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PROMOTING ORGANIC FOOD PRODUCTS TO THE ROMANIAN CONSUMERS

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Abstract:
Romanian consumers started buying and consuming more organic food products. Their decision-making process is influenced by a variety of aspects and by their consumer profile. Companies need to adapt their marketing mix strategies based on this information. The current research aimed to identify correlations between the marketing mix elements and buying intention and get some insight into how Romanian organic product consumers are influenced by promotional instruments. A quantitative research was developed, supported by a structured questionnaire. Following a factor analysis of the promotion items, two dimensions emerged that were named by the authors "personalized promotion" and "classic advertising". The marketing mix elements that were found to have the highest correlation with buying intention are perception of cost-benefit ratio (price) and personalized promotion techniques (promotion). Younger respondents (<24-year-olds) agree significantly more with personalized promotion techniques that people with ages between 24 and 38 years of age. Women also tend to have higher personalized promotion scores than men. No significant difference in the promotion scores was found between respondents in the case of income, education level and number of children in the family.

Key words: marketing mix, promotion, organic food products, consumer behaviour

JEL classification: M31, Q13

1. INTRODUCTION

In our society food has become not just a necessity, but it is also associated with *"a new identity and represents a solidarity symbol, as well as a social relations and cultural identities enhancer"* (Cembalo et al., 2012; Cova, 1999; Elliott, 1999).

Fabris talks about the consumer society's transformation, evolving and becoming less material (Fabris, 2003), while Maffesoli shows the tendency towards the value of the symbols from purchases, which can turn into communication vectors (Maffesoli, 1996). Dell'Aquila notes that goods are not just social positions but individual identities (Dell'Aquila, 2003). Today, consumption is a consequence of everyone to be able, fueled by a social language, to decide which products define and characterize them (Genovese, 2016).

When the consumer is free to act as a rational and selfish subject, it combines resources and skills to push producers to do what they would not do otherwise (Denegri- Knott et al., 2006). Through their actions, consumers have their own democracy and the purchased products will generate a positive or negative vote, for or against the market (Schwarzkopf, 2010).

Today's consumer looks for and wants to live experiences and emotions. As a marketing implication, the way for a company to differentiate itself from the competition is to provide customers with irresistible, interactive experiences, satisfaction being not enough (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2003).

This also applies to organic product consumption. Today, agriculture is supported in many countries by the community, through solidarity action groups (Cembalo et al., 2012). Consumers can exercise their free choice, interacting directly with producers (Brunori et al., 2008). They go directly to the farm, can gather the products by themselves and, at the same time, eliminate the costs

with intermediaries. It is a win-win situation that increases the producers' incomes, that receive a fair price for their products and consumers can choose the products they need.

One very important element that producers need to consider when creating promotional materials is who makes the buying decisions in the family (Tolušić et al., 2002). In order to properly develop marketing strategies and better position themselves on the market, companies need to create a consumer profile, determine how they react to the company's marketing mix policies and what affects buying intention and behavior most. The purpose of this study is to identify what marketing mix elements are best correlated with the Romanian organic food consumer buying intention, and how social-demographic characteristics are associated with promotion strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Marketing mix elements

A high number of researchers analyzed factors influencing the organic food purchase such as: the intensity of organic food demand, socio-demographic aspects of regular buyers, knowledge of the product and distribution channels used for selling the products (Bamberg, 2002).

Although personal factors can influence the consumer's decision to buy (or not) an organic product, the way a company uses its marketing mix also plays a major part. Hughner et al. found that insufficient marketing is considered a barrier in purchasing organic products (Hughner et al., 2007). Bamberg proposes that objective barriers be reduced by promoting unified product labels and new distribution and sales systems (Bamberg, 2002).

Product. Consumers consider that the authenticity of organic food products depends on its natural taste and product quality (Bryła, 2015), labelling and a separate exposition place in the points of purchase (Bryła, 2016). Salleh et al. found that the product's quality and taste motivate consumers to purchase organic products (Salleh et al., 2010). Consumers are willing to pay more for an expected extra in organic product and process quality (Kahl et al., 2012). As a result, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1a. Product brand is significantly associated with buying intention.

H1b. Product diversity is significantly associated with buying intention.

Price. Organic food products have a premium price, that might create a purchasing barrier (Rana & Paul, 2017) and has a negative impact on the consumers' behavior (Gan et al., 2008), determining them to sometimes switch to other products (D'Souza et al., 2006). Other authors (Wang et al., 2019) found that some consumers have a more positive attitude towards organic products and show a willingness to pay higher prices. A low-price sensitivity of consumers was found to positively impact the purchase of green products (Aertsens et al., 2011). The middle to upper income groups are the target segment for organic products, as they can pay higher prices (Deliana, 2012). Some (Gil et al., 2000) recommend that farmers should increase consumption among those segments that appreciate the positive attributes of organic products and should focus on domestic markets because these have the potential to expand in the future.

In contrast, Smith et al. (Smith et al., 2009) show that price does not have a significant effect on the intention to buy organic products. Some markets, like for example in Greece, are moving towards maturity resulting in a decreasing importance of price (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002). Still, in exceptional situations, organic and conventional products may have the same price (Halpin & Brueckner, 2004). The premium price contains all the additional costs from all supply chain stages (Pearson & Henryks, 2008). In the case of organic vegetables, their supermarket price can be at least double that of conventional ones and even more expensive than those from farmer markets (Klein, 2009). Offering monetary incentives such as price discounts, free product samples, or coupons are an effective way of getting a habitual consumer to try something new (Bamberg, 2002).

There are situations when customers see the high price as a surrogate for quality. In this situation, the higher the price, the higher the quality. For customers that associate organic products

with luxury or status, decreasing the price will determine a reduction in the amount purchased (Pearson & Henryks, 2008). The authors proposed the following hypotheses:

H2a. Price is significantly associated with buying intention.

H2b. Price-benefit ratio perception is significantly associated with buying intention.

Promotion. Another way to persuade the consumer to buy organic products is through targeted marketing strategies (Pearson et al., 2013). Companies have developed unique promotional activities to support their sales (Lockeretz, 2003). Companies that compete against mass market products, for example, personalize their own niche products (Pearson & Henryks, 2008), like organic foods. Some authors consider that the consumption of organic products can be encouraged by achieving greater social and environmental awareness (Vega-Zamora et al., 2018). Another way to promote organic products is by focusing on why consumers should buy them and not just by making them aware of their existence (Pearson & Henryks, 2008). Another approach to promoting organic products is by informing consumers that they are not niche products but what people used to consume a long time ago (Chiciudean et al., 2019). The following hypothesis was formulated:

H3. The promotion of organic products is significantly associated with buying intention.

Place. If ten years ago, 95% of the sales were made in specialty stores and just 5% in mainstream stores (Monitor, 2006), today, the organic food industry is turning from being a niche market to a mainstream one (Tutunjian, 2004, 2008). In some countries, distributors have even started promoting their own line of organic products under specific brand names (Tutunjian, 2004). Beside the standard distribution channels, alternative ones have appeared, creating a direct link between the producer and the consumer (Smithers et al., 2008), resulting in two types of consumers: regular consumers using standard distribution channels (supermarkets) and hardcore consumers adopting alternative channels (box delivery, farmers' market, specialty stores, and small grocery stores). Consumers using the direct channel look to interact with producers: ask questions about production methods, food origin and variety, cooking tips etc. Longer channels where consumers do not see and interact with the producer and where the information about the product food is limited (Smithers et al., 2008) target consumers that look for a one-stop grocery shopping experience. Each approach has its own development strategy to attract consumers with different consumption motives and that choose based on different information sources and trust dimensions (Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Zahaf, 2012).

H4. The perceived appropriateness of distribution channels is significantly correlated with buying intention.

2.2. Socio-demographic characteristics

Although socio-demographic characteristics may influence the buying decision process of organic product buyers (Chiciudean et al., 2019), Gracia and de Magistris found that consumers' socio-demographic characteristics have a limited influence on both purchase intention and final decision (Gracia & de Magistris, 2007).

Gender. Gender is an important characteristic of the organic food buyer. Women are generally more concerned about health and healthy food and are more likely to buy and consume organic products than men, even if the latter is more willing to pay a premium price (Ureña et al., 2008). Women also have a positive attitude regarding organic products in a higher proportion than men (Lea & Worsley, 2005). Stobbelaar et al. (Stobbelaar et al., 2007) state that adolescent girls are more positive towards organic products than boys. Barriers to buying organic products are also different between men and women. While men consider bad taste and marketing strategy mistakes as barriers, women perceive high prices and short expiry dates as being the most important ones (Padel & Foster, 2005). The following hypothesis was formulated:

H5. There is a significant difference in promotion scores between men and women.

Age. Researchers have different results when analysing age as an influence on the buying decision of organic products. In the UK, above-average aged people are committed organic consumers (Geen & Firth, 2006). On the contrary, Arbindra et al. (Arbindra et al., 2005) found that older respondents were less likely to buy organic products than younger respondents. Other researchers (Van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011) reported that young people (18-25 years) have a more positive attitude towards organic products than older respondents and are willing to pay more than 6% higher premiums on products that are pesticide free (Cranfield & Magnusson, 2003). In Poland, youngsters consider themselves satisfied with conventional products and consider organic food as being unappealing and tasteless, while older people mention high prices and lack of knowledge as the main barriers to buying them (Bryła, 2016). Similar findings were obtained in Greece (Tsakiridou et al., 2008) and Serbia (Vapa-Tankosic et al., 2018), where youngsters do not want to pay extra for organic products. For Serbian adults the willingness to pay increases with age. O'Donovan and McCarthy (O'Donovan & McCarthy, 2002) did not find significant differences between age groups concerning the purchase of organic products, while Lea and Worsley (Lea & Worsley, 2005) found that the impact of age on organic products beliefs is minimal. The authors propose the hypothesis:

H6. There is a significant difference in promotion scores between people in different age groups.

Education. Research found that education can be a factor that influences the purchase of organic food products (Aryal et al., 2009). Dettmann and Dimitri discovered that consumers with higher education were more interested in buying organic products than those less educated (Dettmann & Dimitri, 2007). Some authors found a positive relationship between education and the consumption of organic products (Yue et al., 2008), while others found it to be negative (Thompson & Kidwell, 1998). Lea and Worsley (Lea & Worsley, 2005) found that the impact of education on the beliefs related to organic products is minimal, while Arbindra et al. (Arbindra et al., 2005) wrote that the purchase patterns for organic products are not significantly influenced by education. The following hypothesis was stated:

H7. There is a significant difference in promotion scores between people in different education groups.

Income. Income can influence the consumer behaviour (Ajzen, 2006), but when it comes to organic products, researcher's opinions are divided (Gracia & de Magistris, 2007). In Europe, Canada and Australia, it seems that income plays a significant positive role in purchasing organic products (Denver et al., 2007) while in the US, studies did not find this relationship to be statistically significant (Zepeda & Li, 2007). The following hypothesis was formulated:

H8. There is a significant difference in promotion scores between people in different income groups.

Existence of children. The existence of children within households can be an influencing factor on the buying and consuming of organic products (Yue et al., 2008). Some researchers (Freyer & Haberkorn, 2008) report that while pregnant, mothers changed their eating habits, using more organic products in their daily menu for them and their family. The most quoted argument for organic products is the need to protect the health of children. Children or family member problems also led to an increase in organic products consumption. The consumption may decrease when children enter their adolescence and develop their own food preferences (Riefer & Hamm, 2008). The authors propose the hypothesis:

H9. There is a significant difference in promotion scores between people with and without children.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this research is to identify how the marketing mix elements influence the Romanian consumer intention and behavior when buying organic food products.

A questionnaire was used, containing questions regarding the consumer's approach when buying organic products and aspects related to marketing mix elements that can be used by companies in order to convince customers to buy organic products. The questionnaire also contains socio-demographic characteristics such as: gender, age, monthly income, studies, marital status, number of children and children's' age. Multiple choice questions and scale questions with a seven-point Likert scale were used, quantifying the level of agreement with certain statements (1-total disagreement, 7-total agreement). The questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample of 5 people and then modified, based on the comments and suggestions made by the testers.

Using social media channels, the questionnaire was distributed to potential organic food consumers. The sampling method is non-probabilistic, but it allowed the authors to reach organic food consumers easier. A total of 330 respondents filled in the questionnaire. The data was checked for unengaged responses resulting in 325 valid questionnaires. Of these, 10 respondents reported never buying organic products and were also eliminated from the analyze. The sample's structure is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample's structure

Category	Items	No. of consumers	%
Age categories	<24	75	24%
	24 – 38	184	58%
	39 – 58	50	16%
	59 – 74	5	2%
	>74	1	0%
Sex	Female	240	76%
	Male	74	23%
	No response	1	0%
Studies	Highschool	34	11%
	Post-high school	3	1%
	University	179	57%
	Post-university	99	31%
Income	<1200 Lei	25	8%
	1200 - 2200 Lei	57	18%
	2200 - 3200 Lei	86	27%
	3200 - 4200 Lei	75	24%
	>4200 Lei	72	23%
Number of children	0	206	65%
	1	72	23%
	2	35	11%
	>=3	2	1%

Source: Authors' own research.

4. RESULTS

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, the underlying constructs needed to be found in the case of buying intention and promotion, as they were not measured directly. A Principal Component Analysis was performed on the buying decision items in order to see if the underlying construct is unidimensional. Although the KMO value was moderate (KMO=0.673), Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi 2(3)=611.499$, $p<.001$) indicating that the sample was adequate for this type of analysis. All communalities were above 0.7 indicating similar patterns of responses. One factor emerged explaining 81.49% of variance showing the unidimensionality of the construct. The factor regression scores were retained and used in ulterior analyses.

In the case of the promotion items, the factor structure is unknown. As a result, a Principal Axis Factoring Analysis with Promax rotation was performed. Both the KMO value (KMO = 0.919) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2(3)=2829.149$, $p<.001$) indicate sample adequacy. The

variable pertaining to logos was removed as it was crossloading all extracted factors and the analysis was run again on the remaining items. The sample of N=315 and the low number of factors allow for communalities in the range of 0.5 (Field, 2009) with the lowest extracted communality value being 0.550. The two extracted factors explained a total of 71% of the variance. Because of the items loading them, the two factors were named "personalized promotion" and "classic advertising". Personalized promotion contains items that reflect the direct contact between the buyer and producer while classic advertising includes standard promotion instruments like TV, flyers or billboards. The resulting structure matrix is presented in Table 2. The regression factor scores were retained and used in subsequent analyses.

Table 2. The structure matrix with the two extracted factors

Items	Personalized promotion	Classic advertising
Promotion – Tastings	**0.868**	0.568
Promotion – Samples	**0.862**	0.578
Promotion - Online info prod	**0.852**	0.536
Promotion – Fairs	**0.826**	0.599
Promotion - Sales-Promotion	**0.822**	0.495
Promotion - Complementary products	**0.809**	0.691
Promotion - Producer feedback	**0.740**	0.444
Promotion – Billboards	0.556	**0.944**
Promotion - TV Radio	0.573	**0.849**
Promotion – Flyers	0.557	**0.809**

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

Source: Authors' own research.

In order to test the first four hypothesis a Spearman correlation was performed. Table 3 presents the resulting correlation coefficients, p-value and number of cases for each correlation pair.

Table 3. Association between buying intention and the marketing mix elements

Marketing mix element	Item	Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)	N	Hypothesis confirmed
Product	When buying organic products how important is the product's brand	.126*	0.028	305	Yes
	When buying organic products how important is the product diversity	.179**	0.002	302	Yes
Price	Organic foods are expensive	.245**	<0.001	315	Yes
	The price of organic food is in accordance with benefits	**.470****	<0.001	315	Yes
Promotion	Promotion – personalized	**.371****	<0.001	315	Yes
	Promotion - classic advertising	**.299****	<0.001	315	Yes
Place	Local Store	0.108	0.056	315	No
	Supermarket	0.131*	0.02	315	Yes
	Specialized Store	0.150**	0.008	315	Yes
	Food Market	0.147**	0.009	315	Yes
	Producer	0.231**	<0.001	315	Yes

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors' own research.

Although product characteristics like brand and diversity are significantly correlated with buying intention scores, it is a weak correlation indicated by the low correlation coefficient values. The factors that have the highest correlation coefficients with buying intention are the perception of cost-benefit ratio (r_s=0.470, p<0.001) and the personalized promotion techniques (r_s=0.371, p<0.001). The only place of distribution that does not have a significant correlation with buying intention is the local store while the producer has the highest correlation, even though not very strong. The producer is the distribution channel that is perceived as being the most appropriate (r_s=0.231, p<0.001).

In order to better understand how the organic product consumer reacts to different promotion techniques, a couple of tests were performed by using socio-demographic variables: age, sex, education level, income level and the existence of children.

An Independent Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test was performed in order to determine if there are significant differences in promotion scores between age groups. In the case of classical advertising no significant model was found (p=0.232). A significant difference was found for personalized promotion scores between the Z generation (<24 year-olds) and the Y generation (24-38 y.o) but after applying the adjustment for tied ranks, the significance disappeared (H=29.644, SE=11.730, p_{adj}=.069). Subsequently, a Mann-Whitney U test was performed for the two variables, confirming that the respondents from the Z generation had significantly higher personalized promotion scores (Z=-2.507, p=.012) than respondents in the Y generation, meaning that they agree significantly more with this promotional technique.

Female respondents had higher personalized promotion scores (MR=165.35) than male respondents (MR=132.03). A Mann-Whitney test indicated that this difference is statistically significant (U(N_{female}=240, N_{male}=74)=6995, z=-2.762, p=.006). This was not true in the case of classical advertising where no significant difference was found (p=0.108)

A Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to check if there is a significant difference in promotion scores between income and education level groups and a Mann-Whitney test for number of children. No significant models emerged.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The current study analyzed the marketing-mix elements and how they related with buying intention. Of the studied elements, price and promotion have the biggest correlation with buying intention. As more mature markets tend to have lower price sensitivity (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002), the focus fell on promotion. In the case of promotion, two components were identified that were named by the authors: “personalized promotion” and “classic advertising”. Personalized promotion contains items that underline the direct contact between consumer and producer, while classic advertising contains promotional instruments such as TV/radio ads, flyers or billboards. Of the two dimensions, personalized promotion had the highest correlation with buying intention.

In the second part of the study, the authors looked at the difference in promotion techniques and the level of agreement of different socio-demographic groups. Respondents younger than 24 years-old are significantly more open to personalized promotion techniques (like tastings, samples or complementary products) than people with ages between 24 and 38 years. Personalized promotion also is more agreeable to female respondents more than male respondents, while in the case of classical advertising there is no significant difference between the two groups. There is no significant difference in the promotion scores between respondents within different income and education levels or with a different number of children in the family.

There are some limitations of the present research that need to be mentioned. As the sampling method was non-probabilistic the study is exploratory in nature. Because the buying intention of organic products varies between cultures, this study cannot be extrapolated to an international level. It is recommended that further research be done on a more extensive random sample of consumers that might lead to a more robust and universally applicable model. Another limitation is the imbalance in the gender ratio of respondents. For this study there were a

considerably higher number of female respondents. Further studies should explore a more balanced sample.

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