ROMANIAN ORGANIC FOOD – STUDY ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to present the results of the research conducted in order to establish the factors that influence the Romanian consumers' behaviour regarding organic food products. As a result, a behavioural model of the Romanian consumer was realised. It can serve as a base for marketing policy-making by organic food business operators. The method of investigation was the questionnaire-interview. The statistical analysis shows that three groups of organic food consumers can be delineated: non-consumers, every day consumers and occasional consumers of organic food products. Based on the results of the conducted study, a sequence of conclusions turned out to be helpful to the stakeholders on the Romanian organic food market.*

Keywords: *consumer, organic food, behaviour, marketing research*

1. Introduction

Organic farming is likely to receive a major boost in the European Union and most probably also worldwide since consumers have lost some trust in food derived from conventional production. The large increase in organic farming have increased due to a variety of factors: (i) to preserve the earning capability of farmers in a world that needs less producers to feed the well-fed part of the world's population; (ii) to preserve the rural countryside as it is; (iii) to use cultivation methods that will conserve the soil and contribute to sustainability (Siderer & al., 2005 [1]). The attitude of consumers towards organic food is in general positive with typically associated benefits such as superior taste, more environmental-friendliness, improved health, safer food products, and animal welfare (Rödiger & Hamm, 2015 [2]). A frequently reported reason for not buying organic food was price, since it was usually premium priced (Marian & al., 2014 [3]).

Organic food has thus gained a significant place in the public discourse as well as in political strategies for agricultural development. Consumption has a central role in this new quality food policy, and this is reflected in the political objectives on organic farming (Vittersø & Tangeland, 2015 [4]).

By definition, organic foods are not genetically modified and are produced specifically without the application of synthetic chemicals such as pesticides or fertilisers. Specifically, organic food include less harmful additives and more primary nutrients (vitamin C, dry matter, minerals) and secondary nutrients (such as phyto-nutrients) than traditional foods (Hsu & Chen, 2014 [5]). Numerous researchers (Grankvist & Biel, 2001 [6]; Lee & al., 2013 [7]) indicated that consumers perceive foods labelled as organic to be healthier than traditional foods. Between the sensory aspects of food (like taste, texture characteristics, odour) and the impact of non-food effects (like cognitive information, social factors, physical environment), human food choice is difficult. Although various models represent the complexity of food choice behaviour (Gifford & Bernard, 2006 [8]; Zander & Hamm, 2012 [9]), little research has investigated the impact of the regulatory fit effect, especially associated with organic food choice.

Consumers combine information about product attributes and consequences to evaluate a product and make their choices. They rely on their felt involvement which is influenced by their experience. The importance placed on each parameter is based on the consumers' priorities and values (Shafie & Rennie, 2012 [10]).

Demographic variables as well as lifestyle and environmental attitudes define the organic consumer profile. Regular consumers of organic food tend to be educated, affluent and of higher social class (Stobelaar & al., 2006 [11]). Awareness of food hazards and knowledge of food hazards were higher among females and individuals with more education and income (Shafie & Rennie, 2012 [10]). Lockie & al., 2002 [12] also found strong correlation between increasing consumption of organic food and levels of formal education. Regarding the price of organic food products, organic consumers are willing to pay approximately 10% premium for organic food with an average of 9.5% by women and 11.4% by men. Regular consumers would pay a slightly higher premium around 15%, an average of 12/6% by women and 18% by men (Urena & al., 2008 [13]).

The literature on organic products is poor in informations regarding Central Eastern Europe (Radman, 2005 [14]). In the same time, the literature concerning the organic food market in Romania is also limited with most studies focusing on food production (Gurau & Ranchhod, 2005 [15]), rather than consumer behaviour (Arvanitoyannis & Krystallis, 2006 [16]).

The present study focuses on Romania's case related to the organic food market potential. It is important to understand which factors contribute to the low demand levels of organic products on this market. What factors might motivate Romanian food shoppers to purchase organic food products rather than conventional food products, if any?

In order to investigate this market opportunity, the current situation in the Romanian organic food market is analysed. The focus is on consumer understanding, attitudes and perceptions regarding organic products, the perceived benefits, and finally consumer motivations to purchase organic rather than conventional food.

The purpose of this study was to identify what are food shoppers' perceptions on organic food products in Bucharest, Romania. In the analysis, both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed.

2. Materials and methods

In this analysis, the population is comprised of food shoppers that live in Bucharest, the capital city of Romania. The criteria for this study are drawn using age, family lifecycle, income and education level, as well as residency.. All the research participants are permanent residents of Bucharest. They were assured of both the anonymity and confidentiality of given data, and that the results would not be used for other purposes, according to the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

The questionnaire based survey was conducted in Bucharest, on a representative sample of 1300 food shoppers. The target population comprised of all persons over 18 years old who are responsible for the shopping activities within their household (i.e. food shoppers) and who, at the time of the survey, were living anywhere in Bucharest.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted on high traffic streets in the city centre of Bucharest. The questionnaire was designed based on the reviewed literature and on the findings of the qualitative research. The sample size was of 1300 respondents with 1251 valid responses.

Quantitative surveys based on questionnaires are the most common way to assess the different factors affecting consumers' food choice (Steptoe & al., 1995 [17]). A set of relevant statements is presented to respondents based on literature and identified via the qualitative research. A five-point Likert (agree/ disagree) scale was used (Kotler, 1972 [18]; Honkanen & al., 2006 [19]).

The items in a scale should be strongly correlated with the latent variable (Hair & al., 1998 [20]). If this condition is true then the items within a scale should be strongly correlated with each other. Nevertheless, given the exploratory nature of this study, the scale proved to be unreliable.

The questionnaire comprises three sections: questions on consumption behaviour, a multidimensional scale on attitudes of organic food with five constructs and demographic questions (Steptoe & al., 1995 [17]; Lockie & al., 2002 [21]).

The data analysis was carried out using the SPSS 17.0 for Windows statistical program package.

Factor and cluster analyses were performed based on the responses given on the five-point Likert scale, at a significance level of 5 percent. The factor analysis is a technique whose objectives are to identify a smaller set of underlying dimensions which explain the inter-relationships among a large set of metric variables with a minimum loss of information. It achieves data reduction so that the original set of

variables is replaced by a smaller number of factors (Hair & al., 1998 [20]). The factors are used as variables for the subsequent analysis – the cluster analysis. This analysis is a multivariate technique for groups responses with similar profiles on a defined set of characteristics (Popa, 2008 [22]; Varga, 2009 [23]). The applications of cluster analysis are market segmentation, positioning and targeting, new product development, and test markets' selection (Hair & al., 1998 [20]).

3. Results and discussion

(a) Exploratory factor analysis using Varimax factors rotation method

The third section of the questionnaire (Annex 1) comprised of 30 affirmations regarding consumer behaviour on organic food market, which were submitted to statistical processing using factorial analysis, cluster analysis, Chi-square test of association and Chi-square test for the corresponding degree. The 30 affirmations are further reffered as variables.

The factorial analysis was conducted by processing the obtained data and information from the questionnaire, third section, from the 1251 respondents, using the SPSS 17.0 software.

The statistical processing conducted with SPSS 17.0 software comprises two main parts:

- exploratory factor analysis by usig Varimax factors rotation method;
- cluster analysis, using the following processing techniques: Chi and Chi-square tests.

The factor analysis uses two methods to determine the factors which are: primary component analysis method - Hotteling and common factors analysis method - Thurstone. In our case, we addopted the primary component analysis method - Hotteling, which looks for and extracts in successive stages the largest linear correlation between variables, every step meaning the identification of a factor. The values of the extracted factors are then used as variables for cluster analysis where the data needs to be organized in form of a matrix where "the cases" are on the line and "the variables" are on the columns.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett test of sphericity are two statistical tests that indicate the degree of association between the variables. High values, closed to 1 and significant, represent a favourable argument for the existence of some factors and so for the legitimacy factor analysis on that data. 0.8 rounded value of KMO is suggesting one or more common factors, which justifies the application of a procedure of factor reduction (Varga, 2009 [23]).

One of the major problems of the analysis consists in obtaining a maximum variation at factor level, based on the combined variables. For obtaining that effect, the calculus program that was used permits a rotation of the variables variation space, i.e. a rotation of the graphical representation space so the original Ox axis could approximate itself the regresion line. This type of rotation follows the maximization of the variation (variability) of the factor named "varimax". Its complementary aim is to reduce the variance of the values that are not part of the factor.

The primary components analysis implies the extraction of all the possible factors with the help of a numeric index, frequently used with this purpose, Eigenvalue index which can be calculated as a sum of the determination coefficients (r^2), between each factor and the variables that enter into its composition, eventually those factors which satisfy the condition that the Eigenvalue index value to be greater or equal to 1 being kept. In our case, the 30 variables designed to study the organic products consumer behaviour were cumulated based on the meanings and resulted the 8 factors, which together explain 51,021% from the variation of the analyzed values.

The degree of reduction of the obtained data is 74%. The percentage of the variation of a variable explained by reunited factors that indicates the indicator's safety represented by that variable was pretty low.

The data based on the Varimax method allows final conclusions regarding the factorial structure of the variables analyzed, such as:

- Factor 1 – The consistency of taste: it is mainly composed of variables related to satiety and taste;
- Factor 2 – Natural food products, uncertified: it explains the affirmations linked to consumer perception that the products produced and sold by farmers are organic products, uncertified ;
- Factor 3 – Ethical benefits: this lane? explains the affirmations that reffers to the primary benefits of organic products, namely health and environment protection;
- Factor 4 – Snobbism: composed mainly of the variables linked to an eventual snobbism effect of organic food products consumption, in this case perceived as luxury products;

• Factor 5 – Accessibility : explains the affirmations that refer to the market disponibility for the organic food products and having a good good quality / price report;

• Factor 6 – Lack of familiarization: composed mainly of variables linked to the level of familiarization with organic food products category;

• Factor 7 – Ignorance: explains the affirmations that refer to the level of information and promotion of organic market;

• Factor 8 – Skepticism: composed of variables linked to lack of trust in organic food product concept.

Based on the data processing and as a result of the analysis of Varimax Table, a series of interesting and useful conclusions have emerged. First of all, it confirms the fact that the organic food products market is based on a group of loyal consumers, that acknowledges and appreciates the sensory and nutritional characteristics of organic food products and in the same time they are satisfied that organic products are more filling and even tastier than the conventional ones.

The group of loyal consumers have enough information and appreciate the diversity of organic food on the Romanian market with the price / quality ratio being fair.

According to the Varimax Table it appears that the group of non-buyers of organic products is based on the fact that they consider that natural products can be considered uncertified organic products and can be purchased from the local farmers or even produced in their own household (rural) at more affordable prices.

The data from Varimax table shows that the group of occasional users did not make a habit of consuming organic products for reasons of convenience or simply do not find their favorite products in organic version. They say that they don't belive that there really are organic products but instead recognize they do not have enough information about organic food products. They consider that the organic products were not aggressively promoted, but they are interested to know more issues which will determine them to consume organic food products in the future.

(b) Cluster Analysis

Cluster analysis was performed in order to identify the market segments. For this purpose the scores from factor analysis previously presented were used. Before presenting the results and conclusions of the cluster analysis, we will present some important outlines.

The cluster analysis is a multivariate technique that analyzes the possibility of grouping objects, then the analyst will choose not only the method of analysis but also the grouping solution that he considers appropriate. Cluster analysis is used in marketing for market segmentation, for positioning and orientation, new product development and testing selected markets (Hair & al., 1998 [20]).

The Chi-square test is used to highlight the degree of association between two categorical variables with the following conditions: categorical variables can be expressed either by numerical values or by string values (printable character); the two variables can not "intersect" (there must be no subjects included in more than one cell of the table); the expected frequency values not less than 5 (or at least in no more than 20% of the cells); there should be no cells with the expected frequency 0.

The Chi-square test is used for the degree of correlation when comparing the observed rates of a single categorical variable, with its expected frequencies, that are previously known.

Three significant groups of respondents were established by the k-means method, each one with 342 (27,3%), 381 (30,5%) and 528 (42,2%) respondents. The k-means method is an iterative group method, that starts from a fixed number of clusters established by the researcher to suit large amounts of data analysing.

The profiling of each consumer, from each of the three groups, was based on factor scores for each group and contingency tables with behavioural and demographic variables for which there were significant differences between groups based on chi-square test, at a level of significant variation of 5%.

From the analysis of the cluster centers and from the contingency tables we can observe the profiles of the three formed segments.

The ocasional consumer represented 528 of persons from a total of 1251 interviewed persons, which present a low interest towards organic food products compared to the other two consumer groups. Anyway, the highest proportion of 34.5% (i.e. 182 people), preffer to go shopping once a week, while 34,1% (i.e. 180 people) go shopping 2-3 times a week.

Group 1 consist of non-buyers of organic products, who perceive certified foods as luxury products for snobs and believe that products bought from peasants or farmers, in general, are as natural and organic as certified organic products. This way we can explain why these

consumers do not purchase labeled organic food products: they are not willing to pay extra for certification, faith in rural production quality being very strong.

Group 2 represents the usual consumers of organic food products, who became loyal to these products due to product quality, especially at sensorial level.

Group 3 is represented by occasional buyers of organic food products who know the health and environmental benefits, but still retain a slight skepticism about the method of production, information on the label and certification schemes. They also buy such products that they feel are handy, in terms of quality - price ratio and the market availability of a variety of organic food products alternatives (at least at perception level).

Contingency tables with the 29 behavioural and demographic variables were performed to identify possible groups descriptors. From 29 variables, six of them proved to have statistical significance for the presented study.

Thus, these variables are: purchase frequency, initial source of information about organic food products, organic products consumption in general, organic milk consumption, consumer label use and age at time of study.

The non-buyers group (Group 1) represented by 342 people from a total of 1251 interviewed people, are very involved in household shopping, more than once per week, at a rate of 29.5%, which means 101 people. They also recorded the highest percentage (42.1% i.e. 144 persons) of weekly shopping. These results may show the inclination of Group 1 to visit the traditional trade more than other consumer groups.

The segment of the consumers of organic food products presents a more varied behaviour, exactly 23,4% of them are going shopping only 2-3 times a week, 37,8% are going shopping weekly, and 26,5% are going shopping even more than once a week.

For all three groups of consumers, the TV shows regarding organic food products consumtion represented the primary source of information, followed by internet and point of sale advertising. Moreover, occasional users seem most receptive to promote organic products at the point of sale (15%) which may indicate that they buy organic products in momentum, as the decision is made on the shelves, out of curiosity.

It emerged the fact that milk and dairy products represents the most consumed organic food category, with a slight difference between segments: loyal consumers consume in proportion of 64.8% versus 53.4% for occasional users.

In general, consumers read the information on the packaging only partially (62%), but the consumers of organic foods group tend to give greater importance to this information, using the label every time, at a rate of 32%. In general, consumers consume organic food less than once a month or never at a rate of nearly 50%. However, according to the segmentation above, there are some differences between the three groups: Group 1 has the highest rate of non-consumer (48%), Group 2 consumes most often (63%) and Group 3 consumes up to 2-3 times a month, in general (70%). On one hand young people aged 18-24 years are more curious and open to new things than other categories of consumers and on the other hand, they are the most financially constrained, this being the main reason they are found in a high percentage in the non-consumer group (42.7%). After analyzing the contingency tables, the group profiles can be resumed as presented in Table 1. It can be concluded that cluster analysis clearly revealed three groups of buyers: the first one - consumers that do not buy organic food products, the second one - the loyal buyers of organic food products and the third one - the ocasional buyers of organic food products.

Table 1. Organic food market segmentation (consumer profile groups)

Profile variable	Number and group size		
	1 (27,3 %)	2 (30,5 %)	3 (42,2 %)
Group name →	*Non-buyers*	*Loyal buyers*	*Occasional buyers*
Factor scores (the level of a certain perception in the consumers mind)			
Consistency taste	neutral	strong perception	disagreement
Uncertified natural Foods	strong perception	neutral	disagreement
Ethical benefits	neutral	disagreement	strong perception
Snobbism	strong perception	neutral	disagreement

Accessibility	disagreement	neutral	strong perception
Lack of familiarization	strong perception	disagreement	neutral
Ignorance	disagreement	neutral	strong perception
Skepticism	disagreement	neutral	strong perception
Consumer Behaviour			
Frequency of purchase	more often	once a week	rarely
Frequency of consumption eco	almost never	weekly	occasional
Source of information	TV sows	media and Internet promotion	Internet promotion and point of sale promotion
Use of the label	partially	allways	partially
Demographic Profile			
Age	over 35 years	25-34 years	18-24 years

To make a comparison with other research results, we mention that in 2009 a similar study was conducted by the Centre for Rural Economy (CER) on consumer perception towards organic products in Romania and China. This study outlined the organic food consumer profile, being "informed, educated, who has knowledge about organic products, diets and their impact on health, has a monthly income above average, afford to pay a higher price and take their time to seek these products". In both countries, participants in the study, both consumers and non-consumers associate organic food products with health. They believe that organic products are expensive being considered luxury products that address to a narrow segment of the population, and the supply is insufficient, with a reduced and inaccessible variety of products. Contrary to the results obtained in our study, CER follows the fact that there is a lack of trust in the certification of products and in the veracity of their labels.

4. Conclusions

After studying the profiles of the interviewees we found that they fall into three representative groups: non-buyers group, the group of loyal consumers of organic products and occasional buyers of organic food products group, each of these groups being characterized by certain dominant traits;

The non-buyers group of organic products is made up of people who are involved in the household shopping, going once or morethan once per week for shopping but have not yet determined the difference between natural and ecological product, preferring to buy products from farmers, being also cheaper than those that are certified as organic products, the latter being considered luxury products, that they believe to have the same benefits essentially; the group of loyal consumers is composed of people who have enough information about organic products and have formed a true image about them, being aware of the cost-benefit ratio and became loyal consumers of such products; the group of occasional users go shopping once a week or less often but is still slightly more responsive and knows the benefits of eating organic foods, but sometimes is influenced by price, income, convenience, accessibility, factors that decrease the frequency of consumption of these products. Another feature of this group is its flexibility, making it easier to be influenced, a big impact being held by the promotion at the point of sale, which can influence them to buy such products out of curiosity; a very important category of consumers has proven to be represented by young people aged between 18-24 years, which although they are most receptive and flexible thanks to modern mentality and easy access to information constituing the biggest group of consumers of organic food products, both loyal and casual, they however are constrained by financial instability and also occupies much of the non-buyers group; as is well known in Romania the standard average living is low and the monthly average income is generally between 1001 and 5000 RON/household (section 2 - 3 of the questionnaire), which doesn't satisfy basic needs to a higher level of quality, and this fact reduces the consumption potential of organic food for the time. Summarising the results and conclusions following the marketing research that we conducted with the aim of shaping a behaviour model of the Romanian consumer of organic products, we can say that the organic products market dinamics in Romania is moderate and restrained by economic factors (significantly lower income per person than the

average income per person in the European Union), by social factors (traditionalist spirit and reserved towards new of the Romanian consumer) and even political factors (reduced stimulation of the state towards production of organic agricultural products) and reduced promotion of healty food education with the addition of environmental protection.

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Annex 1.

The questionnaire developed and used for the research conducted in order to determine consumer perceptions of food products

Secţiunea 3: ATITUDINILE FAŢĂ DE ALIMENTELE ECOLOGICE

Nr. crt.	Afirmaţii:	Dezacord tot l	Dezacord	Indecis N/A	Acord	Acord total
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Consumul de produse agroalimentare ecologice contribuie la menţinerea sănătăţii umane	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
2	Consumul de produse agroalimentare ecologice contribuie la protejarea mediului	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
3	Produsele agroalimentare ecologice sunt mai gustoase decât produsele convenţionale	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
4	Aportul de substanţe nutritive este superior, în cazul produselor agroalimentare ecologice faţă de cele convenţionale	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
5	Produsele naturale sunt produse ecologice	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
6	Există produse ecologice necertificate, comercializate în pieţe, la ţărani	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
7	Unele produse de la ţară sunt ecologice	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
8	Pentru o dietă sănătoasă, consum produse ecologice	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
9	Alimentele ecologice şi cele convenţionale au	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
10	Produsele tradiţionale sunt ecologice	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
1	Am văzut des alimente ecologice în magazine	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
12	Nu sunt informat(ă) adecvat în legătură cu	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
13	Am nevoie de mai multe informaţii despre metodele de producţie ecologică	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
14	Prefer alimente ecologice produse de companii	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
15	Oferta de alimente ecologice din România este	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
16	Raportul calitate/preţ al alimentelor ecologice este	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
17	Nu îmi permit să cumpăr alimente ecologice atât de des pe cât mi-aş dori	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
18	Cumpăr alimente ecologice pentru ca nu conţin organisme modificate genetic	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
19	Alimentele ecologice sunt indicate copiilor	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
20	Mă satur mai repede când consum alimente	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
21	Alimentele ecologice îmi aduc aminte de ce	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
22	Unii cumpără produse ecologice doar pentru că sunt	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
23	Am încercat produse ecologice din curiozitate	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
24	Produsele ecologice sunt produse de lux	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
25	Nu cred că există produse cu adevărat ecologice	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
26	Nu am găsit alimentele pe care le consum de obicei în varianta ecologică certificată	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
27	Nu caut în mod special produse ecologice	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
28	Nu am auzit de nici o campanie de promovare a alimentelor ecologice	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
29	Cei din mediul rural consumă alimente ecologice, din propria gospodărie	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
30	Cumpăr produse ecologice ca să mă răsfăţ, la ocazii speciale	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]