

PERCEPTION OF ROMANIAN CONSUMER ON ORGANIC FOOD PRODUCTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the perception of consumer on organic products in Romania market in November 2016. The methodology used was a simple survey which was done on 201 respondents from Galati, Romania, who answered to different questions in order to identify their perception and needs on organic products.

The questions are closed questions with multiple options of answers. As a conclusion, Romanian consumers seem to be interested in consuming organic products because of their health benefits and taste, versus conventional products. First option in preference of organic products is fruits and vegetables followed by meat products. The survey showed us that organic products are easy recognized on the market after their specific labelling.

Key words: food, healthy, labelling, organic products, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

In last time, food industry has shown a lot of interest in food labelling, healthy products, organic products, clean label products, nutrition, healthy or marketing claims taking in consideration culture difference, consumer perception and their needs. As is mentioned in abstract the scope of this paper is to identify the perception of consumer on organic products in Romania market.

Food labelling at EU level is defined by Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the provision of food information to consumers. According to Regulation 1169/2011, health and nutritional claims are not mandatory on the food product labels, but if such claim is being used it should comply with the requirements of Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 of the European Parliament and of The Council of 20 December 2006 on nutrition and health claims made on foods.

Additional requirements for the organic food products labeling are available in the Regulation (EU) 1169/2011 and are defined in Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 of 28 June 2007 on organic production and labeling of organic products and repealing Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91.

According to the Regulation (EU) 1169/2011, the information which should be displayed on the food products labels are followings: name

of the product, list of ingredients, ingredients and processing aids which contain substance causing food allergies or intolerance, quantity of certain ingredients or categories of ingredients which are included in the name of products or emphasized on the label, net weight, data of minimum durability, special storage condition - if necessary, name of business operator who is responsible for inserting the product on EU market, country of origin - only for food products required by law, instruction for preparation or use - if in the absence of this instruction would be difficult to make appropriate use of food, the alcohol content for alcoholic beverages with more than 1.2% alcohol, and nutritional declaration.

All this mandatory information should be displayed in words and numbers and additional in pictograms or symbols, in such way not to be misleading for consumer.

Based on Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 organic foods are food products without synthetic chemicals, which comply with the rules and principles governed by the specific legislation and which are certified by an inspection and certification body in all stages of production, preparation and distribution in order to be sure that these products are not out of control. Organic means coming from or related to organic production.

The increasing importance of improving human health through food and the impact on the environment of the consumers' food choice is

very well documented in the literature (Jolly et al., 1989; Grankvist & Biel, 2001; Mondelaers, K., et al., 2009; Magnusson, Arvola, et al., 2001; Lee, Shimizu, et al., 2013).

Several studies reported different benefits of organic foods over the conventional products. Tests performed on fruits and vegetables indicated the existence of high contents of biologically active compounds in the organic products: apples, pears and potatoes contain high amounts of minerals (Smith, 2003), tomato are rich in lycopene, vitamin C, carotenoids and total polyphenols (Caries – Veyrat et al., 2004; Toor et al., 2006), and strawberries were reported to exert anti-carcinogen effect (Olsson et al., 2006).

Organic meat, poultry, dairy products and eggs are seen as free of antibiotics or growth hormones. In the same time, organic food ingredients are not grown or processed with synthetic fertilizers, conventional pesticides, ionizing radiation or bioengineering (USDA, 2007). It was reported that organic food products contain lower contents of pesticides in comparison to conventional products. Anyway, as indicated by Borguini & Torres, (2006) it was not possible to have a definitive conclusion on this issue because of the lack of wider data on the presence of pesticide in the organic products. It was considered that a common declaration stating that these products could be considered free of pesticides could significantly influence the decision making in buying food products and diets of the population (Roitner-Schobesberger et al., 2008).

Cereals and oilseeds crops are in top of organic land cultivated cross world. According to the information released in 2016 by FIBL & IFOAM Organic International, Australia has the largest areas of organic agricultural land of 17,150,000 hectares, followed by USA-2,178,471 hectares, China -1,925,000 hectares, Spain-1,710,475 hectares, Italy-1,387,913 hectares, Uruguay-1,307,421 hectares, France-1,118,845 hectares and Germany-1,047,633 hectares, whereas Romania has 289,252 hectares (FIBL & IFOAM Organic International. The world of organic agriculture „Statistic and emerging trends 2016”, www.organic-world.net).

This paper present that consumers seems to be informed about their healthy issue and they try

to consume weekly organic products or more frequently, depends on their needs and their financial possibilities. The study show also that women are more interested to consume health products, maybe because in Romania culture, the woman take care family and meals, even the meals are prepared at home or are ordered from different place. It is an indication that future study should focus on nutrition labelling, product segmentation and consumer information.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A questionnaire was presented directly to 202 male and female consumers from Galati, Romania town in November 2016. Most of interrogated consumers reside in Galati city (171 respondents) and the rest reside in the near villages (31 respondents).

A total of 185 consumers who filled the questionnaire had the age between 18 - 65 years and only 7 with age above 65 years. The questionnaire had 22 questions with multiple choice answers. Questions were elaborated in a simple way, in order to be easy and clear for consumer and to obtain answers accurate as possible.

Interrogation was done on the street, near the various supermarket and traditional markets during the first 7 days of November. Around 30 respondents per day were been interrogated.

The method used for approaching the consumers consisted in a simple discussion that help filling the answers to the questions of the survey, in order to collect all information necessary for our study.

All questioned persons were first asked if are available to fill the questionnaire, and only after granting permission they were provided with the questions and potential answers in a step by step manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main demographic characteristic of the respondents, such as gender, education level, budget and age are described in Table 1. Out of 202 respondents a total of 117 consists of females (58%) and 85 were males (42%). One justification is that women are more involved in shopping than men.

Table 1. Demographic characteristic of respondents

| Gender | Education level | Monthly budget | Age, years | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------|-----------|-----------|----------|----|
| | | | 18-30 | 31-50 | 51-60 | >61 | |
| Women | Primary school | < 250 euro | | | | | |
| | | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | | | 3 | |
| | | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | | | 4 | |
| | | > 700 euro | | | | | |
| | High school | < 250 euro | | | | 2 | 3 |
| | | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | | | 4 | |
| | | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | | | | |
| | | > 700 euro | | 12 | 2 | | 4 |
| | University | < 250 euro | | | | | |
| | | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | | | | |
| | | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | 43 | | | |
| | | > 700 euro | | 20 | 2 | | 17 |
| Post University | < 250 euro | | | | | | |
| | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | | | | | |
| | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | | | | | |
| | > 700 euro | | | 1 | | | |
| Total | 117 | | 75 | 5 | 30 | 7 | |
| Male | Primary school | < 250 euro | | | | | |
| | | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | | | | |
| | | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | | | | |
| | | > 700 euro | | | | | |
| | High school | < 250 euro | | | | | |
| | | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | 7 | | | |
| | | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | 4 | | | |
| | | > 700 euro | | 5 | 26 | | |
| | University | < 250 euro | | | | | |
| | | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | | | | |
| | | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | 18 | | | |
| | | > 700 euro | | 5 | 5 | | |
| Post University | < 250 euro | | | | | | |
| | 250 ÷ 400 euro | | | | | | |
| | 400 ÷ 700 euro | | | | | | |
| | > 700 euro | | | 15 | | | |
| Total | 85 | | 39 | 46 | | | |

Analysing the information available in Table 1, it is observed that younger consumers with age ranging between 18 - 30 years (approximately 56%) are more available to answer to the questionnaire, followed by respondents with

age between 31 - 50 years (25%) and finally by of consumers over 51 years old. According to their statements, the main reason for the low participation of the elderly consumers to the survey was the belief that their answers will not

be taken into consideration. The highest interested in organic products was shown by women, most probably because of Romanian culture the women are responsible for meals of the family, education of children, providing healthy food and solving nutrition problems. Zugravu et al. (2017) also reported that women are more responsible in family for health and nutritional habits than men.

Among the respondents, a total of 62% reported to be highly educated, having university and post-university studies and with a monthly budget between 400 - 700 euro or even more than 700 euro in almost equal proportions. The people with high level of education are more interested in organic products and health benefits provided by their consumption. Zugravu et al. (2017) also reported that Romanian people with university degree are more preoccupied by including healthy food in their diets.

Also, previous studies have found a significant relation between consumption of organic food products and consumer's demographic characteristics. From gender point of view, Lockie et al. (2004) and Lea and Worsley (2005) identified that women have a positive attitude towards organic food products in comparison with men. In 2007, Stobbelaar et al., find that adolescent girls are more positive towards organic food products. In term of age, are registered contradictory findings: Rimal, Moon & Balasubramanian (2005) registered that older respondents were less interest to buy organic foods than younger respondents. Geen and Firth (2006) noted in the UK that organic consumers tend to be older than the average population. Lockie et al. (2002) find organic food products consumption is not different across the age. In any case, in different studies is registered that age affect also consumer attitudes on organic products. Young consumers are more conscious from environmental point of view but less willing to pay more because of their lower power to purchase these products in comparison with older consumers which are more conscious from health benefits point of view of organic products and are more willing to pay a high price for organic food products (Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002).

The respondents were asked to identify the definition of organic food products by choosing one answer out of three options presented. A high percentage of the respondents (83%) described the organic products as a product or a mix of ingredients which are coming from organic agriculture, (11%) of respondents declared that are products with low levels of preservatives and the rest declared that are products which should be processed before consuming. Among the respondents who described the organic food products as a product which are coming from organic products, about 64% are respondents with higher education.

Education it is also reported as an important factor which affect consumer also consumer attitudes towards organic products. Consumer with higher level of education are more likely to have a positive attitude towards organic food product, they require more data about the product and technological process of organic food products (Wier et al., 2003).

Consumer knowledge on organic food products. When was ask what categories of organic products they know, the respondents had the opportunity to choose out of four possible answers. Most of the respondents (48%) recognised fruits, vegetables and cereals as organic products, 27% declared eggs, milk and milk and eggs derivate, 21% declared meat products, and finally spices and mixes of ingredients were indicated by 4% of the respondents.

The respondents were also questioned on how they identify organic food products on the market. The results of our survey showed that 86% of respondents are able to recognise the organic products based on the specific label, 9% of consumers reported the importance of smell and taste attributes in recognising the organic food products, and 5% indicated that colour, shape and dimension of the products are decisive for deciding if a food product can be classified as organic or not. Mostly women (63%) were interested to check if the label is specific for organic products. The respondents with high level of education are more cautious in organic products identifying.

According with study found in literature, Dutch consumers are aware of food organic products and around 96% from them know to recognize

them in the market. This is the higher per cent registered in European consumer as a whole (Zanoli, 2004). It is registered also that Dutch consumers have a positive attitude towards organic food products (Motivaction, 2000; Netherlands Institute for the Public Opinion and Market research (NIPO), cited in Biologica, 2002).

Attitude towards on organic food products.

In order to determine whether organic food products meet the quality required by consumers, the respondents were asked to identify the main differences between organic and conventional products. The organic products were identified to be more healthy and natural compared to the conventional ones by 61% of the respondents, 22% indicated better sensorial characteristics, 10% declared that this product have particular packages and the rest of consumers think that this product is easier perishable.

When asked about the reason for consuming organic food products, the benefits for health were mainly invoked by 65% of respondents for the consumption of organic products. Another reason indicated by 23% of the respondents for consuming organic food products is the fair quality /price ratio. Finally, a total of 12% respondents mentioned the particular taste of this products, the habits or that they do not like processed food.

Dutch consumers mentioned following reasons for buying organic food products: taste is better, it is healthier, are better for their children health, are better for the environment, it serves animal welfare; it is of more reliable quality (Platform Biologica, 2002).

McEachern and McClean found in 2002 in a Scottish study that taste was the major reason for procure organic dairy products (30%), followed by food safety (24%) and benefits of health (17%).

When asked to report on the relationship between products quality and price, 41% of

respondents declared that the price asked for these products is not fair, 31% consider that depends on the product, and only 28% declared that the price quality ratio is correct.

When investigating the most efficient channel for promotion the organic food products, the respondents were provided with the following possible answers: newspapers, mass media or combination between mass media and newspapers. Our survey indicated that mass media is the most important player for promote organic food products on Romanian market, followed by different tools as newspaper

According with studies published in 2007, by A. Gracia and T. Magistris, promotion of organic agricultures it is an important option for the society and for marginal and fertile agricultural areas, because these products are considered free of chemicals agents, with high nutritional value and in the same time allow gradually restore of natural equilibrium of agriculture systems; as is know this equilibrium was broken by chemical treatment used in conventional products. In South of Italy, Public Institutions are oriented to promote organic agriculture in rural areas, because this type of agriculture can represent an important alternative of agriculture production.

The results of this research proved that communication campaigns focused on organic products benefits for the consumer health and environment could stimulate the organic product consumption and also the market for organic food products (Gracia and Magistris, 2007). In order to see what are Romanian's consumer preference for organic food products and what are the channels of increase promotion of organic products, we asked them them to identify on a scale between 1 to 5 if they are checking if the product is organic, what is frequency of consuming, organic category food product preferred, source of purchasing and what is the monthly budget for this type of products (Table 2).

Table 2. Organic food product category preferred by Romanian's consumer

| Gender | Check if the product is organic on scale 1 -5 | | Frequency of consuming | | Organic category product preferred | | Observed defect of organic products | | Source of purchasing | | Monthly budget for organic products | |
|--------------|---|-----|------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|----------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|
| | 1 | 4% | | | | | | | | | | |
| Women 117 | 1 | 4% | daily | 3% | Fruits, vegetables, cereals | 52% | packaging, organoleptic | 4% | internet | 20% | < 10 euro | 20% |
| | 2 | 11% | weekly | 37% | meat | 32% | did not observe | 39% | special store | 23% | 10 - 30 euro | 59% |
| | 3 | 49% | monthly | 49% | milk, eggs and derivate | 6% | no | 57% | markets | 17% | > 30 euro | 12% |
| | 4 | 26% | occasionally | 11% | combination of different categories | 10% | | | supermarket hypermarket | 40% | varies monthly | 9% |
| | 5 | 10% | | | | | | | | | | |
| Men 85 | 1 | 9% | daily | 16% | Fruits, vegetable, cereals | 45% | packaging, organoleptic | 48% | internet | 1% | < 10 euro | 7% |
| | 2 | 9% | weekly | 36% | meat | 28% | did not observe | 11% | special store | 32% | 10 - 30 euro | 59% |
| | 3 | 44% | monthly | 41% | milk, eggs and derivate | 25% | no | 41% | markets | 40% | > 30 euro | 16% |
| | 4 | 27% | occasionally | 7% | combination of different categories | 2% | | | supermarket hypermarket | 27% | varies monthly | 18% |
| | 5 | 11% | | | | | | | | | | |

According with information from Table 2, we observed that on a scale between 1 to 5 our consumer check if the products is or not an organic product as a 3rd option and that organic food products preferred by our respondents are fruits, vegetable and cereals followed by meat category products and after by milks, eggs and derivate products or combination from different organic category products. Organic products are consumed weekly in almost the same percent by men and women. Organic products are being sold better in supermarket and hypermarket followed by stored specialised on organic food products. Mens (48%) are more carefully if the product present defect or not in comparatio with women (4%). The montly budget consumed by our respondents on organic products is between 10 and 30 euro, small budget in comparison with the country wich have a culture in consuming organic products.

It is also reported in studies, that fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy and 'chilled convenience' products are most purchased organic food

products (Soil Association, 2013). The principal reason for purchase organic food products is because they think that this products are more healthy (Soil Association, 2013).

According to Spaargaren (2000), in order to get a good picture on the circumstances under which people buy the organic products, the lifestyle and systems of food products purchasing should be investigated.

CONCLUSIONS

Only a small per cent of Romanian consumers purchase organic food products on a daily basis and seems that the majority has a positive attitude towards organic products. Anyway, one must take into account that this positive attitude towards organic food products will not guarantee that the consumers will buy more organic food products. It is anyhow an important step for develop the organic products market.

Also, the culture of Romanian's consumer should be developed through different communication channels where the benefits of organic food products should be underline and also e-commerce should be friendlier for them in order to increase the consuming of organic food products.

This segment of products and improve of consumer's knowledge in understanding of label, nutritional label and benefits of products which become a must for Romanian's consumers.

A tool for make our life easier for read the label and understands nutrition labelling, benefits of organic products is required in Romania market.

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