


## DOES DUAL QUALITY OF PRODUCTS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION TRULY BOTHER CONSUMERS?

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**Abstract:** *Dual quality is a situation when a company places its products on international markets under the same brand and in identical or very similar packaging but with different composition or different quality. This has the greatest impact on the satisfaction of consumers, who may feel inferior if they receive lower quality than abroad. Several comparative tests were carried out in Europe, which showed that dual quality exists in the EU, although it was not confirmed that there were always better products in Western Europe. Testing bodies, national politicians, the European Commission, manufacturers and distributors, and consumers abroad also commented on the topic. Several countries conducted research on consumer opinions on dual quality, but similar research was lacking in Slovakia. For a long time, there was also a lack of a solution to this situation, as manufacturers defended themselves by saying that they were only fulfilling the demands of consumers. The main aim of this paper is to examine consumers' opinions on dual product quality and to identify a solution to this problem that meets their requirements. The analysis of the opinions of consumers in the Slovak Republic was based on the results of primary research conducted on a sample of 987 respondents. The general methodology established by the European Union served as a guideline for formulating proposals for solving the problem of dual quality of goods in the EU, which was adapted to the conditions of the Slovak Republic in accordance with the opinions of Slovak consumers. The main proposal is the establishment of the Slovak Trade Inspection (STI) as the main body responsible for solving the issue of dual quality in Slovakia. STI is supposed to be responsible for receiving and processing suggestions in case of suspicion of dual quality, coordination in ensuring product testing and communication with brand owners. Another important proposal is the intensification of communication with brand owners and the creation of more space for their expression in the event that dual quality offered by them is discovered. As part of testing the use of dual quality as an unfair practice, the prices of the affected products in individual countries should also be investigated.*

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**Introduction.** At a time when the economies of Central European countries are being hit hard by the crisis caused by the pandemic, there is growing pressure to look for opportunities. It is the role of policy makers to set the trend for improving equality and transparency of business opportunities in the European single market. Finding new markets in which a manufacturer can place its products is a natural business activity that leads to the expansion of sales to markets in other countries to obtain competitive advantage (Brodnanova, 2022). Producers operating internationally usually sell their products under the same brand in many countries. The customer assumes that it is the same product, i.e. in the same composition and quality. Many studies declare that quality is one of the tools that companies use to fulfil their strategy and increase their competitiveness (Potkany et al., 2022). However, experience has shown that large companies sell products of a different composition or quality in Western European countries under the same brand than in Central and Eastern European countries. The price is about the same, sometimes even higher for lower quality products offered in Central and Eastern Europe.

The current problem of dual quality arose naturally after the regime change in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 80s. If international companies wanted to succeed with their products in the markets of the countries of the former Soviet Union, where the standard of living was lower than in other countries, they had to adjust the composition of their products so that the products were buyable to reach a profit as a key performance indicator (Kliestik et al., 2022). With the opening of the borders, the people of Eastern and Central Europe began to travel abroad, where they also bought products of brands they knew from home, and there were cases where they came across dual quality (Pratt, 2007; Ichijo and Ranta, 2016; Osvaldova and Vrabcova, 2020). Consumers in the eastern part of the EU have begun to complain that the quality of some products is lower in their country than with the same brand of the same manufacturer abroad (Klabusayova, 2018) they consider the benefit of the products they get (Polat, 2022).

Several entities are involved in the issue of dual quality. In the first place, these are the institutions that have carried out comparative tests in different countries. These tests took place in the years 2011 to 2019 in the so-called post-communist countries.

Politicians from the countries concerned were mostly active in addressing the dual quality. The most prominent figure was the Slovak Minister of Agriculture and the Czech European Commissioner, whose agenda included consumer protection. However, there have been several reservations that politicians are covering up other, more serious problems in domestic countries with this agenda (Morvay, 2019).

The European Union initially refused to address dual quality because, according to it, this issue fell within the competence of individual countries. Food safety was paramount (Cupak et al., 2016; Treiblmaier and Garaus, 2022) because food insecurity can affect health with potentially negative consequences for mental, social and physical well-being (Grimaccia and Naccarato, 2022; Bukari et al., 2022). As long as the product was safe and provided all the information on the packaging, from a legal point of view, there was no reason to address the dual quality. Following pressure from politicians in the countries concerned, the European Commission has acknowledged that dual quality exists, but the results of previous studies have not been clear due to inconsistent testing methodologies. The European Commission has therefore commissioned the Joint Research Centre to develop a common methodology and then test it to demonstrate or disprove the dual quality. In 2018, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre conducted a test, the results of which showed that there were differences in the composition of products packaged in the same or very similar packaging, but the geographical pattern dividing the EU into East and West was not confirmed. The European Commission has subsequently classified dual quality as an unfair commercial practice, and once it is proven using a uniform European method of comparing goods, it threatens sanctions for entrepreneurs. Member States were given the task of incorporating a harmonized methodology for dual-quality research into their legislation.

Dual quality information was mostly presented in the media, with little room for comment from producers and brand owners who were demonstrated the use of dual quality. In this respect, there is room for greater involvement of manufacturers and brand owners in the process of eliminating dual quality in the EU.

However, minimal attention was paid to the opinions of those most affected by dual quality, namely consumers and their trust and satisfaction (Kozakova, 2020). There are many cues for choosing a product and quality and safety is the most important factor for consumers when buying products, especially food (Mascarello et al., 2015; Grunert and Achmann, 2016; Jiang et al., 2021; Petrescu et al, 2022), and it should be unified in the EU. Research on consumer opinions and attitudes was carried out in only two countries - in the Czech Republic and Poland. For this reason, the empirical research focused on examining consumer behaviour in Slovakia in the context of dual quality. The interested of this research was in the opinions of consumers in the selected European country as a basis for creating proposals for solutions to policy updates

regulating the conditions in the European single market, as well as the national policies of individual European states based on the opinions and demands of consumers. The given data are necessary for the correct setting of the direction of legislation in the given area and the documents in such a form and scope are currently absent in the European area.

The aim of the study is to find out the opinions of Slovak consumers on the issue of dual quality. This is the only research of its kind in Slovakia. The contribution is devoted to the explanation of dual quality in the area of the European Union as an unfair practice. The following is an analysis of secondary sources to determine the situation in this area: how dual quality was proven, which goods are concerned and what is the opinion of various stakeholders: brand owners, politicians of individual countries, the European Commission and consumers abroad. The analysis of secondary data is followed by primary research on the attitudes of Slovak consumers towards dual quality, which is the only one of its kind in Slovakia. Based on the results of the research, the conclusion of the contribution contains proposals for the solution of dual quality in Slovakia, which is based on the methodology adopted by the European Commission, but is adapted to the conditions of the Slovak Republic according to the preferences of Slovak consumers. The proposals are directed towards the institution that has to solve the problem of dual quality in Slovakia, communication between individual interested entities and also attributes that need to be taken into account during testing. The contribution thus provides a concrete procedure for solving the problem of dual quality according to the requirements of Slovak consumers.

**Literature Review.** Dual quality is a situation where goods are sold in different countries in the same or very similar packaging with different composition or quality. It cannot be considered as a socially responsible behaviour, because consumers can perceive it as an ethical, legislative or economic problem (Eleyan, 2022). In order to prove dual quality, several tests have been performed since 2011, initiated by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The purchased goods were compared with goods purchased in Western Europe - especially in Austria and Germany, but e.g. also in Sweden (Euractiv, 2011). In the comparative studies, identical pairs of selected products were purchased, in which the appearance, smell and taste, composition in the laboratory, or the data on their labels were compared. In most cases, the results confirmed a dual quality, as they almost always revealed inconsistencies: the use of different ingredients, different product ratios in the package, different product weights, or different presentation of information on the packaging of goods. The products of the food assortment were respected, also products intended for personal hygiene, cleaning and washing products, but also diapers and dog food (dtest, 2016b; dTest 2017a; dtest, 2017b; dTest, 2018a; dTest 2018b; dTest, 2018c). These everyday consumer goods are also mentioned in the European Commission's report on this issue (European Commission, 2018c). Politicians from the V4 countries, especially from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, who presented it to the European Commission, became actively interested in the problem of the dual quality of products sold in various European countries. The Slovak Republic was the first to point out that if a manufacturer sells the same product, e.g. fruit juice, and does not state on the packaging that there are more preservatives in the product exported to Slovakia than in the same product intended for Western Europe, this is a violation of the law. The problem was mainly addressed by the State Food and Veterinary Administration and the Slovak Consumers' Association, which initiated the tests, as it was a problem of corporate social responsibility towards their customers (Veselovska et al., 2020; Zavadsky et al., 2018; Osvaldova and Vrabцова, 2021).

In 2015, ten MEPs representing Slovakia, Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Hungary, Malta and Italy addressed the issue and called on the European Commission to end consumer discrimination. According to them, producers were prevented from supplying lower quality goods to Eastern Europe. They reminded that this applies to a wide range of goods, from food and toiletries to disinfectants and clothing (Nagyova, 2015). The Czech Minister of Agriculture tried to open a discussion on this topic during a meeting of European agriculture ministers in 2016. However, his efforts were supported only by Slovak colleagues, the representatives of other countries did not perceive the problem (Ekonomika, 2016). Subsequently, Slovakia opened this topic at the level of the V4 summit but also of the Council of the European Union (TASR, 2017). In addition to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Greece and Finland have supported its efforts to solve the problem. Subsequently, the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland called on the European Commission to pay more attention to the problem of different food quality in different EU countries. They stated that they considered it unacceptable for people in one country to be offered goods of the same brand in the same packaging, but in poorer quality than in another country (CTK, 2017).

They described such a practice as unfair for consumers and said that products of different quality should be labelled differently and have different packaging. At the same time, the countries concerned agreed to set up a website for consumers, where they could report cases of dual quality and thus put pressure on producers

through chambers of commerce and food to change their practices (Ceska televize, 2017). It should be noted that this page was not created. The European Commission initially denied responsibility for tackling the problem, saying that the competences belonged to individual countries and that the legislation would not change. After pressure from politicians from the so-called new countries, however, the EU began to deal with this problem. In 2017, the then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, admitted the existence of «secondary residents» and declared that the consumers of Eastern Europe have the right to the same quality as those of Western Europe (European Commission, 2017). The European Commission has prepared a report on the dual quality of goods in the single market (European Commission, 2018c), in which it noted the existence of this practice on the part of some producers and specified the goods concerned.

The Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2005 concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices in the internal market) has been in force since 2005. Annex I lists practices, which are considered unfair in all circumstances. The list lacked the practice of unethical labelling of the same manufacturer's products, although the composition or quality is not the same. In 2018, the European Commission decided to include dual quality on the list of unfair practices. Austria, which held the presidency of the EU Council in the first half of the year, removed penalties for dual product quality from unfair trade practices from forthcoming legislation entitled «New Consumer Agreement», which met with strong opposition from several countries, including Slovakia and the Czech Republic (TASR, 2018).

Subsequently, in the second half of 2018, the European Parliament, under the Romanian Presidency, approved a directive on unfair commercial practices in the internal market, entitled «A new consumer deal», which will address dual quality (European Commission, 2019a). It will apply not only to food but also to non-food products. With this step, dual quality has become a deceptive business practice throughout the EU, and member countries can fine for violations of this directive (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2019). The new directive provides, inter alia, for clarification of the rules concerning the misleading marketing of dual-quality products. The proposal amends Directive 2005/29 /EC to make it clear that a commercial practice involving the marketing of a product as identical to the same product marketed in several other Member States in which the product has significantly different composition or characteristics misleading the consumer, or are likely to lead to a commercial transaction decision that he would not otherwise take, is a misleading commercial practice and should be assessed and dealt with by the competent authorities on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the provisions of the Directive (European Commission, 2018a).

The marketing of goods in one Member State as identical to goods marketed in other Member States, even though those goods have significantly different composition or characteristics, is considered to be a misleading commercial practice unless justified by legitimate and objective factors (Directive 2019/2161). The directive also regulates sanctions for infringements. Member States had two years to apply these measures to their legislation. Dual product quality will only be possible if the different composition is justified by legitimate and objective factors. These include the availability or seasonality of raw materials, improving access to healthy and nutritious food, or the trader's right to offer goods of the same brand in different geographic markets in packages of different weights or volumes (TASR, 2019).

The main problem with all the tests in the individual member states was that they used different methodologies. The institutions themselves have acknowledged that it is not possible to determine from their procedures how many goods have a different composition in the EU single market. At the same time, each survey tested a different amount of different goods. These goods were also not always comparable, because e.g. in the case of private labels, it is not possible to achieve the same quality, as the distributor's packaging packs products from different manufacturers, which use a different and typical technological process, as well as different raw materials (Samekova, 2017). As a product with a different composition, e.g. a product that had the same composition as a foreign product, but was described in a different way, was also evaluated (Euractiv, 2019). Sometimes differences also arise in different ways of rounding the figures of the share of raw materials of products. Therefore, in 2018, the European Commission, through the Joint Research Centre (JRC), came up with a uniform methodology for comparing the composition and quality of goods and tested it in 2019 in a survey of 1380 samples of 128 different food products from 19 Member States (Southey, 2019b). Italy, Germany and Austria did not participate in the testing. The study shows (European Commission, 2019b) that in the most cases the composition corresponds to how the products were presented (either they had the same composition in the same packaging or different composition but in different packaging), in 9% of cases the products were presented as the same throughout EU with different composition, in 22% of cases the products were presented similarly but had a different composition. Thus, up to 31% of the test revealed a dual quality of goods in the same or very similar packaging.

In 2020, the JRC also conducted a sensory test. As a result, the evaluation carried out by a group of trained experts included 20 branded products, each of which included samples taken in EU Member States. Differences in sensory properties between national versions were noticeable in 10 of the 20 food products evaluated (Ulberth, 2021). An important finding of the JRC survey was that the problem of dual quality of goods does not have a geographical pattern. Dual quality has been declared an unfair practice in the EU and a breach threatens fines (Southey, 2019a). Even different local consumer preferences will not be a reason for the dual quality of goods in the EU (Livingstone, 2019). The same rules are to be introduced for the non-food range of goods (The Slovak Spectator, 2019). The European Commission for Agriculture and Rural Development was also of the opinion that the practice of placing the same product of the same brand with a different composition in different markets must end (European Parliament, 2018).

Minimal attention was paid to the opinions of consumers in individual countries on the given topic. Research into their opinions on dual quality was conducted only in the Czech Republic and Poland (dTest, 2016a, Mth, 2016, Forbes, 2018). Other researches are lacking. There are several surveys of consumer opinions, especially on foods in terms of their origin, health, quality, taste, safety, information on packaging, etc., but none of them addressed the issue of dual quality (Almli et al., 2011; Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2000; Guerrero et al., 2010; Hassan and Monier-Dilhan, 2006; Van Der Lans et al., 2001; Tsakiridou et al., 2009).

**Methodology and research methods.** The paper provides a detailed analysis of consumer views on solving the problem of dual product quality in Western and Eastern Europe. Although buyer behaviour is affected by the existence of dual quality and the degree of awareness, the very existence of dual quality is explained by managers as a result of differences in buyer needs. However, there is no solution that consumers would consider relevant and sufficient. The authors of this article seek to find evidence to support these assumptions and to provide guidelines for national and European policy makers to cope with the ever-increasing pressure from customers and politicians based on customers' perceived dual quality of goods.

The main aim of the paper is to examine consumers' views on dual product quality and to identify a solution to this problem that meets their requirements.

The first step in achieving this goal was to examine how customers perceive dual quality and how these practices of some international manufacturers hinder them. The level of awareness of dual quality was examined from the perspective of customers' perceptions depending on their age, gender, education, income and living conditions. As a result, the second step in the analysis was to use these findings to identify suitable solutions. These findings served as input for the creation of a correlation matrix that provides a map of all significant impacts based on these research findings. Spearman correlation and basic correlation coefficients were used to identify relationships with high impact potential. Specific correlation coefficients were calculated according to a formula previously used by various authors (Veselovska, 2021; Zavadský et al., 2020). Spearman correlation was calculated according to formula 1:

$$R_S = 1 - \left( \frac{6 \times \sum d^2}{n^3 - n} \right) \quad (1)$$

where  $n$  is the number of customers;  $d$  represents the difference in order.

The next step in this research was to draw conclusions from the findings of the survey and to develop a correlation matrix, which was later transformed into guidelines for policy makers. The intention was to find solutions from which the company could benefit by carefully selecting the appropriate strategy that would provide an answer to the wishes and needs of customers arising from their awareness of dual quality.

The data source used in the article was the first nationwide survey conducted in the Slovak Republic. This country was selected for research because it is one of the countries where the existence of dual quality has already been proven. The survey examined consumer views and provided evidence of what solutions customers expect from legislators. The survey was part of a project in which academics and the private sector work together to identify the real needs of different customers in the European Union. The surveyed consumers were selected at random throughout the country to ensure that the sample was representative. More than 11,600 people were reached through various methods, such as social networks, consumer associations and directly through project developers in shops. A questionnaire was used for data collection. Exactly 63 shopping malls located throughout the country were selected for personal interviews. 213 questionnaires were completed in this way. Another 774 questionnaires were completed online. During the personal interviews, consumers were first provided with a brief explanation of what dual product quality means. The same explanation was provided at the beginning of the online questionnaire to avoid misunderstandings.

The structure of the questionnaire was the same for all live interviews and online distribution. It consisted of 26 questions. Most questions were closed or semi-closed to allow customers to provide their own answers if the options provided were not sufficient. However, only 3 consumers took advantage of this opportunity.

A total of 987 consumers took part in this survey. All respondents were the main buyers of daily consumer goods in their household. Women represented 66.15% of respondents. The age of the respondents was chosen as the main criterion for the representativeness of the sample. The basic group consisted of all people in Slovakia aged 19 to 80 years. The data used to describe the basic set were from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic. Table 1 provides data on the base and sample. The Chi-square test was used to verify the representativeness of the sample according to the population structure. The assay was performed at a significance level of 95%. The Chi square value proved that this set is a representative sample of the base set.

**Table 1. Structure of the base file and the sample file**

Age of the respondent (in years)	Base file		Sample file	
	Count	%	Count	%
19 - 25	406 044	9.26	101	10.23
26 - 45	1 681 150	38.35	371	37.59
46 - 65	1 448 396	33.04	311	31.51
66 and more	848 019	19.35	204	20.67
Total	4,383,608	100.00	987	100.00

Sources: developed by the authors.

**Results.** Dual quality is a complex, multi-layered problem that has several dimensions. Within the EU, products should be safe in the first place, their composition is not comparable in individual countries. According to the European Commission, products could have different formulations in different countries if manufacturers stated this in the formulation on the product. Therefore, dual quality was not a legislative problem, but an ethical problem, because if consumers bought the same product in different places, they assumed it was the same. On the other hand, it is also an economic problem given that the input materials used in products destined for different markets may have different purchase prices. The processing process itself may have a different price, and last but not least, some products are sold at different weights or prices.

Dual quality also involves various actors, be they manufacturers, politicians tackling this problem at national level, the European Commission tackling dual quality at European level, media reporting on test results and consumers. Consumers have received the least attention in the process of tackling the problem of dual quality, and it is they who are ultimately directly affected by dual quality. Therefore, attention was drawn to consumers in the research – their experience and views on dual quality.

**Table 2. Perception of the nature of the dual quality problem depending on the age of the consumer**

Perception of the problem of dual product quality in terms of its nature (in %)	Age of consumers			
	19 - 25	26 - 45	46 - 65	66 and more
ethical problem	13.30	13.73	18.49	21.05
legislative problem	11.01	12.53	12.45	11.58
an ethical and legislative problem	51.83	52.05	50.19	48.42
economic problem	23.85	21.69	18.87	18.95
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Sources: developed by the authors.

The data in Table 2 suggest that the older consumers are, the more they perceive the ethical nature of the dual quality problem. On the contrary, younger consumers view this problem more in terms of its economic nature. However, in all age categories, the perception of the problem of dual product quality dominates as an ethical and at the same time legislative problem. Table 3 shows the results of the correlation analysis between perception and age. The data show that there is a significant direct relationship between the degree of perception of the dual product quality issue as an ethical issue and the age of consumers. On the contrary, significant indirect dependencies exist between the age and the degree of perception of the economic nature of the dual quality problem and the degree of perception of this problem as both ethical and legislative.

**Table 3. Spearman correlation coefficient**

The degree of correlation between the perception of the problem of dual product quality in terms of its nature and the age of consumers	ethical problem	legislative problem	an ethical and legislative problem	economic problem
	0.649	0.120	-0.591	-0.606

Sources: developed by the authors.

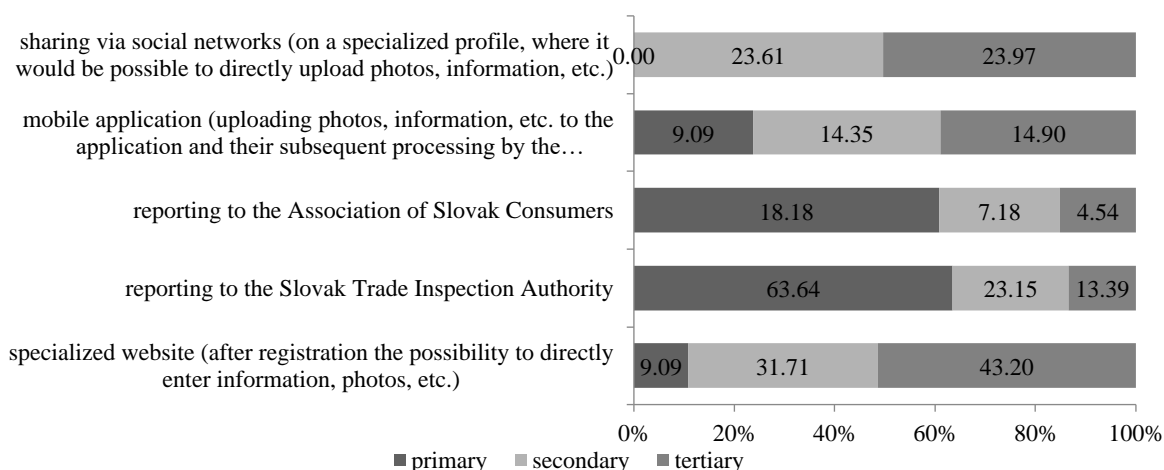
The results of the questionnaire survey indicate that a significant proportion of consumers are interested and willing to share their own experience with dual quality (92.71%). Interesting findings were also found when analysing their views on the preferred way and form of sharing these experiences (Table 4).

**Table 4. Preferred way of sharing information according to the age of the consumer**

Preferred way of sharing information (in %)	Age of consumers			
	19 - 25	26 - 45	46 - 65	66 and more
specialized website (after registration the possibility to directly enter information, photos, etc.)	31.28	43.38	36.25	28.57
reporting to the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority	18.01	14.37	19.92	30.61
reporting to the Association of Slovak Consumers	5.69	3.94	7.97	10.20
mobile application (uploading photos, information, etc. to the application and their subsequent processing by the application administrator)	19.43	16.34	9.16	14.29
sharing via social networks (on a specialized profile, where it would be possible to directly upload photos, information, etc.)	25.59	21.97	26.69	16.33

Sources: developed by the authors.

The data in Table 4 suggest that the most significant preferred way to share information is a dedicated website, as up to 37.05% of all consumers indicated this option. Almost a quarter of respondents (23.5%) consider sharing via social networks to be the most appropriate way. Reporting to the Slovak Consumers' Association was evaluated as the least preferred way of sharing information, as only 6.12% of Slovak consumers would choose this option. The order of preferences does not change significantly even if the data are grouped according to the age of the consumers. The only exception is the age category 66 and over, in which reporting to the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority dominates as the primary form of sharing information and experience with dual quality. In terms of gender, no significant differences between men and women were identified in terms of their choosing how to share information about the identified dual quality.



**Figure 1. Preferred way of sharing information depending on the highest level of consumer education achieved**

Sources: developed by the authors.

The results of the survey suggest that there are significant differences of opinion on the preferred way and form of sharing one's experience with dual quality, depending on the highest level of consumer education attained.

Figure 1 presents the results of this analysis. The data show that respondents with basic education significantly prefer reporting to the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority as a form of sharing information on dual quality, as this method would be chosen by up to 63.64% of these consumers. As many as 18.18% of consumers in this market segment would prefer to report to the Slovak Consumers Association. Only 9.09% of consumers with basic education would choose a specialized website. This form of sharing experience with dual quality is the dominant option for consumers with completed secondary education and for consumers with completed higher education. In the segment of university-educated consumers, the form of sharing via social networks is also significantly represented (23.97% of these consumers).

Interesting findings can also be derived from an examination of the preferred source of information on the problem of dual quality by age groups of consumers. Almost half of the respondents mentioned print media as the preferred source of information on dual quality issues (47.62%). A transnational internet portal (page) informing about detected cases would be in 2nd place in preferences (20.67% of consumers). The smallest share of consumers would be interested in obtaining information on dual quality from the Prime Minister's regular reports (6.59%). Only 7.19% of Slovak consumers would be interested in information from the Association of Slovak Consumers. The data in Table 5 show that the largest proportion of consumers who prefer print media as a source of dual quality information is over the age of 65, as more than half of them would choose this source of information (52.94%). The European Commission's regular report would be of the lowest interest to the consumer age group of 46 to 65 years. Only 1.18% of consumers over the age of 65 would be interested in current information from the Slovak Consumers' Association, which is by far the lowest share compared to other market segments. Interest in the transnational internet portal (page) informing about detected cases is higher among younger consumers.

**Table 5. Preferred source of information on the dual quality problem depending on the age of the consumer**

Preferred source of information on the dual quality problem (in %)	Age of consumers			
	19 - 25	26 - 45	46 - 65	66 and more
media coverage in dailies, weeklies	45.81	45.06	47.48	52.94
regular report of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic	15.86	21.01	15.11	22.35
regular report by the prime minister	9.69	3.80	4.68	7.06
regular report from the European Commission	14.10	15.19	9.35	20.00
transnational internet portal (page) informing about detected cases	29.07	21.01	13.67	9.41
current information of the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority	13.22	16.20	25.54	28.24
current information of the Slovak Consumers Association	3.52	6.08	10.43	1.18

Sources: developed by the authors.

When examining consumers' views on the organizational solution of the problem of dual quality of goods for consumers, 51.37% of all consumers would prefer national institutions (e.g. Slovak Trade Inspection, National Testing Institutions, universities), but as many as 43.87% of consumers stated that the European Commission should primarily address this issue. Only 12.06% of consumers believe that this competence should be left to national parliaments. Leaving the solution to the consumers themselves is the least preferred option (only 10.64%). This finding suggests that consumers themselves would consider it appropriate to address the issue of dual quality on an institutional basis as well, but this runs counter to the findings of low interest in information from existing institutions. For this reason, attention was focused on a more detailed examination of these data, by structuring them according to the age of consumers (Table 6).

**Table 6. Organizational support for solving the problem of dual quality of goods depending on the age of the consumer**

Organizational support for solving the problem of dual quality of goods (in %)	Age of consumers			
	19 - 25	26 - 45	46 - 65	66 and more
national institutions (e.g. Slovak Trade Inspection, national testing laboratories, universities)	54.63	50.63	50.72	49.41
national parliaments	5.29	13.92	14.75	12.94
European Commission	46.26	43.54	38.49	55.29
customers themselves (by boycotting brands, reporting them to Slovak Trade Inspection Authority, etc.)	7.93	11.65	12.59	7.06

Sources: developed by the authors.



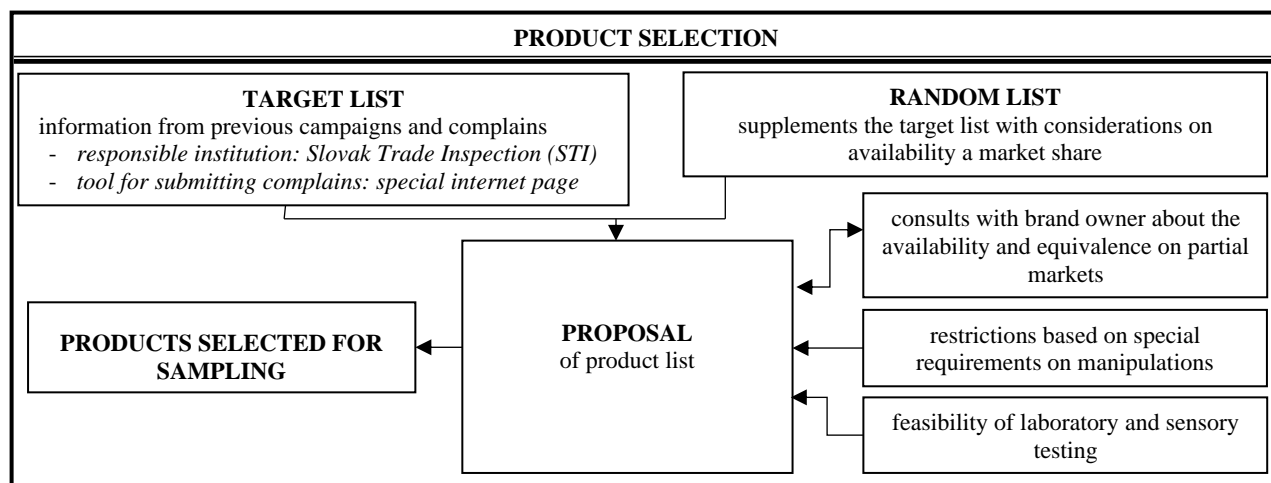
National institutions dominate in all age groups except the consumer segment over 65 years of age. In this group, the greatest emphasis is placed on the European Commission. By far the lowest share of national parliaments is among the youngest consumers. The results of the research suggest that people do not trust any of the current national institutions dealing with dual quality (Slovak Trade Inspection, Slovak Consumer Association, which initiated the first comparative test, but did not work on this issue; national testing laboratories, universities). In general, the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority is the body of state control of the internal market in matters of consumer protection with a nationwide scope. In carrying out this task, Slovak Trade Inspection Authority controls the sale of products and the provision of services to consumers. Therefore, it would be prudent to believe that it is this institution that should also carry out dual-product inspection. Of the presented institutions, the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority as a communication body would be recommended by the majority of respondents in the research.

Quality, especially quality of food, is very important factor in consumer behaviour and consumer satisfaction (Toudert and Bringas-Rabago, 2021; Buve et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2022). Consumers are increasingly paying attention to their purchase choices in terms of authentic local high quality and sustainable products (Carlsen and Bruggerman, 2021; Konuk, 2018; De Canio and Martinelli, 2011). In recent years, also Slovak consumers are also more demanding on quality. According to several surveys by GfK Slovakia, most respondents state the quality and freshness of food as a decisive preference when buying food products (GfK, 2008; GfK, 2015). Moreover, although price is still important for consumers when shopping, the emphasis on quality is clearly rising. At the same time, 16% of Slovak consumers state that they go shopping abroad for a specific purpose, due to the increasing quality of goods abroad (GfK, 2017). In 2016, the Post bank analysed the shopping behaviour of the Slovak population (Kusnírova, 2016). The analysis shows that Slovak consumers are interested in quality food and in the western regions of the Slovak Republic are willing to pay a higher price for such food. This view applies to the purchase of food, but e.g. also when buying sports shoes and supplies. From these results, it is possible to assume that Slovak consumers will no longer be satisfied with low quality and will be hindered by the dual quality of products, especially if they receive lower quality. Also research from 2019 proved that consumers are the most affected by quality during purchase of dairy products (SITA, 2019). According to the own primary research, dual quality hinders Slovak consumers and they consider it to be problem. This is a similar opinion as in the case of consumers in the Czech Republic and Poland, where there were also surveys of the population's views on dual quality (UOKiK, 2018). Research in the Czech Republic has shown that consumers are interested in the issue of dual quality and perceive various characteristics of products as unfairness and manipulation by brands (dtest, 2016a). According to the Czech State Veterinary and Food Inspection Authority, almost 90% of Czech consumers are not satisfied with the lower quality of food available in the Czech Republic compared to Western Europe (Mth, 2016). These are foods with identical packaging and logos and a similar price but different composition. Another consumer survey was conducted in 2017 and the results showed that Czech consumers are interested in the issue and consider the quality of goods sold in the Czech Republic to be worse than in Western EU countries (Klicnar, 2017). Polish respondents had no experience with dual quality, yet a third of respondents were convinced that such practices existed (Forbes, 2019). Although the European Commission initially resisted interfering in the issue of dual quality producers, it prepared a change in legislation under pressure from Eastern and Central European politicians. The first step was to prepare a uniform methodology for dual quality research. In addition to the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, experts from member countries, including the Slovak State Food Veterinary Administration, also took part in its creation. This methodology was subsequently tested by the Joint Research Centre in 2018, which confirmed the dual quality test in the EU, but also refuted its geographical pattern, which would divide Europe into East and West. This means that not all products are of better quality in Western European countries, some are better in Eastern Europe.

However, the state remains one of the most important determinants of the business environment, being the one who sets the rules for business and the one who supports or hinders the development in this area (Virglerova et al., 2017). Therefore, the new European methodology provides guidance to member countries on how to proceed with product selection, sampling and testing itself (European Commission, 2018b). Food producers for whom the tests show differences will have to submit an explanation to the competent authorities (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2018). The same methodology should be gradually introduced for other types of products.

Figures 2, 3 and 4 show the procedure of the proposed harmonized testing, which was supplemented with proposals for testing in the Slovak Republic (marked in italics) in three steps: product selection, sample collection and testing. The results of the testing will serve as inputs to the first step product selection in this cycle. These formulations were based on the results of research, in which consumers stated that the Slovak

Trade Inspection Authority should be responsible for solving dual quality. Consumers said they would welcome a dedicated website as a source of information, which most would also prefer to report their experiences with dual quality. Initiation of a dialogue between the relevant state authorities and manufacturers, or brand owners is considered. The fact is that the manufacturers have so far commented very little on the whole issue. On the one hand, this was often due to the fact that they were not given the opportunity to explain their actions at all. On the other hand, it happened that the producers expressed themselves very unhappily (when, for example, the detergent manufacturer stated that consumers in the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic have different stains than those in Germany), or they changed their behaviour, thus actually confirming that in connection with dual quality acted intentionally. In general, it can be said that intensifying communication with manufacturers and brand owners will be beneficial in solving the problem.



**Figure 2. Proposal of a dual quality testing procedure – Product selection**

Note: \*STI – Slovak Trade Inspection, \*\*SVFA - State Veterinary and Food Administration, \*\*\*PHO – Public Health Office

Sources: developed by the authors on the basis of (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2022).

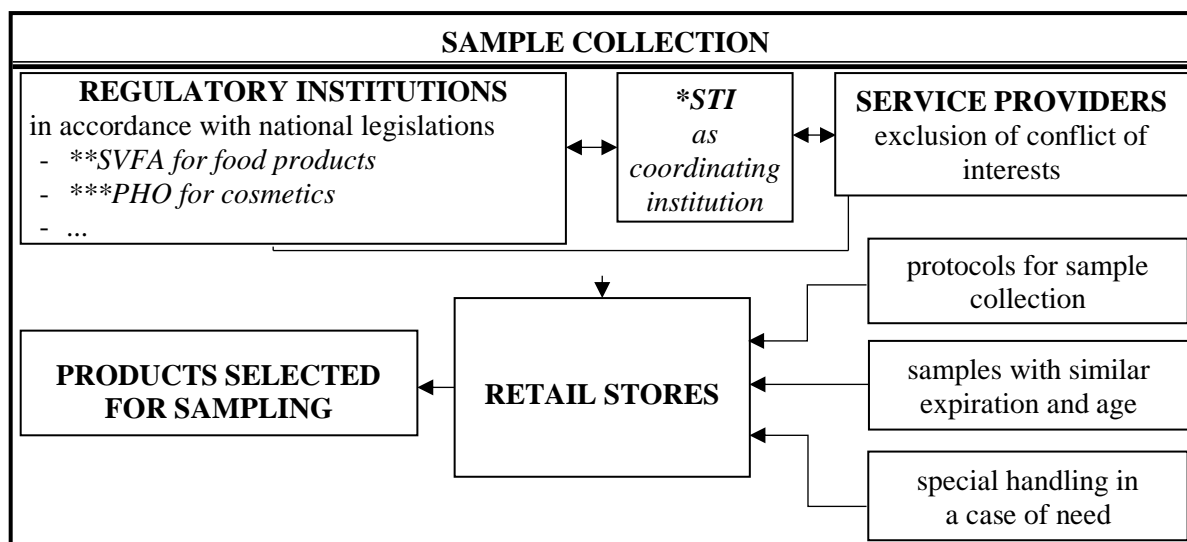
At this stage of the testing process, a list of products to be tested will be prepared. This step begins with creating a targeted list of products to test (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2018). Information from previous campaigns and complaints (through consumer organizations and other available information) will be taken into account when creating a targeted list. Therefore, it is prudent to suggest that the main consumer organization in Slovakia be the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority, as this organization is most trusted by consumers in Slovakia. However, when visiting this organisation's website, the potential complainant encounters a problem. In the Submission of Complaints, Complaints, Proposals and Requests section, it is read that Slovak Trade Inspection Authority is not authorized to address (SOI, 2022):

- submissions and inquiries concerning the quality and health safety of food, agricultural and tobacco products or unfair commercial practices in their sale (the competent supervisory authority is the State Veterinary and Food Administration and its regional units),
- submissions and inquiries concerning the health safety and safety of food, raw materials and beverages in mass caterers (the competent supervisory authority is the Public Health Office and its regional units),
- submissions and inquiries concerning cosmetic products are handled by the Public Health Office and its regional components (the Public Health Office is the supervisory body for cosmetic products).

Such a procedure is quite complicated, as one institution refers the consumer to other institutions depending on the type of product concerned by the dual quality. In addition, Slovak Trade Inspection Authority, as a place to report cases of dual quality, is especially preferred by consumers from lower social classes, where lower education is expected. Such a procedure can be complicated for them and can discourage them from doing so. With increasing age, the interest in information through Slovak Trade Inspection Authority is also growing. Complications of complaints can also be expected due to the age of these consumers (Bartkova et al., 2019). Therefore, a separate section should be set up within the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority for the purpose of reporting cases of dual quality. This step would include a separate internet channel on the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority website and responsible persons who would further address the issue of dual quality. On the one hand, they could forward a complaint to the responsible authority, on the other hand, they

would keep a record of these submissions and subsequently participate in the preparation of a targeted list of products for testing. A separate website could also be set up for the purpose of reporting dual quality cases, as proposed in 2017, as this method is preferred by consumers regardless of age, gender or income (Bartkova, 2019). Complainants could be redirected to this site from the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority site, or they could visit it directly. This would make it easier for consumers to share experiences with dual quality in line with their preferences and provide competent authorities with a clear database of cases to work with. Alternatively, the responsibility for coordinating complaints and information could be taken over by some Slovak consumer association (e.g. the Slovak Consumer Association, which initiated the first tests but did not address this topic further), but Slovak consumers have little interest in providing information through such an association. The creation of a new independent institution is not recommended. The proposed list of products to be tested is further supplemented by random items, taking into account the availability of products and their market share. The draft product list is then consulted with the brand owner on the availability and equivalence of goods in different markets (European Commission, 2019a).

As stated in the revised Unfair Commercial Practices Directive 2005/29/EC, exceptions to the dual quality ban could include, but are not limited to, the availability or seasonality of raw materials, improving access to healthy and nutritious food or the trader's right to offer the same branded goods in different geographic markets. of different weight or volume. This proposal will then be incorporated into the legislation of the Member States. Instead of a centralized instrument, the EC thus gives member countries the option of labelling dual-quality food as an unfair commercial practice that European law already considers illegal. Attitudes to this step varied from country to country. While the amendment of the directive itself was considered a great success by the then Minister of Agriculture, they were not satisfied in the Czech Republic and announced high fines for finding dual quality as an illegal practice (Horáček, 2019). In 2021, the Czech Republic adopted an amendment to Act no. 110/1997 on foodstuffs and tobacco products, which imposes a fine of up to EUR 50 million for the sale of dual quality foodstuffs. Both the availability and seasonality of products, respectively striving for healthier food, or different weight or volume should not be a reason to justify dual quality in the same packaging. These facts can also be marked on the packaging and thus distinguish individual products on international markets. The design of the list of products to be tested also takes into account the constraints imposed by the special requirements for handling the products and the feasibility of laboratory and sensory testing. The result of this testing phase is a list of products to be sampled.



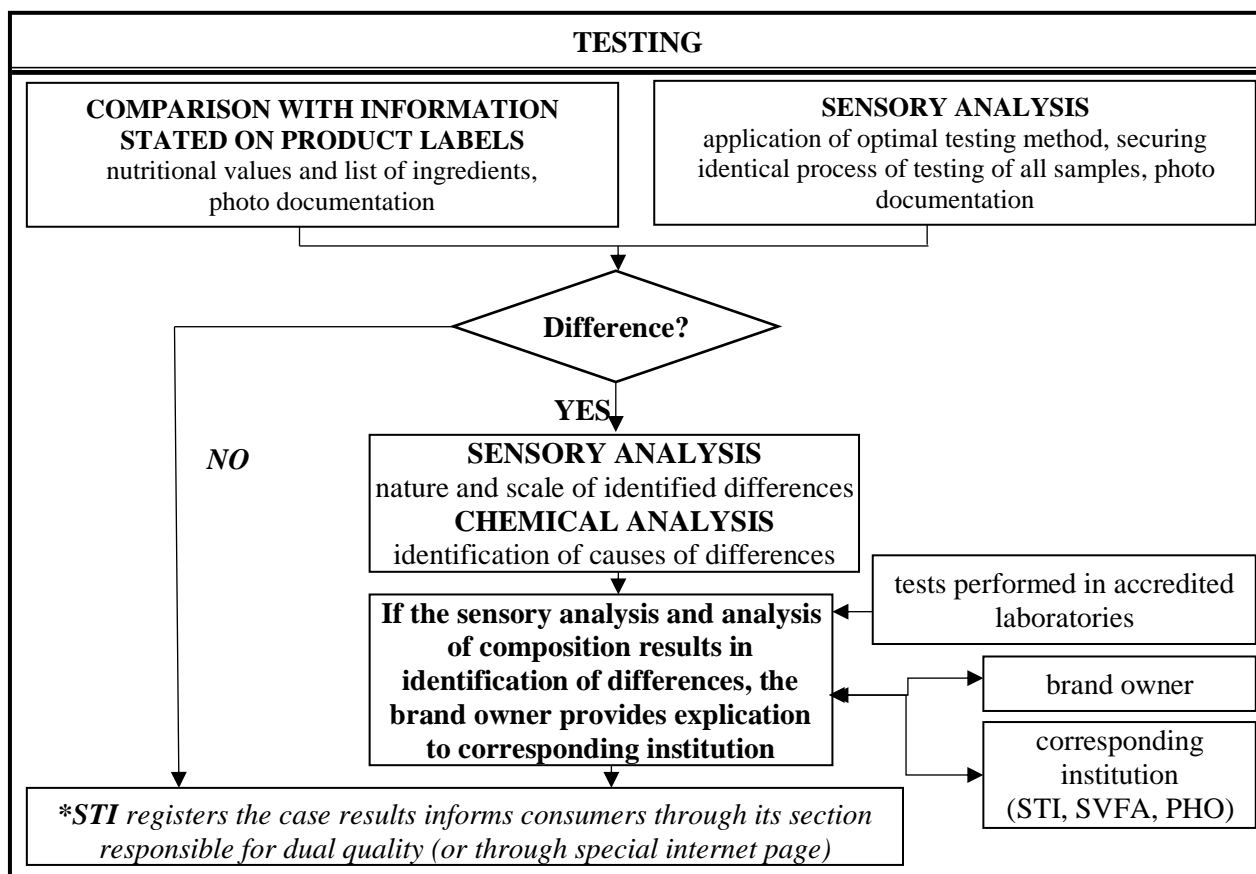
Legend: \*STI – Slovak Trade Inspection, \*\*SVFA - State Veterinary and Food Administration, \*\*\*PHO – Public Health Office

**Figure 3. Proposal of a dual quality testing procedure for the Slovak Republic based on research of consumer behaviour in the context of dual quality – Sample collection**

Sources: developed by the authors on the basis of (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2022).

The competent authorities shall be responsible for sampling in accordance with national rules. For food, it is the State Veterinary and Food Administration in Slovakia and its regional components. As the problem of dual quality also concerns non-food products, to which a harmonized testing procedure should also be

gradually applied, other authorities will be involved in the whole process (e.g. in the case of cosmetics, the Public Health Office). Again, a central body will be needed to centralize data and information and pass it on to stakeholders. Consumers in the Slovak Republic prefer the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority. Alternatively, it could be a consumer association, but Slovak consumers have the least interest in it. Sampling will take place in retail outlets, where a sampling protocol will have to be drawn up. Care will be taken to ensure that the samples have a similar shelf life (although, for example, in the case of sour-milk products, the age of the product is also important, as maturation changes the composition of dairy cultures, etc.) and special handling with goods will be required if necessary. The samples taken will be sent to the lead organization for analysis.



**Figure 4. Proposal of a dual quality testing procedure – Testing**

Legend: \*STI – Slovak Trade Inspection, \*\*SVFA - State Veterinary and Food Administration, \*\*\*PHO – Public Health Office.

Sources: developed by the authors on the basis of (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, 2022).

Testing of goods under the harmonized procedure begins by comparing the information declared on the labels. The values and the list of ingredients are checked and photo documentation is prepared. In this step, it must be taken into account that in different countries a different way of presenting information may apply, or another way of rounding the data, in order to avoid that a case of goods which is in fact uniform, is also considered to be of dual quality, only the way in which the information appears on the packaging differs. The comparison of the labels is followed by sensory analysis, and an appropriate testing method must be used. It is important that the same products from different countries are tested identically in sensory analysis, that these tests are blinded (i.e. that the examiner does not know from which country the sample originates) and that detailed documentation (focusing on the colour of the goods, its structure), condition and quantity of raw material used, if possible to assess, etc.). In the event that differences are found between product samples in this step, sensory (nature and extent of differences) and chemical (finding the causes of differences) analysis will be performed. These tests can only be performed in accredited laboratories.

Given that most Slovak consumers consider dual quality to be an economic problem, product testing should also include price comparison, possibly price comparison per unit of product. The European Consumer

Organization has also recommended that the Joint Research Centre collect information on the prices of foodstuffs suspected of dual quality (BEUC, 2018). If the analysis of the composition and sensory properties shows differences, or even for any price discrepancies, the owner of the mark shall provide an explanation to the competent authority. According to the amended Directive 2005/29/EC on unfair commercial practices, if the dual quality is demonstrated as an unfair practice, the owner of the brand faces a fine of up to 4% of the annual turnover achieved in each of the countries concerned. Given that consumers are interested in continuing to be informed about dual quality, the Slovak Trade Inspection Authority (alternative consumer association) as the main coordinating body of the whole process and at the same time the institution responsible for the website publishing data should publish the results as well as the comments of stakeholders, including brand owners.

**Conclusion.** Dual quality is topical issue and although European Commission accepted legislative and methodological arrangements (Novotny, 2021), member countries need to apply it into their own national legislation and methods. In case that comparing tests from particular member countries were not comparable, European Commission unified methodology of testing to find out real range of dual quality in EU. Dual quality was confirmed, but the geographical pattern dividing EU into Western and Eastern part wasn't confirmed. Subsequently, dual quality was classified as the unfair commercial practise. Now is the turn of member countries to apply new legislative and unified methodology on national level. This was the base of suggestions from this research. Dual quality was analysed in context of Slovak consumers, how they perceive it and whether dual quality influences their consumer behaviour. According to the research, majority of respondents has already heard about it and they mind it mostly in connection with foodstuff. They learnt about it mostly from media, but almost half of them have also personal experience or acquaintance with personal experience. According to the respondents in the research, dual quality should be solved by national organization, particularly by Slovak Trade Inspection. They prefer specialized internet page as source of information. This knowledge was basis for suggestion that Slovak Trade Inspection should be coordinating organ in process of testing products. It should obtain inevitable information from consumers via specialized web page. At the same time, consumers do not demand that double be banned, but demand that the fact that it is a specific composition respecting local tastes, rules or raw materials, be visibly stated on the product packaging. According to research, packaging and labels are a valuable source of information for consumers. In general, consumers read product packaging, look for information on it and prefer to place important information on the front of the packaging. (Grunert and Wills, 2007). Therefore, the information that the product was made specifically for a certain country should also be visibly placed on the front of the product packaging.

The main aim of this paper was to examine consumers' views on dual quality products, how they perceive dual quality and how these practices hinder them, and to identify a solution to the dual quality problem that would meet their requirements. Based on the results of own research, there was formulated incorporation of recommended measures into the framework of the dual quality solution prepared by the European Commission. Recommended framework adjusted to the conditions in the Slovak Republic is the most important contribution of this research.

The biggest limitation is the fact that similar research on consumer behaviour in the context of dual quality is lacking, and therefore it is not possible to compare the results of research on Slovak consumers with the opinions of consumers in other countries. Pan-European research, like pan-European product testing, is therefore further direction of investigations.

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**Чи турбують подвійні стандарти якості продукції споживачів в Європейському союзі?**

Подвійні стандарти якості (дуальна якість) – це ситуація, коли компанія продає свої продукти на міжнародних ринках під тією самою торговою маркою та у ідентичній або дуже схожій упаковці, але з різними складовими або якістю. Це найбільше впливає на рівень задоволення споживачів, які можуть відчувати себе менш гідними, якщо отримують нижчу якість, ніж за кордоном. У Європі було проведено кілька порівняльних тестів, які показали, що дуальна якість існує, хоча не завжди було підтверджено гіпотезу про наявність більш якісних товарів на ринку Західної Європи. Агенції, національні політики, Європейська комісія, виробники та дистриб'ютори, а також споживачі за кордоном також висловлювали свої думки щодо подвійних стандартів якості товарів. Низка країн вже провели дослідження щодо думок споживачів про використання подвійних стандартів якості товарів, але подібні дослідження відсутні в Словаччині, що і обумовлює актуальність даного дослідження. Тривалий час також було відсутнє рішення для цієї ситуації, оскільки виробники відстоювали свою позицію, стверджуючи, що вони лише задовольняють вимоги споживачів. Основною метою цієї статті є вивчення думок споживачів щодо подвійних стандартів якості товарів та формування шляхів вирішення цієї проблеми. Аналіз думок споживачів у Словацькій Республіці базується на результатах первинних досліджень, проведених на вибірці з 987 респондентів. На основі результатів дослідження та узагальнення політик Європейського Союзу авторами розроблено пропозиції щодо вирішення проблеми подвійних стандартів якості товарів в країнах ЄС, які була адаптовані до умов Словацької Республіки. Авторами запропоновано сформувати Словацьку інспекцію з торгівлі (STI) як головного органу, відповідального за вирішення проблеми подвійних стандартів якості товарів у Словаччині. STI повинно бути відповідальним за отримання та обробку пропозицій у разі підозри на виявлення випадків подвійних стандартів якості товарів, координацію проведення тестування продуктів та комунікацію з власниками брендів. Крім того, авторами наголошено на необхідності інтенсифікації комунікації з власниками брендів з метою мінімізації випадків подвійних стандартів якості товарів.

**Ключові слова:** подвійна якість, споживачі, Європейський Союз.