outlets [48]. Polish consumers are convinced of the high quality of local food, therefore a significant part of retail sales, especially of fruit and vegetables, takes place at markets and bazaars. In 2019 there were almost 2160 permanent and 7100 seasonal market places in the country [49]. In Belgium, the French chain Carrefour continues to be the leader in retail sales and is developing with new store concepts. The grocery retail market in Poland is characterized by higher growth dynamics (4.4% in 2017–2019), than in Belgium (3.4% in 2014–2018) [50,51]. In terms of qualitative development of the food retail market, the opposite is true—Belgium is ahead of Poland. In Belgian proximity, premiumisation, comfort and convenience are the driving forces of change [52], while in Poland, proximity and convenience are emerging trends. Hypermarkets lose out to smaller formats, independent stores joining franchise chains are gaining importance, but also forecourt retailers benefit from the ability to trade on Sundays [53]. It should be emphasized that both leading discount chains in Poland are building their competitive advantage by offering an increasing choice of products with European PDO, PGI and TSG quality certificates.

To minimise the possible influence of the differences in the level of the social and economic standing of both studied communities, the research was conducted in the urban and most developed regions of Poland and Belgium.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Collection

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the studied issues, two different methods of primary data collection were used. To begin with, quantitative data were gathered with the use of the Paper and Pencil Interviews (PAPI) method, via the direct interview face-to-face technique. The structured interview questionnaire was pre-tested on a group of 15 consumers and revised before data collection. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 28 substantive and 7 metric questions and was prepared in four language versions: in Polish for the respondents from Warsaw and in English, French and Dutch for those living in Belgium.

The surveys were conducted during local community events aimed at promoting sustainable food (locally produced, seasonal, artisanal, organic, certified etc.) in Warsaw, Brussels and Ghent, i.e., a university city near Brussels. These events included: *Piknik Poznaj Dobrą Żywność* (Picnic Get to Know Fine Food), *Międzynarodowy Jarmark Produktów Tradycyjnych i Regionalnych* (International Fair of Traditional and Regional Food Products) in Warsaw, *Urban BBQ, piQniQ* in Brussels and a *Gent Smaakt* (Tastes of Ghent) Festival. Data were gathered by 11 interviewers, 5 in Poland and 6 in Belgium. Each interviewer had been familiarized with the aims and assumptions of the survey, the construction of the questionnaire and was trained in the scope of conducting the interviews. The average interview time was 20–25 min.

The second stage of data collection was designed to provide a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena linked to food certification. The focus groups (FGs or group interviews) method was chosen as a popular and effective technique to collect qualitative data [54]. The method is based on several scheduled and moderated group interviews with 6–8 participants. During FGs, participants interact, share individual experiences, opinions and attitudes what illuminates the variety of viewpoints held in a study population [55].

The interview scenario used in the study was planned and pre-tested to maximize the collection of high-quality data, as well as to make sure that the interviews did not last longer than 2 h. Pilot qualitative research was carried out in a group of 5 people (women and men aged 28 to 55 years) and led to the introduction of minor adjustments of the final version of the interview scenario. All group interviews in Warsaw and Brussels were moderated by the same person—the second author of this article. In Poland, the language of group discussion was Polish and in Belgium—English. The FGs lasted for 90–120 min.

2.2. Sample

The total research sample consisted of 701 urban residents, of which 359 were from Warsaw, 308 from Brussels and 34 from Ghent.

In order to select individuals, the non-probability purposive sampling method was applied. This was due to the fact that the level of recognition and understanding of sustainability labels among the population is generally low [56–58]. That led to the conclusion that the research should be conducted among people who professionally or for personal reasons, show interest in sustainable food products, which in accordance with EU food quality policy include certified food products. Moreover, statistical data for Poland and Belgium confirms that residents of larger cities tend to have better education and income. The food market infrastructure in such cities is also better than in less urbanised areas and a larger stream of marketing activities is directed to food buyers. Therefore, inhabitants of large cities may be more interested in sustainability issues and familiar with sustainable food labelling.

Altogether 330 people from Poland and 329 from Belgium took part in the quantitative survey. Despite the fact that all data were collected anonymously, extra care was taken to ensure that the share of women and men was similar in both countries. The sociodemographic questions in the survey concerned the respondent's gender, age, level of education, type of employment, the household's size and its average monthly income (per person) as well as a subjective assessment of its financial situation. Respondents were also asked if they were the primary food shopper in their household (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the quantitative study sample.

Variable		Total Sample (%) <i>n</i> = 659	Poland (%) <i>n</i> = 330	Belgium (%) <i>n</i> = 329
Gender	Male	36.9	38.9	35.0
	Female	63.1	61.1	65.0
Age (years)	Below 25	22.2	29.9	16.7
	26–35	33.7	19.3	37.6
	36–45	19.0	12.5	18.6
	46–55	12.6	10.9	12.8
	Over 55	12.6	27.4	14.3
Education	Primary or vocational	6.7	5.4	7.9
	Secondary	35.2	19.2	18.1
	Higher (BSc, MSc or higher)	58.1	75.4	74.0
Household size (number of people)	1	19.6	13.1	26.4
	2	33.9	29.4	38.6
	3	18.3	21.3	15.2
	4 and more	28.3	36.2	19.8
Household average monthly income * (per person)	PLN <1000		EUR -	
	1001–1500		<1500	4.2
	1501–2000		1501–2500	8.4
	2001–3000		2501–3000	22.7
	3001–4000		3501–4500	17.9
	>4000		>4500	13.3
				28.0
				45.3
				14.5
				6.9
				5.3

Table 1. Cont.

Variable		Total Sample (%) <i>n</i> = 659	Poland (%) <i>n</i> = 330	Belgium (%) <i>n</i> = 329
Household financial situation (subjective assessment)	Very good	12.5	13.5	11.5
	Rather good	42.7	40.8	44.8
	Average	37.9	39.6	36.1
	Rather bad	5.2	4.9	5.4
	Very bad	1.7	1.2	2.2
The respondent is the primary food shopper	Yes	77.3	74.7	80.2
	No	22.7	25.3	19.8

* Clearly considerable differences in the nominal income levels of the groups of respondents must be considered in the context of average wages in both countries and taking into account different currencies (PLN and EUR)

The group interviews were conducted among 42 consumers, of which 29 lived in Warsaw and 13 in Brussels. The selection process utilized the purposive sampling approach and was based on the results of the quantitative research. Gender was selected as the criterion for differentiating the groups. Altogether 6 focus groups (3 male and 3 female) were carried out with a total of 20 women and 22 men. In Poland out of the total four FGs two consisted of women and two of men. The first group of Polish women (pw1) involved 6 participants, the second (pw2) 8. Among Polish men, the first group (pm1) numbered 7 individuals and the second 8 (pm2). One FG conducted in Belgium was made up of 6 women (bw), the other FG of 7 men (bm). The respondents represented different professional groups, income and education levels. Almost all FGs were dominated by people with higher education with the exception of the Belgian group of men, who mostly declared lower education levels and working as labourers.

2.3. Methods

Quantitative data were collected using a structured interview questionnaire, divided into 7 thematic blocks on consumer purchasing behaviour, perception of food quality and high-quality food and attitudes towards food with certification labels. For the purpose of this article, only part of these questions was used (Appendix A). In order to determine the importance of quality in food selection, a 5-point Likert scale was used, where 1 indicated “definitely no”, 2—“rather no”, 3—“no opinion”, 4—“rather yes” and 5—“definitely yes”. For the assessment of the quality of food produced in a given country, a discrete 5-point ascending scale was used, where 1 meant “very low”, 2—“low”, 3—“average”, 4—“high” and 5—“very high”. In the question devoted to the features distinguishing food products of high quality, respondents expressed their opinion on 16 factors, that were previously selected in the literature review. Opinions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated “strongly disagree”, 2—“rather disagree”, 3—“neither yes nor no”, 4—“rather agree” and 5—“strongly agree”. The part of the questionnaire concerning attitudes towards food with certification labels consisted of closed-ended questions with non-imposing character. Respondents could choose among 3 answers: “yes”, “no” or “I am not able to tell”. This was due to limited awareness and recognition of product labels. Additionally, the importance of certification labels on the packaging for consumers when they choose food products was measured on a discrete 5-point ascending scale with the end values anchored as 1—“least important” and 5—“most important”.

Qualitative data were gathered during focus group interviews according to the interview scenario, which consisted of 5 thematic blocks. In order to meet the research objectives of this paper, only part of the gathered material concerning the importance of food quality for consumers and the role of quality certificates was used. Participants were asked how they recognize the high quality of food products, whether it is important to them when shopping and what the certification labels on food products really mean and whether they matter to them. During the interviews, various stimuli for discussion were used,

including graphic mock-ups of certification labels operating on the Belgian and Polish markets, respectively.

2.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis was performed in the SAS[®] system 9.3 (SAS Institute Inc., 2013, Cary, North Carolina, NC, USA) and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics version 25, SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, IL, USA). At first, data were investigated through descriptive statistics (frequency, means and cross-tabulations). For the correlation analysis the Pearson's non-parametric chi-square test was used and for the comparative analysis—Kruskal–Wallis' test. The nominal variables were compared using Pearson's chi-square test. For orderly variables (age and number of people per household), a non-parametric Mann–Whitney's test was applied. A level of $p \leq 0.05$ was considered as significant. To interpret the associations between variables V-Cramer's test was used.

Subsequently, Factor Analysis was employed to carry out simultaneous analysis of the information provided by a large number of variables on how consumers perceive high-quality food products. Factor Analysis was performed through Principal Component Analysis (PCA) method and followed by a Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization [59]. Factor extraction was based on the criterion eigenvalue greater than one and confirmed by the Scree Plot. As a result, four components (factors) explaining 55.40% of the original variance were identified (Table 2). All extracted components had good internal reliability consistency measured through the Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha > 0.7$).

Table 2. Component Matrix (Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Varimax Rotation Method—Kaiser Normalisation).

Attributes	Product Features	Component (% of Variance)			
		1st (17.3)	2nd (17.0)	3rd (10.7)	4th (10.5)
Sustainability	No/very low amount of additives, i.e., colorants, preservatives, enhancers	0.706	−0.074	0.062	0.011
	Beneficial effect on health	0.665	−0.009	0.164	0.099
	Ingredients of known and controlled origin	0.640	−0.073	0.308	−0.019
	Minimal level of processing	0.630	0.113	0.072	−0.093
	Ethical production	0.629	0.111	−0.142	−0.024
Marketing	Extensive advertising and promotion	−0.107	0.750	−0.115	0.241
	High price	−0.217	0.678	0.025	0.005
	Indication, symbol or certificate on the packaging that other products do not have	0.207	0.658	0.176	−0.072
	Awards, distinctions, medals obtained	−0.031	0.633	0.266	−0.012
	Esthetical / attractive packaging	−0.104	0.594	0.062	0.462
	Sales in reputable places	0.209	0.575	−0.030	0.027
Technological	Special recipe	0.140	0.111	0.822	0.155
	Special production method or with use of special technology	0.180	0.153	0.789	−0.019
	High quality of ingredients	0.359	−0.184	0.577	0.195
Sensory	Attractive appearance	−0.156	0.254	0.097	0.820
	Good taste and smell	0.224	−0.070	0.042	0.803

Although “sustainability” product attributes explained the biggest share (17.3%) of the variance, “marketing” features, incl. indications, symbols or certificates displayed on the packaging followed close behind and accounted for 17.0%. The remaining two groups of product attributes, classified as “technological” and “sensory” explained 10.7% and 10.5% of the variance, accordingly.

The qualitative data analysis involved recording transcription, coding (data categorisation to make it easier to interpret) and interpreting. The data acquired through the interviews was encoded using an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft).

3. Results

3.1. Quality as a Food Choice Determinant

According to study participants, the quality of products was an important factor influencing their food choices. In the quantitative part of the study the vast majority of respondents (93.5%) admitted that “yes” they “definitely” or “rather” take it into account when shopping. In general, the structure of responses in Polish and Belgian consumers did not differ significantly and the dominant answer (“definitely yes”) was given by 57.8% and 47.9%, respectively. The opposite views (“definitely no” or “rather no”) were indicated only by 3.9% of Polish respondents and 5.8% of the Belgian ones.

Among Poles the quality of food products was more important for respondents from larger (two- and three-person) households ($p = 0.0185$, $v = 0.1783$), those who assessed their financial situation as “very good” and “rather good” ($p = 0.0352$, $v = 0.1457$) or were highly educated ($p = 0.0020$, $v = 0.683$). Statistically significant relationships were found between food quality importance and age among both Polish ($p = 0.0480$, $v = 0.1438$) and Belgian consumers ($p = 0.0026$, $v = 0.1725$). The results also show that with age more respondents declared definitely taking the quality of food products into account when shopping.

FG participants also confirmed that quality is an important factor in the food selection process. Nevertheless, the discussions showed that consumers never take food quality into account by itself. Most often quality is considered in relation to price i.e., “if the quality of meat is good and the price acceptable then I will buy the quality product, but if it is too high then I will choose another one” (bm). Polish men paid the least amount of attention to the quality of the food product and it was noted by the FG moderator that these opinions came usually from younger consumers. On the other hand, quality as a food choice determinant was most important for Belgian women, for example: “I have a long list of criteria. The first one is quality, second is the budget that I have available and third the origin of the product. I have a certain scale in my head and I make an analysis” (bw).

In the subsequent part of quantitative research, participants were asked whether they were willing to pay more for products that meet higher quality standards. Most of them (67.1%) “rather agreed” or “definitely agreed”. However circa 16% of respondents “rather disagreed” or “definitely disagreed” to pay more. Consumers from both countries expressed similar opinions.

The willingness to pay a higher price for high quality products was significantly correlated with a positive assessment of the financial status of the household (Polish group $p = 0.0422$, $v = 0.1444$; Belgian group $p = 0.0003$, $v = 0.1888$). Among Belgian consumers, declarations were also linked to the age of respondents ($p = 0.0019$, $v = 0.1786$). The older the respondents, the more often they agreed to pay a higher price. During the focus group interviews, consumers usually affirmed their willingness to pay a higher price, for example: “when it comes to the basic food products such as for example bread, I am willing to pay even 100% more for higher quality” (pm2). Interestingly, the willingness to pay a higher price for higher quality was seen as being associated with a particular way of producing food, i.e., “Young people are willing to spend more on products of higher quality, e.g., artisanal beer (. . .). Nevertheless, some Polish interviewees openly admitted that their income does not allow them to buy high-quality food for all household members due to its high price i.e., “we buy better quality food, but mainly for our daughter” (pm1).

More than half of the Polish and Belgian respondents shared the opinion that the quality of food produced in their country is “high” (56.4% and 46.0%, respectively) or “very high” (9.8% in both countries). On the other hand, according to one-third of the respondents, food produced in their countries is of “average quality” (31.0% of Poles and 39.7% of Belgians). However, no statistically significant differences in the structure of responses of Polish and Belgian consumers were found. Only in the Polish group, socio-

demographic characteristics of the respondents differentiated the assessment of the quality of domestic food. These were the financial situation of the household ($p = 0.0237$, $v = 0.1501$) and the age of the respondents ($p = 0.0377$, $v = 0.1469$). The better the respondents perceived their financial situation or the older they were, the more often their assessment of the quality of Polish food was positive.

All interviewees who participated in the qualitative part of the survey agreed that food produced in their countries is of high quality. Nevertheless, many statements indicated that the availability of this food was often limited by their financial resources e.g., “there is a lot of quality food on the Belgian market, but its availability to me depends on my budget” (bm). In Poland, both male and female groups were more likely to admit that domestic food is of better quality e.g., “according to experts’ opinions, nowadays, (. . .) we have poor food quality. (. . .) I have confidence in Polish food in comparison to what is generally available in Europe” (pw2) or “Polish food is better in general due to lower levels of chemical usage in agriculture compared to Western European countries (. . .)” (pm2). Remarkably, FGs in both countries stressed that some products may be of better quality when imported or purchased abroad: “in my opinion for example fish is better in France than in Belgium, depending on the product” (bm). In Poland special attention was additionally drawn to the problem of “dual food quality”: “foreign brands produce food of lower quality for the Polish market than for other foreign markets” (pw1).

3.2. Perception of Food Quality

According to survey participants, food quality is itself very complex, and consumers, when evaluating it, take into consideration different product characteristics simultaneously. The results of the quantitative part of the study showed that the desired sensory characteristics (i.e., good taste and smell as well as attractive appearance) most often convinced respondents that the product is of high quality (Table 3). The average score for this group of determinants was 3.91 in the total sample (on a scale from one to five), but Belgian respondents rated them statistically significantly lower (mean 3.76) than Poles (4.06).

Table 3. The mean scores of selected features that distinguish high-quality food products, measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1—“strongly disagree” to 5—“strongly agree”.

Attributes	Total Sample	Poland	Belgium
I. Sensory	3.91	4.06^a	3.76^b
Good taste and smell	4.17	4.29 ^a	4.05 ^b
Attractive appearance	3.64	3.82 ^a	3.46 ^b
II. Sustainability	3.76	3.81	3.71
Beneficial effect on health	3.99	4.06	3.92
No/very low amount of additives, e.g., colorants, preservatives, enhancers	3.97	4.10 ^a	3.83 ^b
Ingredients of known and controlled origin	3.86	3.87	3.83
Minimal level of processing	3.54	3.65 ^a	3.42 ^b
Ethical production	3.43	3.36 ^b	3.51 ^a
III. Technological	3.67	3.77	3.56
High quality of ingredients	4.26	4.27	4.24
Special production method or with use of special technology	3.41	3.49	3.32
Special recipe	3.34	3.55 ^a	3.11 ^b
IV. Marketing	2.81	2.93^a	2.68^b
Awards, distinctions, medals obtained	3.07	3.20 ^a	2.93 ^b
Sales in reputable places	3.05	2.95 ^b	3.14 ^a
Indication, symbol or certificate on the packaging that other products do not have	2.92	3.03 ^a	2.82 ^b
High price	2.76	2.87 ^a	2.64 ^b
Esthetical/attractive packaging	2.73	3.04 ^a	2.41 ^b
Extensive advertising and promotion	2.32	2.51 ^a	2.14 ^b

* Superscript letters “a” and “b” indicate whether the groups of respondents differ significantly in the evaluation of a given product attribute ($p \leq 0.05$).

From the consumers' point of view, also sustainability attributes (beneficial effect on health, known origin and low degree of processing) indicate high food quality. The average score for the five determinants in this group was 3.76. The most important among them was "beneficial effect on health", where the mean in the total sample equalled 3.99 and no significant differences in its assessment were observed between Polish and Belgian respondents. The means of the remaining four features assessed by all study participants ranged from 3.97 ("no/very low amount of additives, e.g., colorants, preservatives, enhancers") to 3.43 ("ethical production"). In general, Belgians rated the importance of these attributes lower than Poles, except for "ethical production", which obtained a statistically significantly higher mean.

In the Polish group, statistical relationships were found between the evaluation of product features linked to sustainability and respondents' age ($p = 0.0263$, $v = 0.1521$), education level ($p = 0.0231$, $v = 0.1491$) and subjective assessment of the household's financial situation ($p = 0.0043$, $v = 0.1769$). They were rated higher by respondents aged 36 years+, holders of higher education and those who assessed their financial situation as "average" or "rather good". Among Belgians, no statistically important relationships were observed.

The group called "technological attributes" (3.67 on average in the total sample) was slightly less important in characterizing high-quality food. The most significant feature—"high quality of ingredients"—was highly rated in the total sample (4.26) as well as in both respondent groups. The least important feature in this group was "special recipe", rated lowest by Belgian respondents (3.11). Polish respondents who assessed their financial situation as "rather good" or "rather bad" assigned more weight to this set of characteristics, when assessing product quality ($p = 0.0198$, $v = 0.1593$).

The collected quantitative data pointed out that consumers saw the importance of marketing attributes as minor in distinguishing high-quality food products. Most of the respondents' indications were between two—"rather disagree" to three—"neither yes or no". Among this set of features, the highest average was obtained by "awards, distinctions, medals" (mean score in total sample 3.07). The least convincing feature that the product is of high quality is its "extensive advertising and promotion" (2.32). Statistically significant differences were observed in the assessment of all attributes from this set among Polish and Belgian consumers. In general, Poles assessed the importance of marketing attributes higher than Belgians, with the exception of "selling in reputable places" where the average score of the Belgian group was 3.14 and the Polish 2.95. The financial situation was the only sociodemographic characteristic that statistically differentiated the respondents' assessments (for Polish respondents $p = 0.000$, $v = 0.1985$, for Belgians $p = 0.004$, $v = 0.1739$). Consumers who assessed their financial situation as "average" or "rather good" indicated that the marketing attributes were more meaningful in distinguishing high-quality food products.

The results of the FGs also revealed that high-quality food products were most often understood and defined as tasty, fresh, and natural, of a low degree of processing and with an expected composition (Table 4). The interviewees also paid a lot of attention to the health aspects of high-quality products that improve wellbeing, promote health and can be useful in the prevention of diseases. Other features of high-quality food were also named and included place of origin, production methods and marketing attributes like packaging, label or brand.

Table 4. Comments made by the focus group (FG)'s participants on the features of high-quality food.

FG	Statements
	Sensory attributes
pw2	<i>A higher quality product tastes better;</i>
pm2	<i>A quality product is a fresh, natural product;</i>
pw1	<i>A quality product for me is the least processed product (...), fresh; Quality food is something fresh, safety proofed</i>
bw	<i>Quality (...) is for me freshness and then taste;</i>
bm	<i>If it tastes good it's of high quality;</i>
	Health aspects
pw1	<i>I understand quality in two dimensions: in the sense of what diet I choose, meaning healthier or less healthy, and within this diet I can choose products from a better or worse producer; Food can be a remedy, I have a cosmetology education, what we eat has a very big influence on e.g., the appearance of the skin;</i>
bw	<i>When I go to the doctor, now that I have health problems, the first question they ask me is if I'm on a diet, because they immediately think it has a big impact on our health;</i>
	Place of origin
bw	<i>For me, the place of origin of a product is a part of quality;</i>
pw2	<i>It is important where it comes from, e.g., butter should be only from Grajewo, with a clover*;</i>
pw1	<i>The quality of feed for hens certainly translates into the quality of eggs;</i>
	Production and processing methods
pm2	<i>Quality is affected by the way in which food is preserved and processed; The type of slaughtering affects the quality of the meat, as blood and other fluids decompose most rapidly;</i>
pw1	<i>I would say that the quality of food depends on how it is produced, how much or not it has been 'sprayed' with pesticides, for example;</i>
pw2	<i>Lately, I have not been buying cold cuts at all (...) because we know that there are chemicals in it, which hurt us;</i>
	Marketing attributes: packaging, label, brand
bm	<i>The products of the Dutch company HAK, although they are canned, are always in glass packaging, this is part of their marketing, at least you can see what is inside. This is, in my opinion, an element of the quality of this product When I look for high quality, I read the label on the packaging (...), sometimes it is written e.g., category one, as in the case of meat, and sometimes that it is restaurant quality;</i>
pm2	<i>The company, the brand is a proof of quality;</i>
pm1	<i>Paradoxically, a high quality product can be cheap (...) You just need to know it (...) have confidence or know the manufacturer who produces it;</i>

* a graphic mark of green clover with the inscription "natural product", the Polish manufacturer's quality label.

According to FG participants, the most controversial feature of high-quality foods was price and using it as a quality indicator is tricky. This is illustrated by the statements of the Belgian group: "price does not necessarily indicate quality" (bm) which shows that the meaning of price in assessing product quality is ambiguous for consumers. These conflicting opinions were also clearly expressed in the group of Polish men: "When we buy cheap it is almost certain that it will rarely happen that the product will be good, but if we pay a high price it is a lottery" (pm1). A woman in the Polish group put it this way: "if we are looking for something that is of better quality, then we want to believe that it is more expensive and will be tastier" (pw2). Consumers can therefore assume that the use of better-quality ingredients or more expensive methods of production results in a higher price for the final product. Whether (and how much) consumers are willing to pay for quality is difficult to assess and largely depends on the individual.

3.3. Certification Labels as Product Quality Assurance

Certification labels are a marketing communication tool used to identify a product and its quality. However, in the quantitative part of the survey 35% of Poles and 31% of Belgians admitted that they did not notice such indicators on the product's packaging. Respondents (23%) had an ambivalent approach to quality labels on food products, claiming that they had no opinion on this subject. Less than half (44%) of the total sample: 42% in the Polish group and 44% in the Belgian group declared that they take notice of certification labels displayed on food products. No statistically significant differences in the structure of responses among Polish and Belgian consumers were observed.

In both groups positive declarations were correlated with age ($p < 0.0001$, $v = 0.2255$ and $p = 0.0006$, $v = 0.2134$). Among Poles, 60% of respondents aged 46–55 and over 55 (59%) paid attention to certification labels on food products. On the other hand, the highest percentage (48%) of opposite answers were given by young respondents under the age of 25. In the case of Belgian consumers, positive declarations were expressed mainly by people aged 36 to 45 (59%) and 46 to 55 (64%). As in the case of Poles, a significant percentage of people under 25 years of age (43%) did not pay attention to that type of business to customer (B2C) information.

In the qualitative part of the study most interviewees admitted that they knew or saw at least some of the certificates presented on the mock-ups. During the discussions, participants from both countries used simplified terms, describing certification labels as signs, marks, symbols or simply as graphics. In the quoted statements of the respondents, these terms were left unchanged. Most often, the respondents were not able to determine their meaning or what the certification labels really certify, i.e., *“I recognize the sign Znak jakości Q (Q Quality Mark) and Poznaj Dobrą Żywność (Try Fine Food), these signs appeared somewhere, but I don’t understand what they exactly mean”* (pw2). It was also noted that a large number and diversity of food quality assurance certificates is confusing for consumers. Some participants of FGs were sceptical towards certification labels that prove to be a kind of greenwashing scheme. One of them said: *“When I buy canned tuna, it is often written on it that fishing is dolphin-friendly, (...) but in reality tuna fishing practices are practically unmonitored and substantial numbers of dolphins and other sea animals are killed or harmed each year”* (bw). Moreover, many opinions seriously questioned the trust that some of these certification labels deserve. However, they were made with reference to very specific examples, proving a higher level of knowledge about their meaning: *“the Belgian product sign on Carrefour mayonnaise, it is a shame to advertise something as “buy it, because it is Belgian and it contains mainly fat”* (bw).

Generally, it was observed that noticeability of certification labels was higher among women than men as well as among Belgian than Polish interviewees. Observations from both Belgian groups give the impression that knowledge about certification labels was deeper and the consumers’ experience in Belgium is higher than in Poland.

Certification labels should reassure consumers about the quality and safety of what they buy and eat. However, the extent to which they guide consumer choices is rather limited. The results of quantitative research showed that for 36% of Poles and 40% of Belgians the presence of labels was “important” or “very important” when purchasing a product. The distribution of consumer opinions in both groups was similar and no statistically significant differences were found between them. Only in the Belgian group, the Cramer test confirmed a weak association ($p = 0.0487$, $v = 0.1549$) between household income and the consumers’ views. The presence of labels was “important” or “very important” for 47% of low-income respondents (<1.500 EUR/month) and 44% of those with monthly earnings between 3.501 and 4.500 EUR.

The fact that the product won a competition or obtained an award was also not important for consumers when making food choices. Only 24% of study participants shared the opinion that such information is “important” or “very important”. Overall awards and distinctions were more important for Polish (30%) than Belgian (18%) respondents. Among Belgians they were more important for respondents living in smaller (one- and two-person) households ($p = 0.009$, $v = 0.2173$), with a secondary level of education ($p = 0.0389$, $v = 0.1557$) and those who assessed their financial situation as “very good” and “rather good” ($p = 0.0452$, $v = 0.1457$).

Data collected during the FGs confirm the minor importance of certification labels in driving consumer choices while shopping. Nevertheless, when participants were asked if these labels ever prompted them to buy a food product, responses differed between groups by gender and nationality (Table 5).

Table 5. Comments made by the FG participants on the importance of certification labels in making product choices when purchasing.

Comments	Polish Focus Groups	Belgian Focus Groups
		Women
Important	<i>I pay attention to the 0–3 digital markings of the type of rearing (. . .) I don't buy either 2 or 3, but 0 (. . .) the way hens are reared and how they are fed is important to me (pw2)</i>	<i>I buy products with distinctions, usually on cheeses, but they usually come from France, although there are also quite a few in Belgium, e.g., for Meritus meat, 'Blanc Bleu Belge' (cattle breed)</i>
	<i>For me, the sign 'Teraz Polska' (Poland Now) matters, as I am a local, and not only, patriot (pw1)</i>	<i>I pay more and more attention to the Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance and Sustainable Fisheries certificates, as environmental issues are becoming more and more important to me.</i>
Not important	<i>None of the signs shown ever made me buy a food product (pw1)</i>	<i>There are too many of these signs, similar to each other</i>
Reasons	<i>I'm not impressed by these signs, I don't pay attention' (pw2)</i> <i>It is difficult to know if it is supported by some research or if the company has not made a mark on itself (pw1)</i> <i>Certificates and marks are a way to increase product sales (pw2)</i>	<i>In general, I believe there are too many symbols and no information who is awarding them</i>
		Men
Important	<i>What matters to me is whether the product has won any consumer awards (pm1)</i>	<i>If I have two dark chocolates to choose from, that are difficult to compare with each other, I would choose the one with the mark of Fair Trade</i>
	<i>The EU quality mark, that is to say the top shelf of the marks, followed by a genuine verification system, for the rest of the marks, this is not the case (pm2)</i>	<i>There is one sign that I pay attention to, it is a sign of authentic Trappist beer. There are many beers that claim to be original Trappist beers, but there only 8–9 really are. They are made by monks in a monastery, according to a special procedure (. . .)</i>
Not important	<i>I don't trust them, just because there are so many of them and they don't guarantee me anything' (pm1)</i>	<i>I would like to believe that if a product has a quality label that it is of good quality</i>
	<i>This does not make shopping any easier, someone introduces too many of these signs (pm2)</i>	<i>Everyone knows the 'Best Frit' sign, but it has never been a reason to go to this or that 'frituur' * for fries</i>
Reasons	<i>With a lot of time expenditure, it may be possible to decode what all these characters mean, but another question is whether they are actually verifiable (pm2)</i>	<i>I don't trust these signs, it's brainwashing, but you can often see them on TV and probably the producers want us to become familiar with them and associate them with good quality</i>
	<i>For me, this is fashion, this is marketing, incorporated into the price of the product' (pm1)</i>	<i>There is no sign that says 'we, an independent organization that has nothing to do with the manufacturer, certify that, for example, the production of this product took place in a sustainable manner'</i>

* the specific Flemish name for typical Belgian bars with Belgian fries.

The dominant opinion among Polish women was that certification labels are not important when choosing food. The main reason for this belief is that the awarding or certification is unclear and there are obstacles to obtaining information about it. According to some interviewees certification labels on the packaging are simply an element of marketing that create additional product costs. When Polish women choose a certified food product, they are motivated by patriotism, concern for social welfare, environmental and animal welfare protection, or search for food products of better quality.

Participants of Polish male groups usually denied that certification marks are important to them when choosing food products. They expressed the most (out of all groups) doubts as to the method of granting certificates, as well as the procedures that must be followed by the producer in order to be authorized to use them. However, the in-depth discussion showed that certification can influence at least some of their purchasing decisions, i.e., "if I had to indicate one of the best products, then I would choose the one with most symbols" (pm2). Some of interviewees also indicated that it might be a good idea to develop one certification label that would be trustworthy and easily recognizable: "this work should begin on one or two certificates, although this is a utopia because there is such a big power that wants to operate on this market to realize its profits" (pm1).

Among all the FGs, certification labels were of the greatest importance to Belgian women. This group was the only one to react enthusiastically and positively to the question of whether any of the certificates influenced the decision to buy a food product. Among the reasons for actively searching for information on the packaging, interviewees mentioned that it is related to the issues of sensitivity to animal welfare and environmental protection, home tradition or the search for high quality for certain product categories (e.g., beef, cheese). However, there were also reservations in this group regarding the huge number of labels on the market and the ambiguity about their use and meaning.

During the interviews with Belgian men, several statements were made that indicate a favourable approach to certification labels on the packaging of food products. These respondents showed great knowledge to take them into account when purchasing food, however, some of them questioned their validity. It was pointed out that even good knowledge and recognition of a particular certification label does not translate into its impact on shopping choices. Furthermore, labels can also cause bad publicity, i.e., a large number of certificates on a single product discourages instead of encouraging its purchase. Some respondents also indicated the need to introduce a single type of certification label that would provide consumers with concise information on various quality aspects of the product.

The qualitative part of the study found that 38% of its participants declared buying certified food or marked with other quality assurance symbols. In the case of Belgian consumers such a declaration came from 45% of them, while among the Polish group it was only 29%. The percentage of consumers who clearly stated that they do not buy certified food was significantly higher in the Polish group (41%) than in the Belgian one (21%). A notable share of respondents (c.a. 30% in both groups) could not clearly answer this question. Affirmative declarations were correlated with age in both consumer groups. Among Polish respondents ($p = 0.0048$, $v = 0.1859$) they were mainly expressed by people aged 45 years and above. In the case of Belgian consumers ($p = 0.0030$, $v = 0.1981$), the majority of declarations were positive in all age groups except the youngest one (below 25 years).

FG participants repeatedly admitted that they buy food products with certification labels or marked with some distinction or award. The main reasons for buying them throughout all the groups were: confirmation of the particular production method, neutrality in terms of environmental impact, care for animal welfare, the guarantee of purchasing a product of a certain (high) quality and habits and traditions brought from home. Some of the statements confirming these observations are included in Table 5.

4. Discussion

The relationship between quality and the selection of food products has been analysed and discussed in previous studies based on several theoretical approaches [3,60,61]. Food quality is now recognized as one of the most important factors in food choices for (65% of respondents), followed by product price (54%), origin (34%) and brand (15%) [62]. Our research also focused on the perception of quality as a determinant of food products' choice. It turned out that quality was very important for Polish and Belgian consumers when choosing food, but they were not interested in quality per se. The respondents combined their perception of quality with different characteristics of the product, which guaranteed them a certain set of benefits, for example good taste and smell, beneficial effect on health, high quality of ingredients, awards, distinctions or medals that other products do not possess, etc. This phenomenon was previously explained by Lancaster who described product quality as a set of attributes defining product performance [63,64] and developed in the "means–end approach" to consumer behaviour [65]. According to these theories, the consumer's perception of product quality comes down to assessing the compliance of the product's features (named "quality cues") with the consumer's needs and values. Our findings show that the surveyed consumers most often perceived high-quality food products through the prism of information about sensory features, the most fundamental

quality indicators, and product sustainability (attributes related to wellbeing, known origin, with a low degree of processing and low environmental impact). Technological aspects and marketing features were seen as relatively less important and may for example satisfy the need for status. This confirms that from the consumer perspective food quality perception is a complex process, based on a subjective judgment of a set of desired product characteristics. Finally, consumers' perception of quality is an individual process related to their sociodemographic characteristics [10,66,67] and situational factors like consumption situation, temporal context and environment [68,69]. Therefore, our study noted differences between respondents of different cultural backgrounds, as well as between consumers of different age groups, gender, education, income and households of different sizes.

Most of the study participants wanted to pay more for food products that conform to higher quality standards. This is supported by the results of several previous studies in which consumers were willing to pay a premium for high-quality food i.e., quality labelled products [70–72]. However, it also has been noted that agreeing to pay more for these products largely depends on the type of food (staple vs. luxury item), how it is produced (origin, recipe, technology), the purpose for who it will be used (own use, child, guests) and the prices consumers actually pay for it. In the opinion of consumers, the main barriers related to the purchase of high-quality food were the lack of affordability or the opinion that the signalled quality of the product does not really matter to them.

Consumers from both countries confirmed the availability of high-quality food products on the market. Among Polish respondents, the influence of the country-of-origin on the perceived food quality was more evident. Former studies suggest that country-of-origin affects consumer attitudes to a product (perceptions of its properties such as quality, reliability and price), through existing buyers' beliefs about the specificity of a given country or due to their loyalty to it [73–76]. Polish consumers indicated a positive attitude towards domestic food products also in another survey [77], which was mostly related to their belief in restricted use of pesticides, fertilisers or antibiotics or using better environmental practices. They also pointed to the problem of dual quality that is observed in their market (discriminatory practices consisting of selling different quality products in the western and eastern EU countries, but with identical brand and packaging). This issue is a part of the European Commission's ongoing work on how to identify and counter misleading commercial practices [78].

Certification labels are an important element of modern consumer policy, aimed at counteracting information asymmetry and protecting producers of food with special qualities [29,79–81]. Their aim is to inform consumers about higher quality and thus enable choice to be better in line with the preference [82–84]. Despite their guiding function, several studies report that respondents are not aware of the inner meaning of quality labels or misinterpret their sense [85,86]. The level of their familiarity and willingness to buy products with certificates varies greatly depending on the type of label, product, the socio-demographic factors of the consumer and situational context [40,56,87–89].

Findings from the present study reveal that respondents hold different levels of awareness related to quality labels. Their noticeability was higher among women and within Belgians rather than the Polish respondents. This may be due to the fact that, in general, women purchase food for households more often and therefore are more likely to notice certification labels when shopping. A highly developed food market in Belgium (with a long-established market economy) has driven manufacturers to introduce a larger number of food claims, certifications, messages and other information tools to differentiate their goods [90]. This probably leads to higher user experience and certificates' consciousness among Belgian consumers. Partly this may be a result of the state policy aimed at increasing the offer of certified products, the recognition of certificates among consumers and the demand for certified food. For example, in 2017 the Belgian Parliament adopted a resolution to promote fair trade and support the "Make Belgium a Fair Trade Country" campaign. Its goal was to increase the share of Belgians that have heard of fair trade to 95% in 2020 [91].

Results showed that most of the surveyed consumers were aware of certified labels but did not know exactly what they stand for and what institutions or organisations issued them. Earlier studies also suggest that respondents simply do not know them, do not understand their message in to the full extent or perceive a relatively low quality vs. price ratio for products with quality labels [86,92].

Our results also imply that the huge number of certification labels functioning in the food market overwhelms consumers, causes reluctance to familiarise them and creates a tendency to ignore them during decision-making. Overall too many certificates create resistance in consumers when they feel coerced to compare information and make choices [93,94]. An interesting idea, that comes from the studied men's groups in both countries, was to create a universal quality label that could prove the quality aspects and would apply to different products. However, the scope of certification covers many different things (used in relation to different areas, e.g., environmental protection, animal welfare, labour standards, supply chain, etc.) as well as different actors and their interests. For this reason, the development of a universal certification label and its implementation is rather complicated. Interestingly the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has recently called for exploring ways to harmonize voluntary eco-claims and create a sustainable labelling framework. These should cover the nutritional, climatic, environmental and social aspects of products [95,96].

Nevertheless, some consumers consider quality labels as an important attribute that is able to drive their choices [13,79,86,90,97]. According to Eurobarometer data, for 33% (2017) and 41% (2020) of Europeans the specific label ensuring the quality of the product is a very important factor in the decision to buy a food product [87]. In our study a similar percentage of respondents admitted that they actively look for a quality certificate on the packaging when purchasing food. Certificates were important when shopping if their message was obvious and consistent with the respondent's personal beliefs on environmental protection, animal welfare, support for local economy and traditions etc. Most of the studied consumers perceived the superior value of products with certificates important for them and rejected those whose message is not clear or reliable. Therefore, it can be assumed that certification labels on food can serve as potential "filter" through which consumers form more general views on food product quality. In the case of sustainability labels, consumer knowledge and understanding of sustainability is a key prerequisite for increasing their importance and for their popularization [56,98,99].

5. Conclusions

The results of this study imply that due to the fact that certification labels refer to different areas of quality, including the food product's environmental impact, animal welfare, climate change, human rights, labour standards etc. consumers tend to perceive them with caution. Sometimes certificates are ignored because potential buyers do not understand what they mean, are not sure about their credibility or have doubts about the certification authority. In general, women show greater awareness and better knowledge of quality certificates than men and Belgian consumers have a deeper knowledge and are have a more positive (favourable) attitude towards certification labels than Poles.

Price was pointed out by interviewed FG participants as the most controversial feature of high-quality foods influencing consumer perception of quality. The prices that people living in different countries are willing to pay for labelled high-quality foods vary and can be assessed with the use of specific Willingness to Buy (WTB) and (Readiness to Pay (RTP) indicators. They are highly dependent on the financial situation of consumers, incl. per capita income level. Therefore, it is clear that economic factors, such as food affordability should be taken into consideration by policymakers and managers when developing quality assurance schemes in attempts to introduce new labels pointing at the product's sustainability.

Despite the fact that the obtained results show that consumers pay more attention to sensory attributes than certification labels these tools can have an important role in deliv-

ering a message on the quality and sustainability of products. The analysis of qualitative data demonstrated that labels that are consistent with the respondent's personal beliefs have a direct impact on quality perception and thus food choice. Consumers' understanding of food quality importance is key to adopting sustainable consumption patterns and drives consumer choices towards healthier, more sustainable options. Therefore, there is a need for public institutions to expand and intensify promotion and communication efforts to help consumers understand the need to shift towards sustainability and to increase credibility and the role of certification labels in promoting food quality, sustainability and market transparency.

The Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy marks the beginning of a process aiming to fundamentally change the way food is provided to EU consumers. Within the F2F Strategy, the European Commission announced several measures for labelling and that it will "examine ways to harmonize voluntary green claims" and propose a sustainable food labelling framework that covers the nutritional, climate, environmental and social aspects of food products. F2F objectives will need to be converted into legislative proposals, and the European Parliament and Member States will shape and amend these proposals as part of the EU legislative process. This multistep legislative development will take several years to complete and therefore research on this quality and sustainability-linked labelling is very much needed in the framework of future sustainability of food chains, incl. consumer behaviour.

The results of the present study should be regarded in the context of their limitations. Firstly, the quantitative research used the non-probability purposive sampling method of data collection, that regardless of the significant advantages, can introduce some bias. Our respondents were overrepresented in some socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., higher education level and higher annual household income). It is also possible that respondents who are more interested in the topic are therefore more willing to participate in the study. They may have also been influenced by social attitudes during face-to-face interviews and respond in a socially acceptable way. Finally, the present study focused on the influence of certification labels in general on perceived food product quality; however, some of them may be more effective than others in facilitating the communication of information to consumers.

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Data Availability Statement: Data are not publicly available, though the data may be made available on request from the corresponding author.

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

Appendix A

Table A1. Quantitative research questions analysed in the article.

Question	Answers/Options
Q1. Do you take into account the quality of food products when shopping? Single choice question	Definitely no Rather no No opinion Rather yes Definitely yes
Q2. What is your attitude towards the following statement: There is a lack of high quality food on the market <i>Single-response matrix question with a five-level Likert-type scale</i>	1—definitely no 2—rather no 3—no opinion 4—rather yes 5—definitely yes
Q3. What is your attitude towards the following statement: I'm willing to pay more for products that conform to higher quality standards <i>Single-response matrix question with a five-level Likert-type scale</i>	1—definitely no 2—rather no 3—no opinion 4—rather yes 5—definitely yes
Q4. Generally how would you describe the quality of food products in your country? <i>Single choice question</i>	Very low Low Average High Very high Good taste and smell Attractive appearance Special production method or with use of special technology Special recipe High quality of ingredients Beneficial effect on health Esthetical/attractive packaging Ingredients of known and controlled origin Indication, symbol or certificate on the packaging that other products do not have Sales in reputable places Minimal level of processing High price Awards, distinctions, medals obtained No/very low amount of additives, e.g., colorants, preservatives, enhancers Extensive advertising and promotion Ethical production
Q5. In your opinion, which features distinguish food products of high quality? <i>Single-response matrix question with a five-level Likert-type scale: 1-strongly disagree/2-rather disagree/3-neither yes nor no/4-rather agree/5-strongly agree</i>	Yes No I am not able to tell
Q6. Do you take notice of the quality certification/confirmation marks on food products? <i>Single choice question</i>	1—least important 2 3 4 5—most important
Q7. How important are: Indication, symbol or certificate on the packaging that other products do not have in your choice of food products? <i>Single-response matrix question with a five-level ascending scale</i>	1—least important 2 3 4 5—most important
Q8. How important are: Awards, distinctions, medals obtained in your choice of food products? <i>Single-response matrix question with a five-level ascending scale</i>	1—least important 2 3 4 5—most important
Q9. Do you buy food products certified or marked with a specific quality certification symbol? <i>Single choice question</i>	1—least important 2 3 4 5—most important
	Yes No I am not able to tell

Table A2. Qualitative research questions analysed in the article.**Part 1: Importance of food quality for consumers**

1. Which main criteria do you take into account while choosing food products to buy?
2. What in your opinion influences the quality of food?
3. What makes high quality food stand out in your opinion?
4. In your opinion, is the high quality food available on the Polish/Belgian market?
5. Do you agree with the statement that Polish/Belgian food is of high quality? Can you explain why?
6. Do you buy high quality food products?
7. How often?
8. For what reasons?
9. Do you think that high-quality food has a different price than other products?
10. Should food of a higher quality standard cost slightly more than other products of the same kind (cheese, bread, meat, etc.)
11. How would you find a way to search high-quality food from among other products?
12. How do you search for such food products?

Part 2: The role of quality certificates

1. Do you buy food products that are marked/certified with a special quality mark?
2. What are these marks/symbols?
3. What do they mean to you?
4. Are they easily available on the Polish/Belgian market?
5. Where can you buy them?
6. Is this mark or symbol a guarantee that you are buying a high quality product?
7. In your opinion, is the product marked with this symbol on the packaging a better product than others in its category?
8. Are they cheaper/the same/more expensive than others in the same category?
9. Do you buy them? If so, why?

Present laminated boards only with the graphic symbols

- Do you know these signs?
- Do you know the names of these certificates?
- Do you know what these symbols certify?

Present laminated boards showing the graphic symbol together with its name

- Do these signs seem more familiar now?
 - Is it easier to determine what they mean now?
1. Does the presence of this type of symbols on the food product packaging influence your purchasing choice?
 2. Were these symbols ever a reason why you decided to buy a certain food product?

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