TENDENCIES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIC FOOD CONSUMPTION IN ROMANIA

Cristina Bianca POCOL
University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj Napoca,
Faculty of Veterinary Medicine,
Department of Animal Production and Food Safety,
Email: cristina.pocol@usamvcluj.ro

Peter ŠEDÍK
Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Faculty of Economics and Management,
Department of Marketing and Trade,
Email: sedik.peter@gmail.com

Darko RISTOVSKI
University Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3,
Email: darkoristovski2003@yahoo.com

Abstract. The constantly growing awareness of organic food and increasing trend of healthy living influence consumer’s attitudes and decision-making process in the food market. In fact, more consumers are considering buying food from organic farming all over the world. The main objective of this study is to identify purchasing behaviour of organic products in Romania, with a particular focus on the frequency of purchase, criteria during purchase, place of purchase and logo recognition. The study was based on primary data obtained from a questionnaire survey conducted from May to June 2017 and distributed online via emails and social media. The sample size reached in total 787 respondents. Respondents were predominantly young (52.2%), had graduated university (66.5%) and lived in urban areas (75.5). From a methodological point of view, basic descriptive statistics were used. Results showed that most respondents purchase organic food weekly (26.2%) or once every 2–3 months or less (22.5%). The most important criteria for buying organic products is taste (43.6%) followed by nutritional qualities (17%) and product origin (8.6%). The least important criteria are brand reputation (0.4%), promotion/discounts (0.5%) and packaging (0.6%). Organic products are mostly purchased in supermarkets/ hypermarkets (39.8%) or at open markets (30%). The majority of respondents (75.9%) recognised a logo for organic products, which indicates high recognition of organic products in the Romanian food market.

Keywords: organic products, food market, consumption, perception, organic agriculture
1. INTRODUCTION

Demand for organic products is increasing all over the world due to changes in consumer lifestyle and eating habits. Consumers have more information about the food market and are becoming more concerned about living healthily (Kubeláková, A., Košičiarová, I., 2016). Therefore, producers should be more focused on consumer perceptions towards organic products in order to meet consumers’ needs (Schleenbecker, R., Hamm, U., 2013). Consumers perceive organic food positively and link it with three aspects: health, quality and environmental concerns (Pearson et al., 2010). In general, demand for organic products is increasing and changing in character from a niche market to a well-developed market. It is connected with consumer perception of food, which is changing continuously (Aygen, F.G., 2012).

There has been rapid growth in the organic market at a global level, and this has been reflected in the Romanian food market, where both the number of organic producers and consumption volumes have increased substantially (Bozga, N-A., 2015). According to statistical data, the number of organic producers increased fourfold from 2010 to 2016 (NIS, 2017). However, in comparison to other EU member states, the level of consumption in Romania is very low. Consumption per capita in Romania represents only 1 euro being spent on organic food. A greater share of organic production is exported to other countries such as Austria, Germany, Italy, Switzerland or Denmark (Toma, M-A., 2015). A possible explanation for this is provided by Draghici et al. (2016), who state, based on a study conducted in Romania, economic factors have a major impact on the dynamics of the organic market. However, Saracin, V.C., and Vasile, A. (2015) demonstrate enormous potential in the organic food sector, especially in Romania. It is necessary to identify consumer profiles which include purchasing behaviour, motives, and product perception in order to design a suitable strategy for fostering organic consumption in Romania. (Petrescu et al., 2016). According to Balasescu, S., (2016) consumers in Romania are concerned about healthy products, sustainable agriculture and their effect on the environment. This creates a certain platform for organic industry and increasing demand for these products in future. Moreover, there is a trend whereby Romanian families with children are becoming more concerned about food safety and living more healthily (Dobrescu, M., 2017).

The aim of the study was to identify the purchasing behaviour of Romanian consumers and their perceptions towards organic food in order to better understand their needs and provide producers with insight on consumer behaviour.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study was focused on consumer purchasing behaviour in terms of purchase frequency, place of purchase, criteria considered during purchase and logo recognition. Primary data were obtained through a questionnaire survey conducted in May-June 2017 on a random sample of 787 respondents in Romania. The questionnaire was distributed online via emails and social media. 60.7% of respondents were women, while 39.3% were men. They majority of those surveyed were relatively young. 52.2% were aged between 18 and 30, while 22.5% were aged between 31 and 45. Those in the age groups between 46 – 60 years and 60 and above were represented by 17.3% and 8% of respondents respectively. 66.5% of respondents had graduated university and 33.5% had only a high school education. 75.5%
lived in urban and 24.5% in rural areas. The income structure of respondents was as follows: up to 1000 lei (5%), between 1000 – 2000 lei (21.5%), between 2000 – 3000 lei (27.8%), between 3000 – 4000 lei (20.7%) and more than 4000 lei (25%). Primary data based on the questionnaire survey were processed and analysed using the statistics programme SAS Enterprise Guide 5.1. Descriptive statistics were also used and the following tests were applied:

- Chi-Square Test of Independence
- Cramer’s V coefficient

For deeper analysis, several hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis No. 1: There is dependence between frequency of purchase and respondents’ gender
Hypothesis No. 2: There is dependence between frequency of purchase and respondents’ age
Hypothesis No. 3: There is dependence between frequency of purchase and respondents’ residence
Hypothesis No. 4: There is dependence between frequency of purchase and respondents’ income
Hypothesis No. 5: There is dependence between frequency of purchase and respondents’ education

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the results of the questionnaire survey, consumers in Romania mostly purchase organic food weekly (26.2%), once every 2 – 3 months (22.5%) or once every 2 – 3 weeks (17.5%). Organic food is purchased every day by only 10.2% of respondents. Similar results were obtained in a Romanian study conducted by Vietoris et al., (2016) where the majority of respondents were found to purchase organic products weekly or monthly. The other author sustains that Romanian consumers buy organic products every week (Toma, M-A., 2015). Another study focused on organic food in Romania proved that higher prices together with low income contribute to the limited frequency of purchase (Bozga, N-A., 2015).
Tendencies and characteristics of organic food consumption in Romania

For deeper analysis regarding the frequency of purchase, the study examined dependencies between purchasing behaviour and demographical factors such as gender, age, place of residence, income and education. Based on the results (see Table 1), education can be shown to have a statistically significant influence on purchase frequency, albeit a weak one (Cramer’s V coefficient is 0.1296). No correlation was proved with gender, age, place of residence or income.

A deeper analyses of purchase frequency and education shows that consumers who had graduated university tend to buy organic food more often than those with lower level of education. Respondents who had graduated university have a higher percentage share in the everyday and weekly purchase categories, while respondents with lower education are more likely to buy organic products on a monthly basis or once every 2 – 3 months (see Fig. 2).

Education plays an important role in consumer perception of organic food and influences purchasing patterns due to the fact that higher education leads to higher awareness of respondents’ health values (Wojciechowska-Solis, J., Soroka, A., 2017). The strong impact of education on the purchase of organic food has been proven in several

Table 1. Influence of demographic factors on the purchase frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>correlation</th>
<th>Cramer’s V coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of purchase and gender</td>
<td>0.8085</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of purchase and age</td>
<td>0.4385</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of purchase and residence</td>
<td>0.1095</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of purchase and income</td>
<td>0.1981</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of purchase and education</td>
<td>0.0214</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>0.1296</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: questionnaire survey 2017
studies (Matysik-Pejas et al. 2017; Dimitri, C., Dettmann, R.L., 2012; Shijiu et al. 2010). In addition, according to Polat, F., (2015), it is important to educate young generations in schools in order to increase their interest in their health and environment.

The study was focused on the importance of several criteria during the purchasing process, which respondents evaluated on a scale from 1 (very important) to 5 (not at all important). According to the results (see Fig. 3), criteria classified as ‘very important’ include taste, followed by the Romanian origin of products, nutritional qualities, and product origin. Slightly important or not at all important are brand reputation, packaging, and label. Furthermore, respondents were asked to choose the most important criteria out of those above. The most commonly chosen factor was taste (43.58%), followed by nutritional qualities (17.03%) and product origin (8.64%). The least important were brand reputation (0.38%), promotion/discounts (0.51%) and packaging (0.64%). Similar results were obtained in a Romanian study dealing with organic food, where consumers mostly considered health and taste as major motives in their purchase (Petrescu et al., 2016). Nutritional qualities as one of the important aspects can be linked to health consciousness of respondents. There is a positive correlation between the intention to purchase organic food and consumers’ health (Petrescu et al., 2017). In fact, consumers search for organic food in order to maintain their health (Dumea A-C., 2012).
Tendencies and characteristics of organic food consumption in Romania

Fig. 3. Importance of criteria during purchase
Source: questionnaire survey 2017

Regarding the place of purchase, the majority of Romanian consumers buy organic food at supermarkets/hypermarkets (39.8%) or at local markets (30%). Less common locations include specialty stores (13.6%) and certificated producers (12.7%). Only a few respondents (1.1%) purchase them online. These results are supported by IFOAM EU (2012), which indicated specialty shops, supermarkets and farmer markets as the major market channels.

Fig. 4. Place of purchase
Source: questionnaire survey 2017
On the topic of logo recognition, a majority of respondents correctly identified the logo for organic products (75.86%). The rest of the respondents chose other logos, such as those representing protected geographical indication (6.86%), protected designation of origin (6.86%) and fairtrade (10.42%). In general, brand perception of organic products is at a high level in Romania. Similar results were obtained by Matysik-Pejas, R., Zmuda, J. (2011), who stated that a majority of respondents recognise organic products based on the logo or graphic symbol.

Fig. 5. Logo recognition
Source: questionnaire survey 2017
4. CONCLUSION

The organic food market in Romania is growing continuously and has great potential in future. The majority of consumers recognise the logo for organic products and purchase these products weekly or monthly from supermarkets or open markets. The most important criterion considered during purchase are taste and nutritional qualities, which can be associated with health consciousness and consumers' desire for a healthy lifestyle. The least important criteria were brand reputation, discounts, and packaging. Furthermore, there is a correlation between frequency of purchase and respondents’ level of education, where consumers who had graduated university purchase these products more often than those with high school education. Therefore, in order to increase the consumption of organic products in Romania, it is necessary to educate consumers, promote these products at a national level as healthier than conventional food and highlight their higher nutritional quality.

REFERENCES


Cristina Bianca POCOL, Peter ŠEDÍK, Darko RISTOVSKI


