

RESEARCH ON CONSUMERS' SELF-PROTECTION THROUGH A HEALTHY DIET

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Abstract

The article analyzes consumers' concern for healthy food, emphasizing the role of the vegetarian diet. Studies on the topic are available world-wide; however, none of these focuses on the role of vegetarian diet within the concern for healthy food, in Romania. In answering this question, a qualitative research was carried out on the customers of a store that sells natural food products and products certified as organic. The results indicate that vegetarian diet has a central role within the wider concern for healthy food, endorsing arguments to support the assertion. Hence, propensities in the consumer concerns to turn to healthier diets were identified, based on a system that diminishes or eliminates meat based diets. The conclusion of the qualitative research is a premise for future development of quantitative research, assessing the dimensions of this phenomenon.

Keywords: healthy food, consumer behaviour, market research, vegetarian diet, eating patterns, organic agro-food products, market strategy

JEL Classification: M31, Q13

Introduction

The article investigates consumers' concern for healthy food, emphasizing the role of the vegetarian diet. It focuses on establishing whether people concerned with healthier food tend to become vegetarian, and if so, it searches the reasons for people choosing a vegetarian diet.

Considering the definition of Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian language, vegetarianism is "a diet or food system formed (only) of plant (and dairy) products". In literature (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991) two other terms are used: consumers of reduced meat quantities are people who classify themselves as reducing their overall meat consumption, and semi-vegetarians defining as people who claim to have habits that focus on vegetarian food, yet, on occasional basis, on meat consumption. Red meat is usually excluded.

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Studies on vegetarian diet are available, which do indeed identify its' benefits, and the reasons people choose it. Some authors (Fraser, 1994) consider that people choose vegetarian diets when have health problems. Another reason, submitted by Penning de Vries, is economic, based on the price of vegetal food, which is cheaper (Penning de Vries, 1995). Reasons related to ethics can be considered, vegetarians claiming that killing animals and eating meat is immoral (Beardsworth and Keil, 1991). The conclusions of the research hold by Goodland show that the reasons for choosing vegetarian diet relate to environment protection, for intensive farming is a mean for resources' usage and environment's pollution (Goodland, 1997).

However, none of these focuses on the role of vegetarian diet within the concern for healthy food, in Romania. Accordingly, the empirical investigation undertaken in this article attempted to fill the gap.

The present study is useful for future ones, of quantitative nature, since it provides the premises for quantitative research. Subsequently, the results of these studies will be used in practice, both producers of agricultural produce and distributors, who will manage their business accordingly.

1. Research objective and intended relevance

The objective of research is identification of consumers' opinions and attitude towards healthy food, role of vegetarian diet within the concern for healthy food, and the reasons people choose vegetarian or semi-vegetarian diet.

This paper investigates consumers' tendency to consume organic products and reduce meat consumption, without becoming vegetarians, applying only some principles of vegetarianism.

The relevance of the study emerges from its implications on economic environment. Food producers might be interested to identify trends in modern society regarding food patterns, attitudes and beliefs towards food. Food sellers might be interested to identify these trends and develop their businesses accordingly. Also, in finding whether reduced animal products food will influence the structure of food-industry and trade, vegetarians and semi-vegetarians' attitudes and beliefs can be regarded as important.

2. Research matters

The overarching question of research is: *What is the role of a vegetarian diet within the wider concern of healthy food?*

There are other specific questions to be answered: *Which are the reasons why respondents have chosen a vegetarian or semi-vegetarian diet?, What prevents diet-conscious people to adopt a vegetarian diet?, What trends towards healthier diets can be identified?, What actions people take in order to make their diet healthier?, What actions people think that might be taken in order to develop the production and trade of organic products and food?*

3. Methodology

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative research was carried out. Qualitative analysis was chosen for it supports understanding the reasons, attitudes and beliefs. Researchers (Sayer, 1992) agree that qualitative research is conducted with a view to understanding the way in which participants perceive situations and events, while the meanings people attach to the phenomena under investigation is crucial. In previous studies (Istudor, 2008) on consumer's perceptions of food products have been successfully used qualitative methods; and research results are relevant.

For data collecting, there were developed semi-structured interviews using a guide of discussion. The persons interviewed are concerned with their diet, being chosen among clients of a chain of stores that sells natural and organic certified products, such as: cereals, bread, bakeries, soy, and soy products, dried vegetables and fruits, chocolate, oil, pasta, sweets, dairies etc. They have ages between 30 and 50 years, higher education (at least master degree), and jobs in education, sales, management etc. Their income per family member is above the average salary. The process of collecting data included the following stages: determining target interviewees, identifying interview questions, preparing glossary of terms for interviewees, conducting interviews, recording and centralizing responses.

The data were analyzed based on various methods of critical reasoning: argument analysis, explanation, evaluation, and inference.

The results of the research were validated using the methods of negative case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The counter evidences are found through careful processing and analyzing the data and drawing conclusions.

4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed for each question comprised in the guide of discussion.

- *What kind of natural products (certified as organic) do you consume?*

The most usual products certified as organic or natural consumed by the persons interviewed are: bread, cereals, dairies, eggs, sweets, coffee, cheese, soy, pasta, and juice. Other products that consumers would like to buy are vegetables and fruits, but they are not sure about their origin, whether it is organic or not.

- *Who else in your family consumes this kind of products?*

The respondents that consume natural products come usually from families that use to be careful with their diet or they influence their family members, not only the core family, but the extended one as well.

- *What kind of actions do you undertake in order to ensure a healthier diet?*

The actions undertaken by the respondents in order to ensure a healthier diet focus on gathering information about content of the product and producers, based on data issued on the labels. Furthermore, mass media is a powerful source of information, even if some respondents are not influence by it taking the advice of qualified nutritionists.

Fasting, reducing meat and additives enriched food consumption, excluding meat products, healthy diet and food culture, buying natural products are other actions leading to healthier diet.

• *What kind of actions do you think should be taken in order to develop natural products', certified as organic, production and trade? Explain!*

There are two approaches for actions undertaken in order to produce natural products. The first approach focuses on encouraging producers through subsidies to produce natural products, with fewer chemicals. The prices of products would be lower if channels between producers and consumers are shorter. Therefore, a national strategy is necessary for organic production initiation and development.

The second approach focuses on consumers and has economical and educational connotations. Purchase of organic products, more expensive than usual ones, is the prerogative of consumers with high level of purchasing power. Based on salary level, consumers choose low or semi price products, while quality is a second criterion. Still, consumers would turn to natural products only if bad health forces them.

Moreover, educating consumers represents a solution for natural products development and production. In Romania, even if organic products are different from natural products, consumers are not aware of the difference and of what eco-label (if existent) really certifies. Because some respondents do not trust label information there is a growing concern for real information labelling and penalizing the sellers who do not observe the laws regarding labelling and products' falsification. The products without certification of origin and guarantee mark represent a threat for producers of organic food, for they are less expensive.

To conclude, production of organic products process is a two ways road: from producer to seller, producers should communicate the benefits of organic products; and from seller to producer, a well-educated consumer will request high quality products.

Natural or organic products' trade also has various approaches such as foreign, domestic or for semi subsistence.

The development of foreign trade depends on issuing national brands for organic products. Romania has a tremendous potential for cultivating organic crops on land that was not aggressed with chemical substances as other European countries did on their lands. Therefore, there is a need for implementing an export strategy in Romania focused on organic products, and promoting them through various means and techniques.

Development of domestic trade relates to the low level of production and consumer's education. Therefore, it can be enhanced through selling organic and natural products either in hypermarkets or in special stores, or both. The reason for selling them in hypermarket is the result of the present model of purchasing in Romania, hypermarket shopping. Many consumers prefer this kind of commerce for finding „everything under the same roof” and for this is a trend. However, as hypermarkets offer many food products, there is a difficulty in finding the organic ones. Therefore, the products certified as organic or natural products should have dedicated stalls or, at least, must be visible. Special, easy to understand signs must be placed, indicating direction to those products. At present, price only, which is higher than the price of regular food products, indicates whether they are organic or not.

Some respondents consider that organic products must be sold in special stores, where the whole sort of products can be found. However, there is a need for more outlets, all over the city/town/county, where consumers can find some of the daily food products such bread and dairy products.

Semi subsistence trade arises from semi-subsistence agriculture, on a large scale in Romania. Small farmers sell their products (vegetables, fruits, dairies, eggs) in unsuitable and less hygienic location, using improper channels of distribution. Even so, in respondents' opinion, small farmers' products are more appreciated and more natural than the products cultivated and harvested in larger farms or imported, for they are bred with less chemical substances. Therefore, a marketing system is necessary to promote these products on the cities/towns markets, close to the consumers interested in buying them.

- *What other products do you want to find in specialised stores?*

Other products that consumers want to find are vegetables and fruits, low level additives products, natural juices, cookies, crackers and sweets, milk and dairies, organic meat products, processed without additives, clothes and shoes made by natural fibers and leather.

- *What kind of food do you consume regularly: for breakfast, lunch, dinner?*

There are two models of consumption. According to the first, consumers usually consume, during lunch, traditional way prepared food consisting of soup and main dish containing mostly meat and vegetables. According to the second model, consumers skip lunch or they serve sandwiches or pizza, usually due to being out for lunch break. In this case, dinner is the most important meal of the day. Both models, consider breakfast as very important, consisting of healthy food such as cereals, milk or yoghurt, eggs, fruits, juice and tea. Also, it can be mentioned the concern for a healthier diet based on vegetables, pasta, cheese, fruits, fish and occasionally meat (grill).

- *What are the tendencies in your diet and your family's? Do you want to eliminate some products (what kind of products)? What kind of products do you want to consume more?*

Consumers tend to eat less meat and meat products and more vegetables and fruits. Eliminating meat is due to the high quantities of noxious elements in fodders used for feeding poultry, or due to high level of fat in pork. Also, consumers tend to avoid food based on additives and chemicals, sparkling or sweet beverages, sweets, bakeries products, and fermented cheese, while increasing consumption of vegetables and fruits, fresh, regular water instead of soda, fish and veal instead of poultry and pork.

- *Are you a vegetarian (or a semi vegetarian)?*

One person in the group declared the vegetarian way of life, while the rest of the group declared they changed their diet from meat based towards vegetables and fruits based. Occasionally, they consume meat; therefore they can be classified as semi vegetarians.

- *What are the reasons why you changed your diet to vegetarian, semi vegetarian?*

The reasons for change were various, such as vegetables and fruits are healthier; they can be consumed any time of the day/month/year, meat is not likable, or, more spiritual reasons such as loving alive animals and condemning the way they are slaughtered.

- *Have you ever felt being tempted to give up? Why?*

The respondents were not tempted to give up vegetarian or semi vegetarian diet due to improved health and well being status. Still, they would give it up if the nutritionists or other medics recommend it.

- *Are you tempted to become a vegetarian? What are the reasons why you do not do it?*

Some semi vegetarians are tempted to become vegetarian, while others do not. For the first group, the reason for not becoming is lack of organic (natural) fruits and vegetables all year around, but during summer and autumn. Another reason is large periods spent for preparing the dishes vegetarian diet consists of, while cooking meat based dishes means time saving during working week. The second group consider that it is much reasonable to give up consuming additives based products than giving up eating meat.

5. Results and their validation

The vegetarian diet has a central place among consumers' concern for healthy food based on respondents' desire to become semi vegetarians. Nonetheless, they are not vegetarians, for they consider as more important to reduce consumption of additives based food than reducing meat based food consumption.

They changed their diet from meat based to vegetables and fruits based, while occasionally they consume meat. There are several reasons for dietary change. First, respondents consider vegetables and fruits a healthier food that can easily be consumed outside the house. Second, they do not like meat and third, they love life animals. Although this trend has been identified, however, consumers concerned about healthy eating are not vegetarians because fruits and vegetables are seasonal products, cooking dishes of plant origin products takes longer and because they consider more important to reduce consumption of additives based food than giving up meat.

Consumers concerned about healthy food turn towards semi-vegetarian diet. They tend to consume small quantities of meat and large quantities of vegetables and fruits; for they consider that animals are fed with feed containing substances harmful to human health, and pork have a high fat content. They tend to consume beef and fish instead of poultry and pork and generally follow a consume model based on vegetables, pasta, cheese, fruit, fish, and occasionally meat.

Consumers take various measures to maintain a healthy diet. They inform on the product's content and manufacturer, by reading label information and gathering information from various sources. Key actions leading to a healthy diet are: fasting, low meat and additive based products' consumption, banning the consumption of meat products, diet education and acquisition of natural products.

Three reasons are the basis for low development of organic food production. First is lack of encouragement producers are provided with in obtaining organic products. Second is acquisition of cheaper but less healthy food due to low level of income. While organic products are more expensive, therefore not chosen due to economic reasons, even so people turn towards them when health problems occur. The third reason is lack of education

among consumers towards healthy food, due to lack of communication between producers and consumers on the benefits of organic food. Although labelled, consumers still show a lack of confidence in the information on the label.

Trade in organic products is not sufficiently developed due to production low level and gaps in consumer's education. Organic products are sold both in hypermarkets and in specialized shops. In the first, the products are hardly distinguished from other conventional products. In the second case, there are few specialized stores and they are poorly distributed territorially. As regards foreign trade, a strategy for Romanian export of organic products is necessary due to the high capacity Romania possesses.

Conclusions

Given these considerations, the conclusion of research matter is that vegetarian diet is central to the concerns of consumers for a healthy diet because desire to become semi-vegetarians was identified, but nonetheless they are not completely vegetarian, considering more important to lower additive based food consumption than reducing meat consumption.

This finding is a prerequisite for further research quantitatively determining the number of vegetarians and semi-vegetarian consumers, the number of consumers who intend to become vegetarians, to identify consumer preferences for sorts of food of plant origin, frequency of consumption etc.

Also, based on quantitative study, it is expected that future research should focus on measures to be taken towards expansion of production and trade of plant origin organic products (especially), which are not sufficiently developed at present in Romania. It should be mentioned that a prime role in increasing the importance of organic products in Romanians' diet is consumer behaviour which further on will bring changes in production organizing and management.

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