Knowledge and Attitudes of European Kosher Consumers as Revealed through Focus Groups

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Abstract
There is a very small, yet important minority within the community of European Union kosher consumers. There is a great deal of research regarding objective aspects of the kosher religious as well as civil laws and their implementation, but comparatively little research about the subjective attitudes, opinions, and concerns of those who actually purchase and consume kosher food. Such information can be important for a variety of interested parties including suppliers, distributors, regulatory agencies, legislators, and certifying agencies as well as religious authorities.

We collected relevant data by organizing hour-long Focus Groups (FG) in five European cities and a suburb of Tel Aviv. The FG addressed consumer attitudes related to shopping practices, commitment, trust, and certification as well as their knowledge and opinions regarding nonhuman animal welfare as it relates to shechita (kosher slaughter) and knowledge of the issue of stunning animals at the time of killing. One of the significant findings was a high level of secularization among Jews that translates to a low level of commitment to eating kosher. But this was accompanied by assertions that eating kosher was an important religious obligation and complaints of low availability and high cost. There was a strong feeling, even among those less committed to eating kosher, that shechita was the preferred method of slaughtering an animal (more animal friendly) and a strong suspicion of anti-Semitism as a motivation for any attempt to impose a stunning obligation.

Keywords
kosher consumption, animal welfare, religious slaughter, Europe

Introduction
Within the European Union (EU), Jewish kosher consumers are a small minority.1

For at least a millennium and a half, by far the largest religion in Europe was Christianity in its various denominations, a religion with very few dietary
regulations. During that period, Jews were dispersed across the globe, with Judaism being practiced widely throughout the European continent. Judaism includes numerous dietary rules, of which the most obvious to the outsider are the shunning of certain species and the method of production of kosher meat. During most of those centuries, food production and distribution was localized, government regulation of nonhuman animal welfare and food production was nearly nonexistent, and Jews, the vast majority of whom adhered to the tenets of their religion, constituted significant percentages of the population in many of the regions in which they lived.

Almost all of these sociologic and demographic factors have been radically altered within the last 70 years. Food production and distribution is now commercialized and centralized, the European Union (EU) has produced a growing number of directives and regulations to attempt to protect the welfare of farm animals, several EU member states have even stricter animal welfare regulations, there is vigorous government oversight of food manufacture, and the Nazi Holocaust and its aftermath significantly reduced the Jewish population of Europe. Today, Jews remain but a small minority in Europe (about 1/5 of 1%), with significant populations being found only in France and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the Jews of Europe are heavily assimilated into the mainstream culture and thus exhibit a broad spectrum in their level of commitment to Jewish religious law.

However, the production, certification, and retail marketing of kosher food remain significant businesses, and the volume of kosher certified products in Europe continues to grow even though the market share is not as big as it is in the USA, where it has been estimated that 40% of food is certified kosher (see http://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/Business-News/Kosher-certification-in-Europe-becomes-more-popular).

In recent years, the European kosher meat market has been less dynamic than the halal market, but this too has undergone some change. In the United Kingdom in particular, European food manufacturers have displayed a growing interest in kosher certification. There has been an increase in kosher labels, and there are a number of independent wholesalers and processors producing prepackaged kosher meat products for the major supermarkets.

The kosher method of animal slaughter (shechita) as well as those practices of halal slaughter that forbid the stunning of animals before their throats are cut, have increasingly become a focus of attention of NGOs and political parties that advocate animal welfare, especially in light of the growth of the halal market and the emerging demand for non-stunned halal in some European countries (Bergeaud-Blackler, 2007; Lever & Miele, 2012). There is a great deal of research regarding objective aspects of the kosher laws and their implementation. In recent decades, particular attention has been paid to all
aspects of how shechita is performed (Grandin & Regenstein, 1994; Coore, Barr, McKinstry, & Anil, 2004).

Some of these studies have included legal, animal health, and animal welfare aspects (Anil et al., 2004; Grandin, 2004; Rosen, 2004; AHAW, 2004; Velarde et al., 2010, 2011), with an evident difference of opinion among animal scientists regarding the animal welfare risks of such a practice (for a discussion on this, see Velarde et al., 2011). The benefits and risks of electrical stunning are also under recent scrutiny (Zivotofsky & Strous, 2012).

However, there is comparatively little research about the consumption of kosher foods and the attitudes, opinions, and concerns of consumers of kosher foods. While human-animal relations is a growing field of investigation within social sciences and humanities, with a growing number of dedicated university courses (see Gorman, 2012) and academic journals and publications (see Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2007, for a review), no systematic research has been carried out on the consumption practices, motivations, attitudes, and knowledge of consumers of kosher food. Our objective is to start to fill that lacuna while being fully cognizant that this is a preliminary endeavor that needs to be followed by a wider investigation. We explored consumer concerns, knowledge, and information relating to the kosher slaughter process as well as kosher products by gathering information and carrying out consumer studies in five European Union member states and Israel using Focus Groups (FG). Some of the issues we addressed included consumer knowledge and acceptance of pre- and post-slaughter stunning methods; kosher product availability; certification of food as kosher; commitment to eating kosher; and attitudes about kosher laws.

Methods

Our method involved collecting relevant data through hour-long FG in five European (Brussels in Belgium, Bordeaux in France, Berlin in Germany, Amsterdam in The Netherlands, Cardiff in the United Kingdom) and one Israeli (Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv) cities. We chose small, medium, and large cities in five countries that have sizable Muslim and Jewish minorities. The FG concentrated on consumer attitudes related to shopping practices, commitment, trust, and knowledge of certification procedures as well as their knowledge and opinions regarding animal welfare as it relates to shechita and the issue of stunning.

Our goal was to collect kosher consumers’ opinions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding religious slaughter practices in a systematic way from across Europe in order to generate working hypotheses, understand consumer motivations, and to allow, as far as possible, comparisons between countries.
Different methods allow exploration of different aspects of an issue and lead to different kinds of results. Here, our choice of FG is principally motivated by the exploratory nature of this study and our intention to understand the nature of consumers’ concerns about kosher foods and knowledge of the shechita method of slaughter. Kosher market and consumer studies have been investigated mainly by private commercial agencies to support market development (USDA, 1998; Faye Clark Marketing & Communications, Inc., 2002). Among them, a few studies are devoted to consumer attitudes and practices (Agri-Food Trade Service, 2010). Some have also addressed consumer opinion regarding religious slaughter, an important component in the production process of kosher meat and a highly controversial social issue in Europe (Bergeaud-Blackler, 2007, 2013).

In this paper we will present the results of the FG about the nature of kosher foods consumers’ concerns regarding the food they buy and their knowledge of the controversy about stunning animals before slaughter. In the conclusion section we will offer some suggestions for further research based on the results of the FG.

The FG have certain limitations. The results of our study are by definition primarily opinions on practices, and not necessarily information about the actual purchasing and consumption practices themselves. The results provide information about opinions formulated by the participants both before the discussion and also during the interaction with other participants. Furthermore, they are based on the opinions of approximately 50 people from across Europe, and this clearly does not cover all possible opinions in relation to the multiple issues that are addressed. However, the limits in terms of generalization of the findings of this research based on a small sample, we believe, are outweighed by the advantages that FG bring in terms of the depth of the analysis of specific issues and through the interactive dimension of the conversations that enabled us to explore consumers’ lines of reasoning and motivations.

We are aware of other potential limitations. For example, that in our conversations in the FG some opinions probably would not be expressed because participants might feel that they are controversial or personal, and might not be inclined to argue about them with strangers. We tried to address this issue by paying attention to the diversity of educational and professional backgrounds, as well as gender, age, and nationalities of the participants. Another important limitation of the FG method is the potential interference with the object studied in that there is the possibility that the facilitator can steer the discussion one way over another in order to obtain the desired results.

In order to address these potential problems and to maintain uniformity between FG in the five countries, which had different facilitators and were
held in different languages, we utilized a common recruitment guide in order to recruit 8/10 participants per focus group, with common characteristics: They should be resident in the country; they should have been born in the country or arrived before the age of 7; they should be regular kosher eaters (at least once a week); and they should represent the diversity of religious trends in their countries (in terms of religious practice intensity and religious identity). Moreover, we aimed to achieve a good gender balance (ideally 4 and 4) and age diversity (all participants had to be 18 to 60 years old, and if possible, half of the sample was younger than 35 years old).8

We also developed a common discussion guide9 in order to stir the discussions to the topics of our interest. The discussion guide addressed the following themes: frequency and places of purchase of kosher foods, culinary skills and food preferences of the participants, level of knowledge of religious slaughter, other “important perceived qualities” associated with kosher food (especially meat), religious references, commitment to consumption of kosher food, and attitude toward animal welfare.

The guide contained suggestive, open-ended questions, avoiding closed yes/no questions. For most of the expected controversial issues, we used open-ended questions and asked them in such a way that one could not predict the way in which they would be answered, and we formulated them to avoid challenging attitudes or provocative comments.

The discussion guide also included questions related to the role of religious authorities and consumers’ knowledge/information about the process of certification of kosher foods, as well as questions about whom they turn to in matters of kashrut.10 Another important topic addressed in the discussion, especially considering the wide variation in the level of observance seen in the European Jewish community, was the issue of commitment to the dietary rules of the Jewish religion. Some questions addressed how committed the participants were to eating kosher and how they would behave in a situation in which they could not totally control their food intake. A particularly important area of discussion was the participants’ attitudes toward animals and animal welfare. This included a discussion on the topic of stunning prior to slaughter. There were questions related to control, trust, and responsibilities as they relate to kosher and the participants’ feelings of social acceptability toward religious slaughter methods.

Finally, regarding anti-Semitism and racism being felt as critical political and social issues in modern and multicultural Western societies (Klug, 1989) and in Europe in particular,11 we asked the participants how comfortable they felt consuming kosher in this context.
Shopping Practices: Low Demand and Low Availability

The participants in our focus groups in general felt that there is both low demand and low availability of kosher meat products. These two phenomena are obviously inter-related, and it is difficult to ascribe a cause and effect. In the FG, various reasons were suggested.

The low demand was explained by several factors, particularly the secularization of western European Jews and the low density of kosher eaters in most regions. The low availability of kosher meat was explained by FG participants as having several causes, including the high concentration of food retailing (especially in the United Kingdom) or other situations that limit competition and that keep prices artificially inflated. One of the Focus Group participants, Andrea from Berlin, stated, “Yes, what a pity, but it is also very expensive.” Anna from the United Kingdom pointed out that a kosher chicken in Cardiff is five times more expensive (about £25) than a nonkosher one bought in a supermarket. Large supermarkets versus local kosher butchers is not an issue for the kosher consumers in Europe because in general kosher meat products are simply not available in mainstream, large supermarkets.

There was also concern about the lack of uniformity in the certification (hechsher) process and the large numbers of competing certifying agencies. While this sounds like the opposite of monopolies and a free market that should generate competition, consumers found it unnecessary, confusing, and in the long run, detrimental to increasing supply. Furthermore, because of the current consumer habit of traveling to areas of high availability, buying in large quantity, and storing, it is often difficult to increase the availability in places in which it is low. Thus, Peter, who lives in Rotterdam, not far from Antwerp, suggested that the Jews go shopping in Antwerp once a month, purchase in bulk, and store all the food in their freezers. Another effect of low availability is that the less committed consumers will simply give up.

A Religious Obligation, but a Low Commitment for a Majority

Irrespective of the level of commitment, most participants explained that their choice to eat kosher food was based on religious factors (i.e., the religion requires it) and explicitly mentioned that it was not primarily for other reasons such as health or animal welfare. This was a constant theme in most of the FG from all of the different geographic areas. The primary motivation, justification, and reason for eating kosher is that it is an essential part of the Jewish religion. There is no need for additional rationales and they offered none; rather, these participants observe the law as part of their religious practice.
A variety of other reasons were also mentioned, but they were always secondary. Health was one of these reasons. Participant Yury from Brussels explained:

[T]here is a lot of people my parents know, and who are not Jewish, who eat kosher meat because they know precisely there are fewer health risks, diseases…. When there were problems of mad cow, kosher shops were invaded by non-Jewish consumers, precisely for these reasons. And I absolutely agree with that, and I respect, and indeed that is why I eat kosher too.

Ellen from Bordeaux explained that her daughter is a medical doctor and nutritionist and that she has told her that some of the kosher laws, such as not eating meat and dairy together, are healthy. Susan from Tel Aviv said, “The food is cleaner, the meat is slaughtered properly. You know they have the veterinary certification.” Other people eat kosher meat because they believe it is better from an animal welfare perspective. Andrea from Berlin said that she had been a vegetarian for a while and then learned that in kosher meat the animal does not suffer and she resumed eating meat, but only kosher. Finally, others gave the reason that it is a means of identification with the Jewish community and a distinction from the general society, while eating non-kosher would be a subconscious assimilation in the surrounding non-Jewish culture.

As part of the FG, we thought it important to understand the level of commitment that consumers have to eat kosher food. This discussion got heated at times and included subtopics: How much participants felt committed to eating kosher; was their commitment universal or did it differ depending on location or type of food; how do they respond in a situation where they cannot totally control their food intake such as business or social invitations at either commercial establishments or a friend’s home; and how they perceive others as viewing their eating habits.

The vast majority of Jewish participants agreed that eating kosher was an obligation for Jews, yet their level of commitment was not commensurate with such a statement, with many being only minimally committed to eating kosher. These sentiments were surprisingly consistent across countries and age groups, with the only significant difference, of course, being that those who self-identified as Orthodox or traditional had higher levels of commitment. Low levels of observance of kosher were not justified by an alternative interpretation of the requirement or by the absence of clear status of the food. A less than complete commitment was manifest in a variety of ways, with some only abstaining from “very non-kosher” products such as pork and shellfish, and others limiting their commitment to kosher meat or to keeping kosher only in their homes.
This last point highlights the significance of a point made earlier—there is a lack of kosher food available and it costs more than non-kosher food. For a person not fully committed to eating only kosher, the difficulty of obtaining kosher food can dissuade her/him from making such a commitment. The absence or low number of kosher eating establishments (fast-food chains, takeaways, restaurants, and public canteens) is inconvenient for workers and young people who have no time to cook. This was the general sense in the focus groups in European Union countries; in Israel, of course, availability did not come up as a topic of discussion. There were also several other obvious differences between the Israeli FG and the EU FG, such as the issue of social pressure.

A second reason for a weaker commitment to the laws of kashrut relates to social pressure, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Within the larger Jewish community there is no perceived social pressure that would “force” someone to eat kosher. Rather, there appears to be acceptance of various levels of commitment, with the less committed feeling no peer pressure to eat only kosher products. On the other hand, many kosher consumers have difficulty with the social acceptability of eating kosher, often from other Jews. Jonathan from Bordeaux stated:

I think that in fact it is more difficult when you’re with Jews who don’t eat kosher, because they won’t make any effort regarding kashrut, while non-Jews... I have worked with non-Jews, and knowing I ate kosher, whenever we had an aperitif or a party or so, they would come to me saying ‘we checked about the whisky, you can drink it; the peanuts are on the list, we checked that...’ so they were careful out of respect for my religious practice. Many others expressed similar sentiments.

Anti-Semitism as a social force against keeping kosher was raised only in the Brussels FG, where not only was it discussed, but its perceived causes, such as strong anti-Israel feelings, were elaborated upon and illustrated by numerous personal examples. Participants in this focus group said that they are careful not to display their religion either by what they wear (e.g., no yarmulke), what they eat, or what they say (not calling a son by a Hebrew-sounding name in public). In addition to small incidents, such as being called “dirty Jew,” they discussed larger events. Mark noted that the local chief rabbi had just been mugged. Lucy was surprised and asked, “The rabbi was attacked here in Belgium?” to which Mark responded, “Yes, our chief rabbi. Not long ago, and his house has been under police surveillance for months.” Lucy responded that there had also been an arson attack on a synagogue in which a Molotov cocktail was thrown.
Interestingly, in the Cardiff FG it was noted that the greater prominence of halal food in recent years has eased the pariah nature of religious dietary restrictions and made kosher consumers feel more comfortable. Donovan, a student at Cardiff University, explained, “I think the increasing prominence of Islam in the UK has made it more socially acceptable because people, more people understand that it is not just Jewish people that don’t eat pork and like their food slaughtered in a particular way.”

High Trust in Rabbinic Guarantees

Because both the kosher laws and food sciences are complex and both farms and processing industries are not easily accessible, the kosher consumer relies on centralized rabbinic determination of the kosher status of products. In the US, and increasingly so in Europe, the main method of communicating rabbinic approval is by labeling on the package itself such that the package of a kosher-supervised product will contain a symbol of the rabbinic supervising agency, such as a U inside an O or a K inside a star.

In Europe there are kosher lists published by local or national authorities in the different countries (such as The London Beth Din Kashrut division, the Consistoire Israélite de Paris, the NIK in the Netherlands, and the Orthodoxen Rabbinerkonferenz Deutschland [German conference of rabbis] in Germany). These same organizations also certify eating establishments as kosher and designate this by providing a kosher certificate to the restaurant or hotel. In general, the FG participants stated that they strongly rely on these organizations.

“Shechita Is the Best Method of Slaughter” for Animal Welfare

Participants were invited to talk about their own conception of how Judaism views issues of animal welfare, in particular shechita and animal welfare, and if this in any way relates to their choice to eat kosher. Because “stunning” is an important topic in the European Union discourse today, this issue was introduced by the moderator when it was not raised by participants. We expected this issue would be controversial because of public campaigns by animal welfare organizations against religious slaughter without stunning (Bergeaud-Blackler, 2013). The Jewish method of slaughtering animals for food requires that the animals are healthy at the time of slaughter and that they must not have suffered any physical injury. For this reason, pre-slaughter stunning
methods, which are judged to cause physical injuries prior to cutting the throat, are considered unacceptable.

It was frequently stated by the participants that Jews should take care of animals and that religious texts are explicit about this, and further that Jews should not behave like “heathens.” Participant Andrew from Cardiff stated, “Right, there is a Jewish point of view which says you look after your animal before you look after yourself.” There was a minority voice that thought that religion had no comment on animal welfare, such as participant Jonathan from Bordeaux who, in a debate on foie gras, stated, “No we don’t talk about animal welfare, this doesn’t exist with us, no no.” He was roundly challenged by participants Larry and Esther. Larry said, “I don’t agree with what Jonathan is saying, although I respect it…. Whether religion takes animal welfare into account, I’ll say yes it does!” Esther continued, “I think that Larry is right, that it is very important in Judaism, one cannot hit animals.”

It was nearly unanimous in the FG that shechita was the “best” method of slaughter, preferable to any other method. This was explained in a variety of ways by the participants. Some explained that shechita is intended to reduce the pain felt by the animal. This was a firmly held belief by many of the participants who felt that it can be scientifically proven. Participant Martin from Berlin explained, “Well, as is known it is in the teaching itself, in Torah itself it is said that it is forbidden to torment animals. So naturally kosher slaughtering, which is commanded by the Torah itself, does not need to be in the framework of cruelty to animals. So otherwise this would be a contradiction.

Jeffrey from Berlin, a self-described physiology student, said, “To make it short: Because of several physiological articles I have read regarding this [that shechita is less painful than other methods]…. And it is simply my medical conviction as a medical student who is also a physiology freak. A variety of explanations were suggested by participants to explain why shechita was considered better: the incision technique; the skill of the shochet; the animal must be bled with only one cut, which implies the use of a very sharp knife; the animal losing consciousness very quickly.

Others explained the motivation behind shechita is not for the sake of the animal (although it was stated that the animal did indeed suffer less) but for the sake of the human, that he/she should not inflict pain to any living creature. Participant Barry from Tel Aviv explained:

I think what [participant] Alex is saying when he says it’s for our sake—of course we are concerned for the animal’s welfare and we don’t want to cause the animal any unnecessary suffering, but when we don’t want the animal to suffer it is not only because of the animal but because we shouldn’t be the one who inflicts suffering, and that shouldn’t become a part of us. We should be sensitive; it’s similar to what you are saying. Our being should be permeated with the sensitivity to care for people, for
animals, and to any other living thing, and again the shechita is much more than that but this is a very important part of it.

Barry also stated, “We have a tradition that shechita is exceptionally sensitive to the animal welfare.” Some participants were therefore in favor of eating only kosher meat because they preferred that the animal dies in the least painful manner. Others saw no advantage to that. Mary from Tel Aviv said:

Honestly if you think about the whole issue of humane slaughtering they are contradictory—you are killing an animal to eat it, you are still killing the animal so either you decide you are going to eat an animal then it doesn't make a difference how it's killed or you decide I'm not going to kill any animals and then you just eat vegetables and whatever... no matter how you describe how the animals are killed they are dead so I don't see the difference; it's dead at the end. I don't care how it got there.

And Paul from Cardiff said, “I think the big question about animal welfare comes down to how the animal is treated prior to the actual process of slaughter itself. The process of slaughter I can't say either way.” Paul’s comment highlighted two important issues that emerged in the discussion. The first point is that many consumers are blissfully unaware of what “industrialized” meat production entails or even “actively ignorant” about the condition of life of farmed animals. They are not familiar with modern animal farming systems and the conditions of life that the animals experience before arriving at the slaughter house; they are not aware of the process of killing farmed animals in both religious and conventional slaughtering.

This holds true for both religious and nonreligious consumers, as shown by several previous studies (see Miele & Evans, 2010). The second point is that several animal welfare organizations, including the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council, focus on the suffering of animals at time of slaughter, but the FG participants thought that “the big question,” or a bigger question, is how much animals suffer during their lives prior to the actual process of killing, and felt that more emphasis should be placed there.

In most FG the “stunning issue” was raised by the moderators, and we do not know if it would have been raised spontaneously by participants. In all the FG the moderator had to give a short definition of stunning as a method used in conventional slaughter in order to render the animal insensitive. There was a significant difference between the Israeli and the European FG regarding the issue, as in Europe there is a strong subtext that permeates the discussion. In Tel Aviv two basic topics were discussed.

One topic related directly to stunning itself: Does it accomplish the objective of reducing the animal’s pain and is it itself painful? The other issue was how to relate stunning to shechita: Does religious law change to incorporate
novel methods in general and in particular, can and should the practice of shechita be modified to incorporate stunning? Regarding the former, there was no uniformity of opinions regarding the efficacy of stunning and whether it is a useful technique, regardless of the religious issue, with some focus group participants believing that it actually increases an animal’s suffering. Roland, on the other hand, said, “I feel like I don’t have enough information about stunning to have an opinion.”

There was a strong feeling that the shechita process should not be tampered with, as expressed by participant Barry from Tel Aviv: “I’m very happy that there is no stunning done in Israel…. It’s not acceptable in halacha.” Alex from Tel Aviv stated:

[S]tunning is not permitted according to halacha and therefore it is good that it’s not done for kosher meat, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it shouldn’t be done for non-kosher meat. If stunning is done within the context of a non-Jewish person expressing his reverence for life and his respect for life, then I think it’s a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

In the European focus group discussion, the “animal welfare” motivation behind those wishing to introduce stunning was questioned. Even the scientific evidence about the “animal friendliness” of stunning was challenged, as expressed by Andrew in Cardiff: “Can I ask what you mean by scientific evidence? Political or ideological pressure?” Some participants were able to see how any discourse about animal welfare at time of killing had become for the Jews inevitably associated with anti-Semitic sentiments, as Henry from Cardiff said, “Yes, well you’re touching on that sort of very deep issue. I mean, I remember, even as a child, the inveighing against the cruelty of kosher slaughtered animals has been associated with anti-Semitism for a long, long, long time. Henry from Cardiff went on to say:

[B]ut what I think is that you would find among a group of people who have been brought up with the idea of kosher slaughter [as part of their tradition/religion] is that they will always be suspicious of the argument that there is something wrong with this method of slaughter.

While we did not delve into the accuracy of the charges that the objection to shechita in the non-Jewish community reflects anti-Semitism, others have investigated this (Klug, 1989).
Conclusion

This first research covering consumer opinion on kosher slaughter on this scale should be seen as a preliminary step for a future extensive and intensive survey throughout Europe that would permit a deep understanding of the issues and that can lead to generalizations. Each section provided food for thought regarding some of the issues that should be further explored. In general, participants declared that animal welfare was not a factor in their choice to eat or not eat kosher or in their other food consumption choices (veal and foie gras were noticeable exceptions, with some people avoiding them for animal welfare reasons), reinforcing the evidence that consumption of food, even in religious groups with dietary rules such as the Jews, is essentially “ordinary” and routinized (Gronow & Warde, 2001).

A reason animal welfare may not be an issue is because the most common behavior is to not think about slaughter at all at the time of purchasing or consuming meat. Roland from Tel Aviv said, “When I eat meat I try not to think about it.” This is not specific of kosher consumers and appears to be consistent with more general studies of (nonreligious) consumers’ concerns about animal welfare (Miele & Evans, 2010; Evans & Miele, 2012). Despite the fact that animal welfare is a very important issue for the vast majority of European consumers (see Eurobarometer 2005, 2007), a concern for animal welfare is not necessarily translated into purchasing choices for products produced as “animal friendly.” Information about the life and death of the animals from which food is produced is often actively avoided, or, when acquired, is considered disquieting (see Miele & Evans, 2010, p. 183). However, there is a significant difference between the consumers of kosher foods and nonreligious consumers regarding the faith in current scientific institutions in providing trustworthy information about animal suffering and the effects of stunning practices in animal slaughter.

While there is growing evidence that European citizens in general put great trust in “scientific authorities” regarding issues of animal welfare (Miele et al., 2011, Evans & Miele, 2007, Bergeaud-Blackler & Ferretti, 2006), the consumers of kosher meat rely on rabbinic determination of acceptability of certain practices (e.g., stunning) and the effects of these practices in terms of welfare of the animals (and, consequently of the kosher status of products). In the discussion about animal welfare, the practice of pre-cut stunning was mainly rejected for shechita, and the issue of post-cut stunning was not raised or discussed at all. The FG participants felt that the issue of stunning animals before cutting their throats was proposed not for a genuine concern about the
higher risk of suffering of the animals in religious slaughter practices, but for anti-Semitic reasons.

Consuming kosher was considered a religious obligation by all the participants in the FG, but low availability, higher prices, and culinary constraints make this practice difficult to fully engage in. The complexity of kosher laws and of modern production and distribution explain the feeling of incompetence of most kosher consumers regarding the kosher process and the high level of trust in competent rabbinic authorities. The introduction of secular methods in actual slaughter in order to reduce animal pain does not appear to be necessary to kosher consumers, who feel that care for animals is included in the shechita process and guaranteed by the shochet, who is a highly trained and highly respected member of the Jewish community.

Furthermore, to many of the European kosher consumers, the proposition of tampering with the shechita process in the name of animal welfare was suspected to have political intentions that could endanger a kosher supply system that is already weak. The limited knowledge of slaughtering practices and the limited engagement with the issue of stunning for avoiding animal suffering at the time of killing suggests that the consumers of kosher food delegate these issues to their religious authorities in much the same way as the general consumer relies on regulatory agencies. The consumption of kosher food is both highly routinized (like food consumption in general) and perceived to be part of the Jews’ religious practice; therefore, it is not suitable for “scientific” scrutiny. This expresses general distrust of the scientific and political institutions that are perceived to advocate a colonial policy of Western secularization.

This study, which utilized FG across the European Union and in Israel, provided interesting and useful information about attitudes and knowledge of the kosher consumer. It is an initial foray into the realm of understanding how such consumers think, and hence, make purchasing decisions. It also provides the seeds for future in-depth studies, either as targeted FG or broader surveys. It would be fascinating to know whether, as was universally agreed on by the participants, kosher meat really is more expensive in the European Union than non-kosher meat and how well the price difference corresponds to the perception of the kosher consumer. Our FG had very few non-Jewish participants. In the US, non-Jews make up a large percentage of those purchasing kosher products. It would be important to investigate the knowledge and attitudes of non-Jews in the European Union toward kosher products. We suspect that due to the small Jewish population in most of the European Union member states, most non-Jews have very little knowledge about kosher or shechita. This is probably true not only of the general public but of veterinarians, animal rights activists, and legislators.
This study of the knowledge and attitudes of the European kosher consumers is thus a first, and very important, foray into a vast unexplored area of consumer research. On the one hand, it has yielded significant information about how the kosher consumer perceives the kosher market and the shechita process. On the other hand, it opens up and leaves many questions yet to be explored.

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Florence Bergeaud-Blackler designed the research and analyzed the data. The comparative focus group report was compiled and written by Florence Bergeaud-Blackler and Ari Zivotofsky. The research was carried out in Belgium by Florence Bergeaud-Blackler and Karijn Bonne (University of Ghent), in the Netherlands by Karijn Bonne (University of Ghent), in Cardiff by Mara Miele and Adrian Evans (Cardiff University), in Bordeaux by Florence Bergeaud-Blackler and Isabelle Téchoueyres (Université de Bordeaux), in Berlin by Maria Biedermann (Freie Universität Berlin), and in Tel Aviv by Ari Zivotofsky (Bar Ilan University). We would like to thank all the participants and the teams in the various countries for their efforts and collaboration.

Notes

1. “Kosher” is the term used to identify food that adheres to Jewish religious law, halacha. There are many details regarding these laws that fill numerous tomes. In summary, all meat must originate from species deemed acceptable by the Bible. Animals must be cloven-hoofed ruminants, fish must possess fins and easily removable scales, and birds must be non-predatory birds that are traditionally acceptable. Fowl and mammals must be slaughtered by a highly trained, pious individual, known as a shochet, using a perfectly smooth, sharp knife following the regulations of shechita. Following the slaughter, the animal is inspected to ensure that it does not have certain physical defects, known as treifot, that render it prohibited. Even after a kosher species is properly slaughtered and inspected for physical defects, it is still not ready for the kosher consumer. There are parts of the animal that are not kosher and must be removed. The three main categories are blood, certain fats, and the sciatic nerve and its capillaries. The latter two apply only in mammals and not fowl, and the process is known as porging. The removal of blood is a two-step process: the large vessels must be physically removed and the retained blood is then removed either through a process of rinsing and salting or by roasting. The task of porging the hindquarters is significantly more tedious and time-consuming than
the task in the forequarters and is generally not done, except occasionally in Israel. Because of the skill required to separate out the forbidden parts, the hind quarters of kosher mammals slaughtered through shechita are sold on the non-kosher market. Finally, the kosher meat must be kept separate from milk and milk products in order to remain kosher. Additional details can be found in the DIALREL report at http://images/dialrel-wp1-final.pdf. All of this relates to meat, the primary focus of this study; there are also laws regarding the kosher status of milk, cheese, wine, vegetables, etc.

2. The ethics of some of these newer regulations have been discussed elsewhere (Zivotofsky, 2012).

3. For example, the Animal Party in the Netherlands and the Greens in Germany.


6. These cities were chosen taking into consideration that both kosher and halal Focus Groups were to be carried out (cf. Bergeaud-Blackler, Evans, & Zivotofsky, 2010).

7. Preliminary analysis of this data can be found in Bergeaud-Blackler, Evans, & Zivotofsky (2010).

8. In Brussels, we interviewed 8 participants (5 females) aged 19 to 64. Religious trends: 3 Orthodox, 2 traditional, 2 liberal, and 1 convert. In Berlin, the group gathered 8 participants (5 male) aged 19 to 53. The group was dominated by the presence of Orthodox: 2 Orthodox; 2 Orthodox/Conservative; 1 Orthodox/Traditional. The 3 other participants self-defined themselves as liberal or conservative/traditional. All participants defined themselves as Germans, 3 declared themselves to be of Russian origin. In Bordeaux, 8 participants (5 male) were aged 23 to 64. All but one stated that they were French, and that one was of French Moroccan origin. In regard to religious affiliation, participants could not easily self-define: 3 declared that they feel close to traditional, 2 Orthodox, 1 Liberal, and one could not define himself. 1 person was a non-Jew. In Cardiff, 8 participants (7 male) responded to the invitation; they were aged 19 to 68. All Jewish participants declared to be British with origins on the British Islands. Participants were regular kosher eaters but mostly non-practicing. Just two participants declared that they practiced religion regularly. One participant was a Noahtie, and one participant was a Muslim who occasionally are kosher. Recruitment was difficult due to the small local Jewish community. In Amsterdam, 9 participants (4 females) participated in the FG, all aged from 26 to 60. They were regular kosher eaters, and mostly practicing Jews. There were 4 participants who self-defined themselves as Orthodox, 3 as Liberal. Finally, in Tel Aviv, 10 participants (6 male) were invited and came to participate in the FG. They were aged 23 to 59. There were 5 participants who were born in Israel, 3 who were born in the USA, 1 who was born in Russia, and 1 who was born in the United Kingdom. There were 3 who self-defined as secular (non-religious), 2 as religious, 2 as Orthodox, 1 Ultra-Orthodox, 1 Traditional/Orthodox, and 1 who refused to “play this game.”

9. The discussion guide was developed in English and piloted in two focus groups in the United Kingdom by the Cardiff team then translated into the other languages. The discussion guide is available as an annex to the comparative report available at the Dialrel website: www.dialrel.eu.

10. Kashrut (also kashruth or kashrus, כַּשְׁרוּת) is the set of Jewish dietary laws.


13. See Miele & Parisi, 2000; Miele & Evans, 2010; Evans & Miele, 2007, for a review and discussion of this issue.

References


