

# **Direct and mediated impacts of product and process characteristics on consumers' choice of organic vs. conventional chicken**

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## **Abstract**

There is a lack of research into why consumers value process characteristics. In this study, we test the hypothesis that the impact of process characteristics such as organic and free-range on consumers' choices of food products is at least partly mediated through expected eating quality or taste expectations. In other words, the process characteristics partly function as cues to (eating) quality. Using a traditional metric conjoint approach based on an additive model, four product characteristics (production method, price, size and information about farmer and rearing conditions) were varied in a fractional factorial conjoint design, creating nine profiles of whole chickens. 384 respondents rated the nine different chickens in terms of taste expectations and willingness to buy. Since the nine records for each respondent are not independent, we used linear mixed modelling for the mediation analysis. We find that, as expected, taste expectations are a strong predictor of willingness to buy. As hypothesized, the impact of both product and process characteristics on willingness to buy is at least partly mediated through taste expectations. Hence, the study shows that process characteristics are important for consumers, not only in and of themselves, but partly because consumers make inferences about eating quality from knowledge about such process characteristics.

**Keywords:** consumer choice, quality cues, expected taste, conjoint analysis, mediation analysis, organic chicken