

## **STUDY ON THE INFORMATION LEVEL OF PUPILS AND PARENTS REGARDING THE EFFECTS OF UNHEALTHY FOOD CONSUMPTION**

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### **Abstract**

During the past centuries, consumption has become both one of the most discussed and analyzed subjects in the literature and a mass phenomenon in society. In order to satisfy their needs and to improve the quality of their life consumers need information and education. Consumers' information and education are promoted by a globally-developed consumer movement.

The aims of our paper are to present the role of the consumer information and education in society, and to analyze and highlight the results of a national project regarding the information and education of Romanian young consumers, run by the Association for Consumers Protection (APC) Romania. By using primary data obtained from a survey based on a questionnaire, a set of three hypotheses was tested during our research. The results of our research shows that a relatively small number of Romanian pupils from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade were aware of the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption and of the fact that the unhealthy food consumption may give rise to obesity and ADHD (agitation with attention deficit).

**Keywords:** consumer information, consumption, consumer, consumerism, pupils

**JEL Classification:** D18, P46

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### **Introduction**

It is a well-established fact by theoreticians from different domains that consumption has become a major subject for discussions and scientific research in the human society during the past centuries (Kroen, 2004; Baldock, 2003; Hilton, 2002; Pennell, 1999; Coffin, 1999). Living in the consumer society, people consume in order to satisfy their various needs, more and more sophisticated, and to improve the quality of their life. Consequently, consumption has become a mass phenomenon in a consumer society (Trentmann, 2004;

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Schor, 1999). In today's postmodern society, consumption and consumer behavior are central components of individual, family and community life (McGregor, 2007). All these led to different human reactions. For example, consumers' involvement found its expression in consumerism.

Consumer information and education represent an integral part of the global consumer movement. In the age of globalization it is of essential importance to make consumer information and education a fundamental activity in schools, colleges and universities. The increase and the improvement of young consumer education impose its incorporation in the basic curricula used both in the educational process and in the training of all teachers (United Nations, 2003; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2009). Unfortunately there are no national consumer education and information strategies in most countries of the world. In many cases these countries have implemented specific measures in an ad hoc manner, in order to face specific problems (Nordic-Estonian Consumer Education Group, 2009).

Consumer information and education programs cover important aspects of consumer protection such as health and nutrition. In this respect, the Association for Consumers Protection (APC) Romania elaborated and implemented the national project entitled "The information and education of young consumers" in the period September 2007-September 2009. The authors of the paper were fully involved in this national project.

The aims of our paper are to present in short the role of the consumer information and education in society, and to analyze and highlight the results of the national project regarding the information and education of Romanian young consumers run by APC Romania. By using primary data obtained from a survey based on a questionnaire a set of three hypotheses was tested during our research. In essence, the hypothesis stated that the Romanian pupils and their parents were not sufficiently informed and educated about the unhealthy food consumption.

The first chapter of the paper presents some of the main theoretical issues about consumption. Also, it emphasizes the importance of the consumer information and education in the world. The second chapter of the paper presents as a case study the national project about the information and education of the Romanian young consumers. This is followed by a presentation of the results and conclusions.

### **1. From consumption to the consumer information and education**

Human needs are best revealed in the arena of consumption, which represents a fundamental element of modern capitalism and contemporary culture. Human needs are satisfied through the consumption of goods and services provided by the market, the state, or the producer himself. Consumption can be defined as "spending for survival or enjoyment, as opposed to providing for future production" (Black, 1997, p. 84).

Throughout time, consumption has been analyzed as one of the most complex concepts of human society, from a sociological, economic, anthropological, cultural and ideological point of view. Starting with the mid-nineteenth century the centrality of consumption to capitalism has been pointed out in the works of famous sociologists, psychologists and economists (e.g., E. Durkheim, K. Marx, W. Sombart, T. Veblen, W. S. Jevons, S. Freud, J. M. Keynes, J. S. Duesenbery, J. K. Galbraith, Z. Bauman, A. Giddens etc.).

One century earlier, A. Smith destined consumption to a more limited role than his successors. Smith's ethics "offer the vastly different picture of happiness found in prudence and tranquility" opposed to the modern consumerism that promotes the idea of continuous consumption as a primary road to happiness (Busch, 2008, p. 75). Likewise, J. S. Mill worried about the dangers of unproductive consumption, expressed by luxury goods. However, Smith celebrated consumption as the wellspring of production, as a positive force that leads to the welfare of a nation: "consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production" (Smith, 2003, p. 839).

A. Marshall "conceived consumption as a moral activity, in the benefits it gave the consumer as worker" at the end of the nineteenth century (Hilton, 2005, p. 7). Later, Veblen considered conspicuous consumption as a way of preserving rank and social status: "... consumption of goods without stint, especially consumption of the better grades of goods- ideally all consumption in excess of the subsistence minimum- pertains normally to the leisure class" (Veblen, 1953, p. 63). On the other hand, conspicuous consumption proved to be "an important determinant in the expansion of markets and technological innovations in the Western world in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later" (Reinstaller & Sanditov, 2005, p. 505). Close to Veblen's ideas, M. Halbwachs asserted that the differences between social classes could be found in consumption. In his opinion, "consumption was the sphere in which social inequalities and working-class deprivations were most deeply felt" (Coffin, 1999, p. 11).

According to economic theory, the theoretical base for consumption was established by H. Kirk, in 1923. Starting from the empirical, stable relationship between consumption and income, J. M. Keynes introduced the consumption function in the economic theory. His assumption: that "leisure would increase as wages and wealth increase is based on the hypothesis that most consumption is directed at meeting our economic needs- food, clothing and shelter" (Stiglitz, 2007, p. 4). For Duesenbery people consume according to the requirements of their position in society. Their aspirations and expenditure are influenced by comparative processes that are mainly determined by proximate needs; neighborhood based. In his writings about excessive consumption, J. K. Galbraith asserts that "just as there must be balance in what a community produces, so there must also be balance in what the community consumes" (Galbraith, 1958, p. 254), emphasizing the importance of a social balance between the consumption of publicly and privately supplied goods.

In a post-industrial society within which people are out of time, "the pleasures of consumption take time: the time to read a book, to talk to a friend, to drink a cup of coffee, to travel abroad" (Bell, 1976, p. 474). Moreover, as the modern economy is heavily grounded on consumption, new forms of desire (e.g., exotic experiences) have to be stimulated to keep production growing (Campbell, 1987). In today's postmodern society social status is significantly determined by "what one owns and buys, by consumption choices" (Baldock, 2003, p. 66) and "an individual's identity is tied to what s/he consumes" (McGregor, 2003, p. 18). In other words, consumption represents a form of socialization and a means of social participation, as J. Baudrillard pointed out (Where?). In the late 1990s, P. Bourdieu showed in his social theory on consumption that "the structure of the social hierarchy both constrains the consumption of lower social strata and leads to subtle, less conspicuous consumption patterns at the top of the social hierarchy" (Ward & Lasen, 2009, p. 148).

In essence, all these theories and scientific opinions demonstrate that consumption has become an increasingly central subject to the human society from the second half of the nineteenth century until today. Derived from the concept of consumption, consumerism “delineates the collective conduct of consumers, which can generate shared features and ends” (Pennell, 1999, p. 552) and constitutes one of the results of growing affluence in Western societies. In short consumerism is characterized by high levels of consumption.

Starting from the 1960s a chain of consumer legislation appeared, initially in the USA (e.g., the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966). In 1962 the American president R. F. Kennedy promulgated the Consumer Bill of Rights, outlining the following four basic consumer rights:

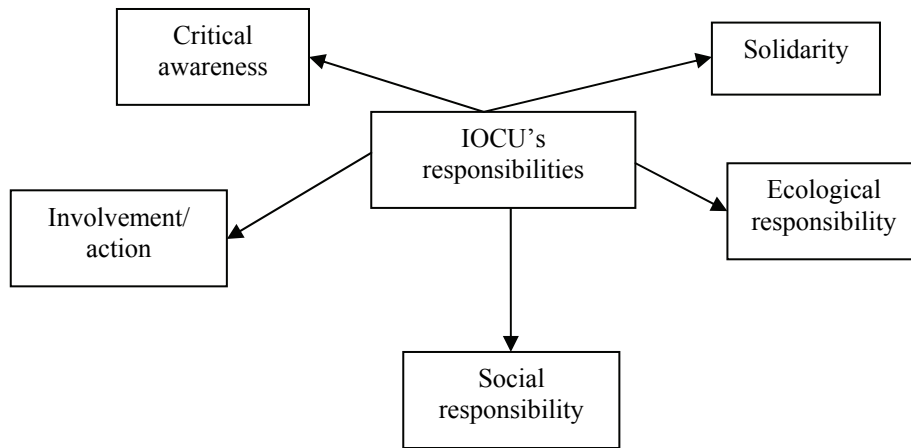
- the right to product safety;
- the right to be informed;
- the right to choose;
- the right to be heard in the formulation of governmental policies.

All these rights were incorporated into the philosophy of the International Organization of Consumer Unions (IOCU). IOCU, renamed Consumers International (CI) in 1995, added another four consumer rights:

- the right to satisfaction of basic needs;
- the right to redress;
- the right to consumer education;
- the right to a healthy environment,

and embraced a set of five fundamental responsibilities during the presidency of A. Fazal (Figure no. 1). As CI states, “our vision is a world where people have access to safe and sustainable goods and services, exercising their individual rights as consumers and using the force of their collective power for the good of consumer everywhere” (CI, 2010).

More and more, the consumer information and education have become a major theme in society. As today consumers operate in complex markets, being confronted with a growing amount of information and multiple ranges of products and services, they need a consumer education. In this context consumer education is critical for a better life and can be defined as “a process of developing and enhancing skills and knowledge to make informed and well-reasoned choices that take societal values and objectives into account” (OECD, 2009, p. 3). Consumers’ organizations and governments should encourage the establishment and development of general consumer education and information programs (United Nations, 2003).



**Figure no. 1: The five fundamental responsibilities of IOCU**

The increasing importance of the role of consumer information and education has been demonstrated by the various initiatives launched in the last decades all over the world. This is why the consumers' organizations from Northern Europe have collaborated in the domain of consumer education since the 1960s. After 1990, this collaboration has been extended to the Baltic States. The Nordic-Estonian Consumer Education Group was established by the following partners: the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Equality, the Finnish Consumer Agency, the Consumer Protection Board of Estonia, the Swedish Consumer Agency, the Danish Media Council for Children and Young People and the Icelandic Consumer Agency (Nordic-Estonian Consumer Education Group, 2009).

Also, Sweden created the Task Force on Sustainable Lifestyles, an international initiative launched together with United Kingdom, Argentina, Costa Rica, Italy, Brazil, with the purpose of supporting the progress of activities on sustainable consumption and production. A specific objective of the Task Force refers to consumption behaviour, information and education (Mont, 2007). In Germany, the German Global Compact Network established partnerships for consumer communication and education in order to foster consumer awareness and responsible consumer choice (Schaller, Kuhndt & Pratt, 2009).

In short, the increasing role of consumer education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century society is given by the fact that it:

- has to respond to the challenge of developing knowledge about the way consumer awareness can be strengthened in an ever-changing environment;
- constitutes a long-term, permanent and gradual process, based on values such as honesty and trust;
- concerns relevant issues of people's everyday life, imposing upon a deep research into the reality surrounding them;
- develops better decision making throughout consumers' lives;
- enables consumers to become pro-active;

- covers more diverse areas than in the past, such as consumer rights and obligations, and sustainable consumption;
- should begin at an early age and cover all life stages;
- should be developed in a balanced way, taking into account the reality;
- should be disseminated in a variety of ways, such as online platforms;
- should be incorporated into educational programs for lifelong learning and in school curriculum etc.

A variety of influences and experiences shape the consumer behavior of children and teenagers. For example, as children are becoming consumers earlier, their eating patterns have changed over the last decades. This is why “consumer education may begin at school in the early grades when children’s learning and behavior pertaining to food- and nutrition-related decisions can be influenced... that can help young consumers make healthful dietary choices before undesirable dietary behaviors have developed” (Kraak & Pelletier, 1998, p. 22). Moreover, highly health conditions among school-age children, especially good nutrition, are important determinants of educational outcomes (Pollitt, 1990).

According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the American Dietetics Association the relationships among nutrition and health, wellness, and disease prevention are well established, and nutrition habits track over time (Myers & Pope, 2009). Consequently, nutrition and food are key elements influencing children’s health. Healthy life promotion programs through education about food „should not be limited to microbiology or nutrition, but should address all aspects of product safety” (Bruhn & Schutz, 1999, p. 84).

Starting from the fact that on the one hand, obesity rates are rising in the world (Commission of the European Communities, 2007; Dixey et al., 1999) and food and nutrition misinformation „may be harmful to a consumer’s health and general well-being” (American Dietetic Association, 2006a, p. 601) and, on the other hand, food and nutrition programs serve as „a vehicle for nutrition education and promotion of physical activity designed to prevent or reduce overweight and prevent chronic disease” (American Dietetic Association, 2006b, p. 1467), the need for enhanced food safety education in schools has begun to be recognized by people from an increasing number of countries. Romania is an interesting example as a country where several projects regarding young consumer information and education have been launched.

## **2. The information and education of young consumers in Romania**

Since its foundation in 1990, APC Romania has participated in several international and national projects related to consumer information and education. In this respect, APC Romania elaborated and implemented the national project entitled “The information and education of young consumers”, in the period September 2007-September 2009. The aim of the project was the information and education of the Romanian pupils and students regarding the healthy food.

In this article, we present only the project relating to pupils from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The objectives of the project were the following:

- to obtain the information of the pupils from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade regarding the food consumption habits and healthy food;
- to obtain the information of their parents regarding the healthy food of the pupils during the so-called “food hour”;
- to obtain the information of their teachers regarding the healthy food of the pupils.

Three separate teams including three experts from APC Romania, four teachers from the Vocational School no. 3 in Bucharest and two professors from the University of Bucharest visited 30 schools, which were selected from different counties of the country as follows:

- Arad- 3 secondary education schools, 1 special education school (for pupils with disabilities);
- Bistrita- 2 secondary education schools, 3 special education schools;
- Bucharest- 6 secondary education schools, 3 special education schools;
- Brasov- 2 secondary education schools, 2 special education schools;
- Cluj- 3 secondary education schools, 1 special education schools;
- Iasi- 3 secondary education schools, 1 special education schools.

The 30 schools sample was constituted on the basis of the answers received from a questionnaire sent previously to the schools from the above- mentioned counties by the school inspectorates. During their visits, the team members undertook their research starting from the following hypotheses:

- the pupils from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade of the studied sample did not know the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption.
- the pupils from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade of the studied sample did not know that the unhealthy food consumption may lead to the increase of the number of obese pupils and pupils with ADHD (agitation with attention deficit).
- the parents of the pupils were not fully informed regarding healthy food and the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption.

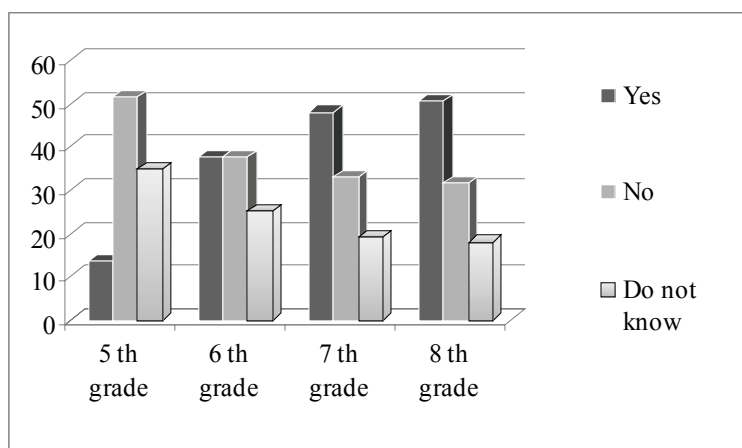
In order to test the three hypotheses, the team members gathered primary data from a sample of 800 pupils and 178 parents (76 men, 102 women) through a survey based on the application of a questionnaire to the pupils and their parents. The questionnaire was applied in order to know if the pupils and their parents were informed about the healthy food and the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption. On average, 30 pupils from different grades and 6 parents were randomly selected from each school. The pupils were informed about the healthy products before applying the questionnaire. In order to validate/invalidate the hypotheses the team members used the following questions within the questionnaire:

I. Do you know negative effects of unhealthy food consumption? - 800 answers (Table no. 1)

**Table no. 1: Answers given to the question “Do you know the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption?”**

Variants	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	8 <sup>th</sup> grade
Yes	27	75	96	101
No	103	75	66	63
Do not know	70	50	38	36
Total	200	200	200	200

The pupils from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade were the most informed (Figure no. 2) about the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption (50.5 %), followed by the pupils from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade (48 %), the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (37.5 %) and the 5<sup>th</sup> grade (13.5 %).



**Figure no. 2: The percentages of the answers given to the question “Do you know the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption?”**

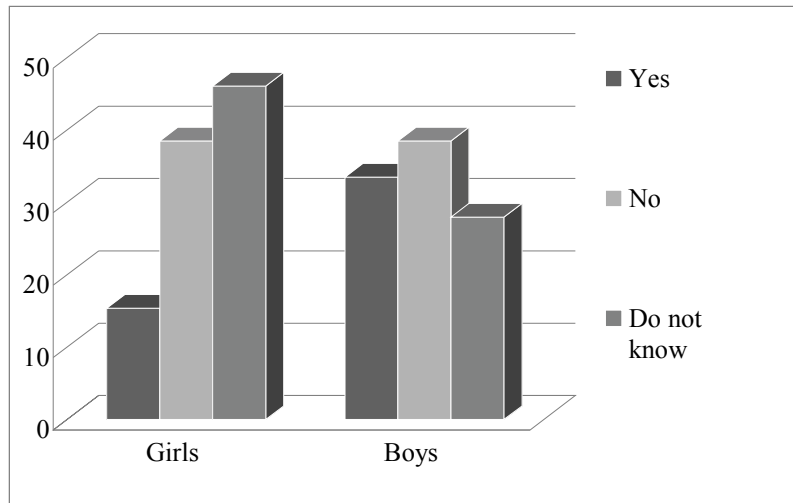
II. Do you know that obesity and/or ADHD may be negative effects of the unhealthy food consumption? - 800 answers (Table no. 2)

**Table no. 2: Answers given to the question “Do you know that obesity and/or ADHD might be negative effects of the unhealthy food consumption?”**

Variants	Girls	Boys
Yes	89	74
No	223	85
Do not know	267	62
Total	579	221

Boys were more informed (Figure no. 3) about the negative effects of the unhealthy food consumption, which may give rise to obesity and ADHD (33.5 %) than girls (15.4 %).





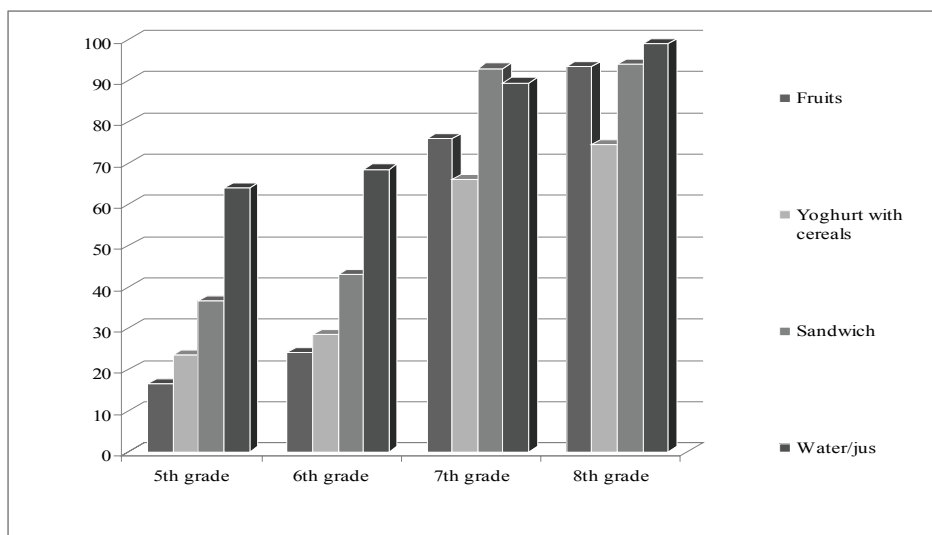
**Figure no. 3: The percentages of the answers given to the question “Do you know that obesity and/or ADHD might be negative effects of the unhealthy food consumption?”**

*III. Do you know what a healthy lunch bag should contain?- 800 answers (Table no. 3)*

**Table no. 3: Answers given to the question “Do you know what has to contain a healthy food package for you at school?”**

Variants	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	6 <sup>th</sup> grade	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	8 <sup>th</sup> grade
Fruits	33	48	152	187
Yoghurt with cereals	47	57	132	149
Sandwich (cheese/ewe-cheese/eggs/boiled meat)	73	86	186	188
Water/juice	128	137	179	198

This question tested the knowledge of pupils regarding their healthy alimentation, by indicating to them only the healthy products because they were previously informed. The pupils from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade were the most informed about the content of a healthy lunch bags for them (Figure no. 4). Water/juice (99 %), sandwich (94 %) and fruits (93.5 %) are the most important for them. In terms of information level, the 8<sup>th</sup> graders were followed by the 7<sup>th</sup> graders. Sandwich (93 %), water/juice (89.5 %) and fruits (76 %) were the most important for them. Far less informed were the pupils from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade.



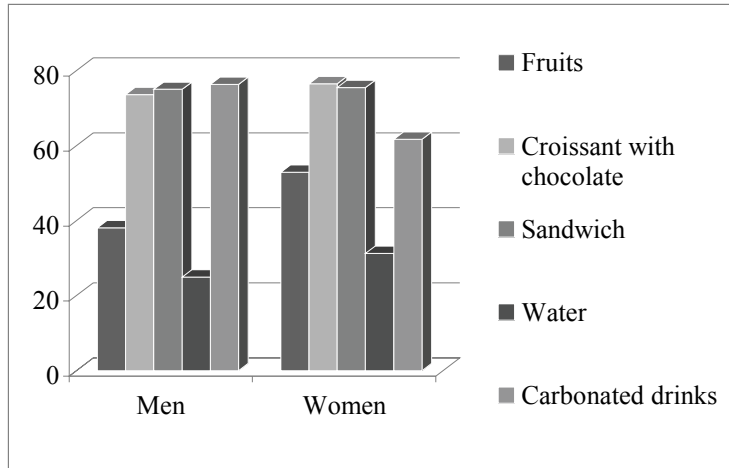
**Figure no. 4: The percentages of the answers given to the question “Do you know what a healthy lunch bag should contain?”**

*IV. Do you know what a healthy lunch bag for your child should contain? - 178 answers (Table no. 4)*

**Table no. 4: Answers given to the question “Do you know what has to contain a healthy food package for your child at school?”**

Variants	Men	Women
Fruits	29	54
Croissant with chocolate	56	78
Sandwich (cheese/ewe-cheese/eggs/boiled meat)	57	77
Water	19	32
Carbonated drinks	58	63

This question tested the knowledge of parents regarding the healthy alimentation of pupils, by indicating to them both healthy and unhealthy products. Women thought that a healthy food package for their children had to contain firstly (Figure no. 5) a chocolate croissant (76.5 %), followed by sandwich (75.5 %) and carbonated drinks (61.7 %). In their turn, men put on the first place carbonated drinks (76.3 %), followed by sandwich (75 %) and chocolate croissant (73.6 %).



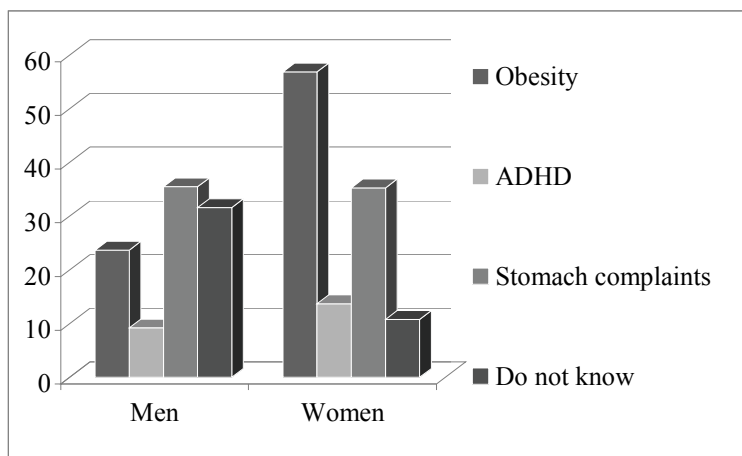
**Figure no. 5: The percentages of the answers given to the question “Do you know what a healthy lunch bag for your child should contain?”**

*V. Do you know which might be the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption for your children at school? - 178 answers (Table no. 5)*

**Table no. 5: Answers given to the question “Do you know which might be the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption for your children at school?”**

<b>Variants</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Obesity	18	58
ADHD	7	14
Stomach complaints	27	36
Do not know	24	11

Women were more informed about the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption for their children than men (Figure no. 6). They put on the first place the risk of obesity (56.9 %), followed by stomach discomfort (35.3 %) and ADHD (13.7 %). In their turn, men put on the first place stomach discomfort (35.5 %), followed by obesity (23.7 %) and ADHD (9.2 %). Fewer women (10.8 %) than men (31.6 %) did not know to answer the question.



**Figure no. 6: The percentages of the answers given to the question “Do you know which might be the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption for your children at school?”**

The results of the research have shown that the three hypotheses were validated. Only 299 out of 800 pupils (37.3 %) were aware about the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption and only 163 out of 800 pupils (20.4 %) were aware of the fact that the unhealthy food consumption may give rise to obesity and ADHD. The pupils from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade proved to be much more informed than their colleagues. Also, the parents of the pupils were not fully informed on healthy food and the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption. Nevertheless, women proved to be more informed than men about these issues.

### Conclusions

Consumption constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon (e.g., economic, social, cultural etc.) and a complex concept. Derived from the concept of consumption, consumerism promotes and protects the consumers' rights and interests, and helps the free markets to work effectively.

This New Millenium has witnessed a renewed and intensified interest amongst consumers in issues of ethically and socially oriented consumption. In our view, it is consumerism in its entire complexity, which might build the necessary bridge between the business world and the consumer society. More than ever the information and education of young consumers are key elements in creating a better society on a global scale. In spite of its youth and lack of resources, the Romanian consumer movement has made significant efforts towards the information and education of consumers in the last twenty years.

Our paper presents for the results of a project on young consumer information and education regarding healthy food consumption, including both the pupils from the secondary education schools and special education schools and their parents. The analysis of the results of our research outlines that a relative small number of Romanian pupils from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 8<sup>th</sup> grade were aware of the negative effects of unhealthy food consumption

and about the fact that the unhealthy food consumption may give rise to obesity and ADHD. Unfortunately, many parents were less informed and educated than their children. The results obtained in this research were similar with other studies (Sanlier, 2009; Bruhn & Schutz, 1999) and revealed that healthy food consumption knowledge tends to increase with age (the pupils from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 7<sup>th</sup> grade are more informed and educated than their younger colleagues) and that females have higher scores than males among their parents.

Although this research is far from a complete one, this is the first of this type accomplished in Romania. Its results can explain to some extent the growing number of Romanian pupils with obesity and ADHD. Because the population of this research consisted of pupils from 30 Romanian schools and their parents, the results should not be generalized to all Romanian pupils from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade and their parents. However, our paper may be considered as a starting point for further studies, which, through the extension of the investigated population, might present more precisely the effects of unhealthy food consumption on Romanian pupils.

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