

ANALYZING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS FROM THEIR INTERESTS AND RIGHTS' PROTECTION PERSPECTIVE WITHIN VARIOUS INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The research originated from comprehending the way students, as consumers; perceive the involvement of bodies empowered to protect their rights and interests, including consumption-modernizing programmes. Among the cross-scientific research methods used by our research, the survey has been chosen and applied in three universities from various countries: Constantin Brancoveanu University of Pitesti – Management – Marketing in Economic Affairs Faculty, Romania, Fernando Pessoa - Business Science Faculty, Portugal and University Degli Studi di Milano – Political Sciences Faculty, Italy. For data processing, comprehensive methods of analysis and statistic-mathematical methods have been used, while for data analysis the method of comparing interviewed students' opinions and the causal explanation have been used. The paper's originality consists in drafting a direct, quantitative research, based on the scientific research of students' opinions, future opinion originators, in three countries with various development levels. In addition, Romanian profile literature does not enlist many scientific papers approaching the analysed topics, while international research papers exist, but only to a small extent. The main results of research reveal the occurrence of dissimilarities and similarities relevant to students' perceptions, regarding the approached subject.

Keywords: consumers' protection, consumers' rights, international research, students, analysis of perceptions, different national contexts

JEL Classification: D18

Introduction

The scientific research prepared to carry out this paper has been based on the need of a diverse experiences and knowledge basis, of consumers' perception.

To reveal the current level of researches and knowledge in this field, we consider important to mention the Programme launched by the United Nations on consumers' protection. By

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this Programme, United Nations offer some guidelines for consumer protection, having as objectives taking into account the interests and needs of consumers in all countries, particularly those in developing countries; recognizing that consumer often faces imbalances in economic terms, educational levels and bargaining power. The Programme aims to help countries in achieving or maintaining adequate protection for their population as Consumers, to simplify production and distribution patterns responsive to the needs and desires of consumers, to encourage high levels of ethical conduct for those engaged in the production and distribution of goods and services to consumers, to simplify the development of independent consumer groups. These guidelines stated by the United Nations aim the physical safety, promotion and protection of consumers' economic interests, standards for the safety and quality of consumer goods and services, distribution facilities for essential consumer goods and services, education and information programmes, promotion of sustainable consumption, rules and regulations relating to specific areas: food, water, pharmaceuticals (United Nations, 2003). A recent research focuses on the way consumers can detect, neutralize and resist different types of deception techniques they face on the market on a daily basis, such as: the strategic digital alteration of photos, videos and other visual information, misrepresentations via numerical information and calculations, statistical information and research results, the artful omission, masking, camouflage and distortion of information (Boush and others, 2009). There are also opinions stating that research in the consumer protection area is not developed at the level imposed by the current economic exigencies. Thus, though they present various researches on the factors influencing the online services, consumer protection and their behavior, Kuanchin and Fadlalla (2009, p. 278) recommend developing researches on the consumers' perceptions and attitude, which do not benefit from a very large attention in the profile literature. There are also other skeptical opinions, thus, Howells and Weatherill (2005, p. 609) consider that there is not any kind of research in order to monitor the consumers' complaints and use them in order to raise the business standards. To a certain extent, we agree to their opinion, but we consider that, even if there are few opinions regarding the importance of the protection of consumers' rights and interests, some efforts are though made. To support our statement we mention the European Commission Eurobarometer study regarding consumer protection in the internal market (European Commission, 2008). The research was conducted from February, 18th to March, 22nd 2008, interviewing 26 746 people in all 27 member states of the European Union, the first Eurobarometer study on the consumer protection within the European Union being conducted in 2006. Having this study as a starting point, the current study achieved, on a reduced scale, with its own capital, the scientific investigation of students in three universities from different countries, regarding the protection of their interests and rights as consumers. We assessed the researched community as highly important, because students represent future opinion originators or decision makers in different key positions in the social-economic environment. From the documentation this scientific article is based on, a single research has surfaced regarding the protection of young consumers' rights and interests – the Eurobarometer study published in 2010, which conducted a research regarding the attitude towards cross-border sales and consumers' rights, developing an analysis on countries and population targets, one of the respondents' segmentation criteria being the level of education (the European Commission, 2010). Lachance and Legault (2007) consider that the consumer's role as decider begins at an early age. Therefore, there are many reasons which justify the study of young people's competencies as consumers. Most important is the fact that they represent a major commercial target and share a large

desire of consumption. Also, youth is a time of new and important consumption experiences and learning preferences, attitudes and behaviors as consumers, many of these developing throughout adulthood.

Thus, the most important questions the European study assumes to answer are the following: Are there any differences and similarities in the ways students, as consumers from the countries where research has been conducted, perceive protection of their rights and interests? Does the different level of economic development of the three countries the respondents come from influence the perception of the protection of consumers' rights and interests? To which extent do students know the main governmental or nongovernmental institutions and organizations in the consumer protection area, and to what extent do they consider themselves protected through diverse programmes and measures made in this direction? To highlight all other aspects aimed to be researched, conduct investigations and state, at an operational level, the information required to conduct the research, the following work hypothesis have been drafted:

- most of the respondents perceive alike the quality of domestic and imported goods and services offered to consumers through the market;
- the relation between income level and price system is perceived differently by the respondents in the three countries;
- the degree of satisfying the social needs through consumption, both from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view, is diverse for the respondents in each country;
- the integration of the technical–scientific progress in the consumption modernizing programmes is not fully exploited in the three analysed countries;
- the respondents in the three countries: Romania, Italy and Portugal have different perceptions on ensuring consumer protection programmes by the state;
- the programs ensuring consumer's protection provide education for most of consumers in the EU member states;
- consumer rights are respected in the economic developed countries;
- the degree of information and education regarding consumer's rights varies from one country to another;
- there is a direct relation among level of economic development, European Union integration process and consumer's responsibility level;
- less than half of the respondents perceive that there are properly protected by the existing measures of consumer protection;
- almost all respondents know the main organizations in the consumer protection area;
- only a small part of respondents resort to the services of these governmental or nongovernmental organisations;
- direct relation among different levels of economic development and the extent to which, in the respondents' countries, the European Parliament and the Council's Directive N°. 2001/95/CE regarding the general safety of products is perceived;

- opinions regarding problems consumers face as result of the free movement of goods vary from country to country according to the level of economic development.

Analysis of the current stage of knowledge, of relating the direct quantitative research conducted with other researches on a global level, led to developing proposals for improvement at the end of the paper.

1. Historical path of specific rough guidelines of the protection of consumers' interests and rights

An explanatory paradigm of consumers' rights might be considered as having originated during the 18th century, but the legislative status of the protection of consumers' interest emerges in the second half of the 20th century. Jasper (2007) considers that before World War I there was limited legislation in place aiming to protect the consumer on the market. Society was not ready to impose its own set of criteria on what was perceived to be an individual's matter. As the industrial revolution took place and businesses which were once conducted on personal level gave place to mass production and consumption, the fairness and equality amongst individuals in the market-place gave way to a new system. And, while the merchants became more sophisticated, the consumer was relegated an inferior position at the bargaining table. Even from the 18th century the buying act has been seen simultaneously as a social, moral and political act, due to the causal impact of purchasing goods. The proximate consequences of shopping, the fact that buying a product influences directly its producers, sellers and the environment, determined the reconsideration of consumers' responsibilities (Glickman, 2009). In the USA, product-testing organizations, notably Consumers Research and Consumer Union – non-profit consumer product testing organizations which offered independent buying advice and accepted no money from advertisers – originated during the late 1920s. These groups and associated individuals published magazines and books which presented skepticism about the information manufacturers delivered and disappointment with poor government supervision (Winn, 2006). Lately, during 1980 – 1985, by bodies with international vocation of the United Nations, after long negotiations and mediations efforts among the governments of participating countries and the well-documented analyses on the consumer protection legislation, resolution 39/48 "Guiding principles of consumer protection" was adopted on April, 5, 1985, whereby governments of all countries "*should develop, strengthen and maintain a strong consumer protection policy, taking into account the guiding principles stated*" (Dinu, 2001).

In Romania, more delayed than in most European countries, the legislation governing the area originated in 1922 by adopting Government Ordinance n° 21/1922 regarding consumer protection. Initially, the Office for Consumer Protection had no autonomy, but it was part of the National Committee for Standards, Metrology and Quality.

Although at present considerable efforts are made, both nationally and on the EU level, to improve the institutional and legislative framework according to consumers' needs and requirements, to optimise the performance of this body, the profile literature reflects other points of view, too. Thus, Cartwright (2004) considers that the state, through the law, should play only a restricted role in protecting consumers, because consumer protection is most efficiently achieved by the operation of free and open markets.

2. Research methodology

To comprehend the perception of the degree of the current young consumers and students' protection in Romania, Italy and Portugal and on the factors which favour the development of social programmes in this area, an international study was carried out. The data collecting process was conducted from October to December 2009. The study was based on the following research course: identification and analysis by comparison of the perception students have on their protection as consumers, the type of data taken in view being the primer, quantitative ones. The sample the information was collected from consisted of 120 students from the universities where the research was developed: *Constantin Brancoveanu University of Pitesti – Faculty of Management-Marketing in Economic Affairs, Romania, Fernando Pessoa University – Faculty of Business Science, Portugal and Degli Studi di Milano University – Faculty of Political Sciences, Italy*. The group investigated was represented by the students enrolled in the three faculties of the universities mentioned, meaning 5,794 students. The collection of information was made through the opinion poll method. To carry out the research, we selected the universities in three member states of the European Union, but which joined the Union at different moments of time, Italy being founding member of the European Union, Portugal joining in 1986 and Romania, more recently, in 2007. The three countries have different levels of living reflected in the Gross Domestic Product/inhabitant (GDP/inhabitant), current prices, in 2008, according to the UNCTAD statistics, thus: Italy - \$38 302/inhabitant, Portugal - \$22,748/inhabitant and Romania – \$8,923/inhabitant (UNCTAD, 2010).

To accomplish the research a questionnaire was drafted, written and applied in English and Italian languages. It consists of 20 questions, of which ten are closed, four opened and six questions aiming demographic structural data: age, nationality, occupation, residence and so on. The respondents' average age was 22.5 years, the main demographic variable used in segmentation being the nationality. The sampling was non-probabilistic (Balaure et al., 2000, p. 147). The main method of research used consisted of the direct research, by opinion survey, based on structured questionnaire, applied in the three universities by ad-hoc sampling. (Savoiu et al., 2004) Because a random sampling should have been extended to all the European Union countries, to a representative number of universities, which would have meant great financial and organizing efforts, an ad-hoc sampling method has been chosen. Though the degree of representation is not as high as that of a random sampling (Catoiu, 2009), certain organizational restrictions, especially financial ones, imposed the use of this sampling method, interviewing students who entered the library from 10⁰⁰ to 12⁰⁰ a.m. and from 5⁰⁰ to 7⁰⁰ p.m. from each of the three analysed universities, as follow: during the week October 19-24, 2009 the research conducted in Romania; during the week November 9-14, 2009, the students from Italy; and the week December 7-12, 2009, the students from Portugal. The assessment of the questionnaire relevance and of the correctness of the research methodology concerning the perception of the protection of consumers' interests and rights was achieved through a pilot opinion survey on a 20-student sample.

The study objectives:

The objectives represent the operational version of the issue of analysing the dimension of the students' perceptions, as consumers, regarding the protection of their rights and interests. The objectives aimed within the research are:

- knowledge of the respondents' perception in the three countries regarding the quality of the goods and services, domestic or imported, offered to the market;
- comprehending the correlation between the income level and price system, in the respondents' opinion;
- comprehending how consumption is perceived considering the degree of satisfying the social needs, under a bivalent aspect: quantitative and qualitative;
- the analysis of how the integration of the technical–scientific progress in the consumption modernizing programmes is perceived;
- identifying how the respondents perceive the level of ensuring consumer protection programmes by the state, and the perception of the extent these programmes educate and inform consumer in a way to increase their responsibility and to stimulate the development of those markets which offer an interesting range of goods and services;
- identifying the perception of the degree of compliance with consumer rights, according to the interviewed people;
- comprehending opinions regarding the way consumer rights are materialized;
- respondents knowledge of the authorities in the consumer protection area and the extent to which we resort to these governmental and non-governmental organizations' services;
- identifying opinions regarding the problems the consumers might face as a result of the free movement of goods and the degree of carrying out the European Parliament and Council Directive no. 2001/95/CE regarding the products general safety.

3. Research results*• Perception of the quality of domestic and imported goods and services offered to consumers through the market*

Analysing the respondents' opinions, as consumers, of "How do you assess the quality of the goods and services offered to consumers through the market?", we concluded that the manufacturers do not exploit to the maximum the strategic and competitive advantages they own on the common market, most of them failing to satisfy fully the interviewed consumers' needs regarding the quality of the goods offered on the market. Thus, on a one to five value scale, one being the very low level and five the very high level, the interviewed students considered it as follow: most of the Romanian students, as well as the Portuguese ones, meaning 60%, considered that the goods and services on the market are of average quality; the Italian students, in equal proportions, meaning 50%, considered average and high quality products (Figure no. 1).

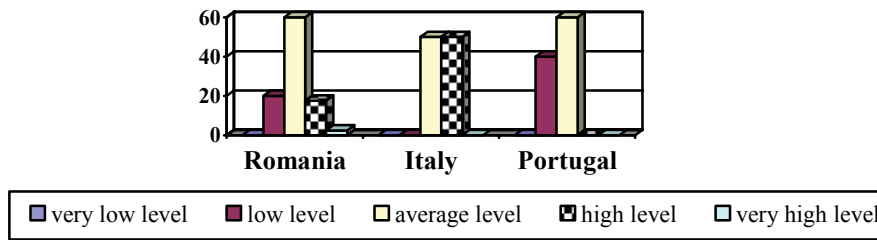


Figure no. 1: Quality perception of the goods and services offered to consumers

• Correlation between the income level and the price system

Being asked to answer the question: “Is the price system in your country correlated to the income level?”, the respondents perceived this aspect as it follows: almost all Romanian students (95%) considered that the income system in Romania is not correlated with the price system, an aspect also stated by the Portuguese students, 80% of them assessing the dissonance between the two variables. Thus, 75% of those interviewed considered that there is interdependence between the quantified factors, the price system being correlated with the income level (Figure no. 2).

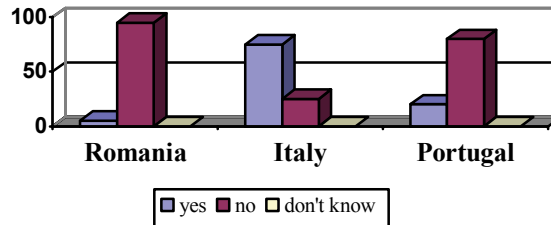


Figure no. 2: Correlation between the income level and the price system

• Perceptions of the consumption considering the degree of the social needs satisfaction, under a bivalent aspect: quantitative and qualitative

The question “Considering the degree of satisfaction of the social needs, how do you assess consumption, both under qualitative and quantitative aspect?” divides the respondents’ opinions in the three countries. Analysing the respondents’ opinions in the three universities, we distinguish the diversity of the perceptions of the analysed problems, the most unfavourable situation, both qualitatively and quantitatively, being in Romania.

While in Romania the percentages are almost equal, meaning that 37.5 % of the Romanian students consider that, quantitatively, the consumption is good, 35% assess it as being low and 25% estimate it of average level, the other respondents assessing it as: diverse and increasing during the last years, in Italy most of the respondents, 75%, assess a good consumption under a quantitative aspect and 25% satisfactory, and in Portugal it is almost entirely perceived as being of average level.

Qualitatively, the situation of the assessments stated by the Romanian students was: 37.5% appraised an average level qualitative consumption, 27.5% a reasonable level, 25% a low

level and 10% an irrelevant degree of qualitative consumption. The Italian respondents assessed in equal proportions, 50%, a good and satisfactory qualitative consumption, while 80% of the Portuguese interviewed students assess a good qualitative consumption level.

• *Integrating the technical-scientific progress in the consumption modernizing programmes*

Analysing the respondents' opinions as resulted from the question "How do you assess the integration of the technical-scientific progress into the consumption modernising programmes?", an opportunity resulted for potential producers who develop advanced production plans and tactics, appealing to the latest technical-scientific researches, who can benefit from the support of large segments of consumers rather not satisfied with the way the technical-scientific progress is integrated in the consumption modernizing programmes. Thus, in Romania 22.5% of the respondents equally assess a good level on one hand, and satisfactory on the other hand, while 17.5% consider it a slow process, 12.5% consider that there is no technical-scientific progress in consumption modernizing programmes and 25% do not know. In Italy, the situation presented itself differently, meaning that most of those interviewed, that is 65%, assess the integration of progress in consumer protection programmes as being slow, and 37.5% consider it a good quality process. In Portugal, 68.5%, of the respondents consider that the process is still not developed enough.

• *Perception of the state ensuring consumer protection programmes within its social policy*

Grounded on the analysis and interpretation of the research results, these problems reflect the serious deficiencies of the state involvement in ensuring the climate for efficient development of consumer protection programmes, probably also due to the weak promotion of these aspects among young consumers. From the responses to the question "To what extent do you assess that the state ensures, through its social policy, consumer protection programmes?", it results that, while in Romania, about 50% of those interviewed assess that the state gets involved to a small extent in ensuring consumer protection programmes, an opposite situation develops from analysing the questionnaires applied to the Italian students, meaning that 50% perceive a large involvement of the state in ensuring the functional frame of consumers' protection and in Portugal, most of the students, 60%, assessed an average level of state involvement in capitalizing consumer protection programmes (Figure no. 3).

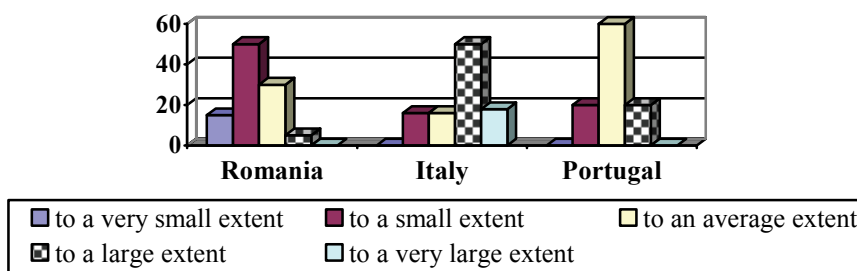


Figure no. 3: The degree the state ensures consumer protection programs

- Perception of the degree the consumption programmes inform and educate consumers in a way to increase their responsibility and stimulate the development of those markets offering an interesting range of goods and services

Regarding “To what extent do consumption programmes educate and inform consumers in a way to increase their responsibility and to stimulate the development of those markets which offer an interesting range of goods and services?”, we noticed that most of the respondents, who consider to a small extent the existence of consumer education and information programmes under the average level, came from Romania. Therefore, it results the need to enlarge the development and extension horizons of these programmes in order to support the young Romanian consumers. Thus, most of the Romanian students, 40%, assessed as average the existence of consumption programmes which support consumers through education and information and might have contributed to sales dynamic on those markets selling products related to their needs. Another deficiency emerged from the fact that only 20% of the Romanian students assessed to a large extent the efficiency of these programmes, the other 40% having unfavourable and very unfavourable opinions regarding this aspect. The Italian students do not have very good opinions on this matter, they too, in a 75% proportion, noticed an average level of consumer education and information through consumption programmes. 60% of the Portuguese respondents also perceived an average level of consumer education and information through comprehensive programmes (Figure no. 4).

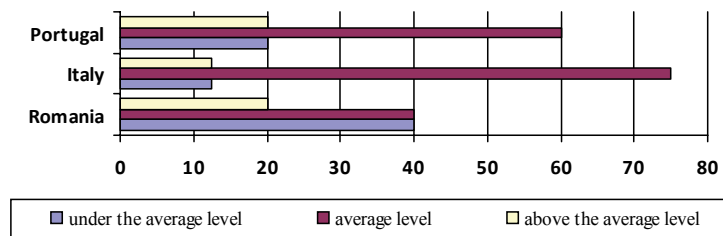


Figure no. 4: Perception on the degree the consumption programmes inform and educate consumers

- Perception of the degree the consumer fundamental rights are respected: the right to a free choice, the right to information, the right to petition and hearing, the right to protection, according to the respondents

To reveal this aspect, the respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire, completing the following requirement: “Assign 100 points, by division, among the following consumer rights, according to their degree of compliance: the right to a free choice, the right to information, the right to petition and hearing, the right to protection.” Almost all respondents, regardless of their nationality, assessed that their rights as consumers are respected. However, they place on the top of the pyramid the respect of a right which is closer to the consumer responsibility and exploitation of the market opportunities than to the authorities within this field of expertise. Other emerging ideas are: the need to improve the communication system among consumers and institutions that contribute to apply consumer rights management, the right to petition and hearing ranking last in the chart and, also, the need to increase the involvement of governmental and nongovernmental bodies in the real protection of this category of consumers. In Romania, most of the respondents

perceive a 36% degree of respect for the right to a free choice, this being the highest level, following the right to information with a 24.3 percent, the right to protection, 21.6%, and the right to petition, 17.5%. The Italian students have the same hierarchy of the perceptions of the degree of respect for consumer rights, meaning: the right to a free choice is also placed first – 33.1%, followed by the right to information – 25.6%, the right to protection – 24.4%, the last position being occupied by the right to petition and hearing – 16.9%. Leading to the idea of similarity complex, the Portuguese respondents maintain the same hierarchy of respect for consumer rights, too, meaning: 35% place first the respect for the right to a free choice, 25% the right to information, 22% the right to protection and 18% the right to petition and hearing (Figure no. 5).

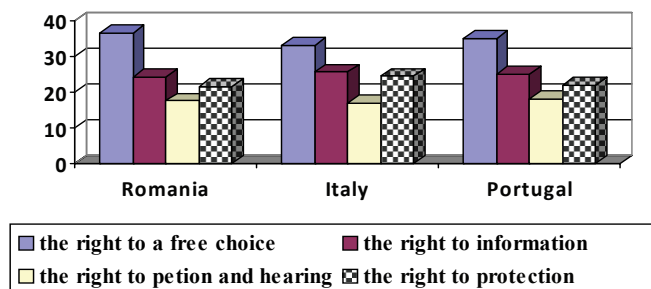


Figure no. 5: Perception of the compliance with the consumer rights

- *Perceptions regarding the factors involved in order to promote consumers' rights to protection: the government, the manufacturers, the unions, the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)*

Certain deficiencies in the professional bodies' activity resulted by interpreting the Romanian respondents' view of the Government's degree of involvement through its legislative and institutional framework, through regulations and rules, deficiencies which come from answers for the following question: "In order to promote consumer right to protection, which of the following factors do you assess that gets more involved: the government, the producers, the union, the nongovernmental organizations?". Only 24.5% of them appreciated the governmental professional institutions' involvement. Most of them, 32%, considered that mostly the manufacturers involve in promoting consumers' right to protection through the quality and reliability of the products they offer. Surely the manufacturers must have a socially responsible attitude towards consumers, but, still, the professional governmental bodies have the necessary levers and should get more involved, according to the interviewed people. Also noteworthy is the fact that, according to the respondents, 25% of profile nongovernmental organizations contribute to the promotion of the consumer right to protection, through actions of information, education, training or representation. Unions contribute with a percentage of 85%. The Italian students perceive on the first place the government's involvement, with a share of 18%, positive aspect, then, equally, the manufacturers and unions' contribution by 25% each, and the nongovernmental organizations' involvement with a smaller percentage, of only 12%. The Portuguese respondents, as well as the Italians, consider that the government is preoccupied to respect the consumers' right to protection. 31% of them agree to this idea, following, in a

descending order, the profile NGOs (26%), the manufacturers (22%) and the unions (21%) (Figure no. 6).

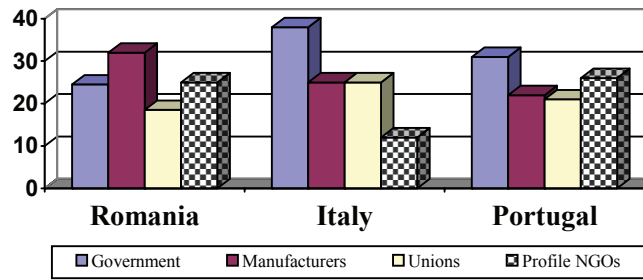


Figure no. 6: Factors involved in promoting consumers' right to protection

- Ensuring consumers' right to information by means of the mentions inscribed on the products offered on the market

Investigating the views of the respondents in the three universities involved in this project, regarding “In order to ensure the right to information, the products have inscribed: the country of origin, the producer trademark, the period of warranty and validity, potential additives used, any foreseeable risks”, a favourable aspect resulted. Almost entirely, with a share of over 90%, they found that, to ensure consumers' right to information, the products offered for sale have inscribed the country of origin, the manufacturer trademark, the warranty and validity period, the potential additives used. About 10% of them do not find any potential risks inscribed on the products.

- Respondents' attitude when they are prejudiced as consumers and the extent to which they resort to professional bodies, consumers' governmental and nongovernmental associations

After data interpretation regarding the question “If you were prejudiced in any way, as consumers, how would you respond?”, contradictory aspects resulted, in the sense that, the students interviewed in Romania, although with a decisively 85% share, assessed that they would file complaints about the situation to the professional authority and only 15% assessed that they would solve the situation amicably, or would not express their discontent at all, from the next question of the questionnaire resulted the fact that almost half of them do not know the professional authorities, the nongovernmental bodies or the consumers' associations which conduct their activity in Romania. On the other hand, the Italian students, with a 75% share, assessed that they would complain to the professional authorities, mentioning that they all knew these authorities, the most important being: Altro consumo, Adusbef, Adiconsum, Coordinamento delle associazioni per la difesa dell'ambiente e la tutela dei diritti di utenti e consumatori (CODACONS) – association which coordinates the trusteeship policies of many consumers' organizations. The Portuguese students also appraised, with an overwhelming share of 80% that they would complain about the situation to the professional authorities, the most important being: Associação Portuguesa para a defesa dos consumidores (DECO), Autoridade de Segurança Alimentar e Económica. But, only 10% of the Romanian students considered that they have filed formal complaints to the professional authorities up to know, 12% of the Italian students and 11% of the Portuguese students.

- Perception of the extent to which, in the national respondents' countries, the European Parliament and Council's Directive N°. 2001/95/CE has been implemented regarding the general safety of products

Considering the importance of the products security meant for the consumers, as a fundamental part of a socially responsible policy of consumer protection, the students were asked to answer the following question: "To which extent do you assess that your country has carried out the European Parliament and the Council's Directive N°. 2001/95/CE, regarding the general safety of products?" Analysing Romanian students' questionnaire, the perception of a deficiency in promoting this matter by the professional authorities, is still predicted.

Although the implications of the European Parliament and Council's Directive flange directly on the consumers, setting both European standards for the manufacturers regarding the criteria of assessment of products security conformity and coercive means when the current legislation is not applied, 45% of the Romanian respondents perceive, however, an implementation of the Directive to a small extent. On the other hand, 50% of the Italian respondents assessed the implementation to a very large extent (Figure no. 7). Note that none of the Italian students assessed a smaller implementation than the average level and none of the Romanians and Portuguese considered an implementation of the Directive to a very large extent. Most of the interviewed Portuguese students, 50%, assessed that the provisions are respected to a large extent, 40% to an average extent and 10% to a small extent.

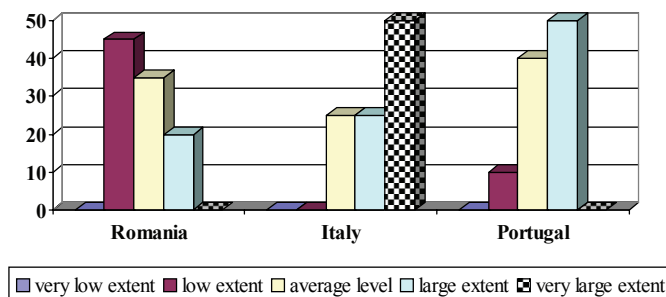


Figure no. 7: Perception on the extent of implementing the European Parliament and the European Commission - Directive no. 2001/95/CE

- The practical problems the consumer faces as a result of the free movement of goods and the elimination of intra-community border control

Analysing by comparison the interviewed people's views regarding this aspect, meaning "What practical problems do consumers face as a result of the free movement of goods and the elimination of inter-borders control?" a lack of the Romanian students' information resulted. Many of them, 40%, could not answer this question and, probably as a result of misinformation most of the respondents identified only the disadvantages of the inter-communities trade liberalization. According to them, they are reflected in a poor product safety due to smuggling, counterfeit goods, and poor quality products offered at high prices and so on. By contrast, the Italian students, in an overwhelming proportion of 90%, identified the advantages of the free movement of goods in Europe, as they assess that there are no practical problems related to the trade liberalization and the elimination of inter-communities borders control and they appreciate instead the variety of products, the

existence of a various range of prices for all social categories, and very favourably appreciate the European standards that all manufacturers must comply with. The Portuguese respondents adopted a conciliating attitude between the pro and con ideas of the analysed aspect, meaning that they presented, in equal proportions, of about 50%, both the advantages and the disadvantages emerging from inter-communities borders control elimination and trade liberalization.

Conclusions

We agree to the idea that an economic analysis can help identifying the market failures which cause real problems for consumers. In other words, a proper research can help avoiding drafting some unnecessary rules, which mean extra costs, but do not solve the problems the consumers are facing (Cseres, 2005). The conclusive interpretation of the results obtained based on the gathered data:

- the quality of domestic and imported goods and services is perceived similarly by the respondents in the three analysed countries, most of the producers not managing to satisfy fully the interviewed consumers' needs regarding the quality of the goods offered on the market;
- the degree of satisfying the social needs, under both a qualitative and a quantitative aspect, is different from country to country, remarking the diversity of perceptions, the most unfavourable situation being in Romania;
- consumption modernising programmes which incorporate the technical-scientific progress are differently perceived in the three scientifically analysed countries, resulting an opportunity for those producers who apply strategies which incorporate the latest technical-scientific researches and innovations such as trading their products to large segments of consumers less satisfied to this regard;
- ensuring consumer protection programmes by the state presents deficiencies in Romania, the state getting involved to a small extent in Romania, to an average extent in Portugal and to a large extent in Italy;
- consumption programmes educate and inform consumers differently in the three analysed countries, below the average level in Romania;
- regarding consumers' fundamental rights, these are ordered the same way, percentages differing for each one, the right to a free choice being the first and the right to petition and hearing being the last;
- the factors involved in promoting consumer right to protection are similarly perceived by the Portuguese and the Italian students. They considered that the government is primarily preoccupied to respect consumers' right to protection;
- almost all students from the three countries considered that the goods offered for sale have inscribed the country of origin, the trademark, the warrantee and validity period, the potential additives used;
- concerning the degree the consumers would resort to professional bodies if prejudiced, even if the vast majority stated they would address the professional bodies,

nongovernmental bodies or consumer associations, so far only 10% of the Romanian students, 12% of the Italian students and 11% of the Portuguese have declared that they have filed formal complaints;

- the perception of carrying out The European Parliament and the Council's Directive N° 2001/95/CE varies from one country to another, depending on the level of economic development;

- the free movement of goods has produced effects the Romanian students do not know, but the Italian and Portuguese respondents identified its advantages.

As result of data interpretation, the following measures of improving activity in the consumer protection area can be drafted, along with actions and strategies already successfully implemented, contributing to the efficiency of activity in this area:

- a better use of competitive or strategic advantages some companies hold on the Community market, in the sense of offering some products of a better and better quality related to the increasingly larger consumers' needs and exigencies;

- the need to improve the communication system among consumers and institutions contributing to applying and fulfilling consumer rights protection management;

- greater involvement of the governmental bodies in Romania in consumer protection programmes, along with improving both the promotion of the regulatory and control organizations in the consumer protection field and their actions. We appreciate that, although sometimes considerably efforts are made by the professional authorities, such as involvement in carrying out the European Parliament Directive No. 2001/95/CE regarding the general safety of products, however, due to the poor promotion of the results achieved in this direction, Romanian respondents' perception was not favourable.

- the need to widen the horizon of development of consumption programmes that educate and inform consumers.

The study was based on the United Nations guidelines on consumer protection (United Nations, 2003), analysing the way different levels of development of countries may influence the consumers' perceptions of their rights and interests protection. The results of the research, though originating from the European Commission Eurobarometer on consumer protection, do not entirely support the results of this massive research (The European Commission, 2008). One difference results from the way consumers assess their rights are being respected. While, according to the mentioned study, only 59% consider their rights are being respected, the students entirely perceive the respect for their rights, but assign different degrees of respect for each right, ranking first the right to a free choice. There are also other similar situations. Such a situation results from the comparative analysis of formal complaints filed by consumers, thus: according to the same study, 6% of the Romanians, 9% of the Italians and 6% of the Portuguese filed such a complaint. From the research conducted on students it results that 10% of the Romanians have filed formal complaints to the competent authorities so far, 12% of the Italian students and 11% of the Portuguese students. The explanation consists in the fact that, while the Eurobarometer was applied to all social categories of consumers, we targeted a highly educated segment. Comparing the results obtained from the research of the three countries with the latest Eurobarometer study, which also presents an analysis of young people at different levels of

education, the similarities are even larger. For example, 10.1% of the European students filed complaints when they encountered problems at purchase. A slight difference is noticed regarding the trust in the public authorities and in independent organizations for the protection of the consumers' rights, according to the study conducted at the European level, students having more than 2.5% trust in the independent organizations, an aspect similar to the Romanian respondents' situation, but slightly different with the Italian and Portuguese students' responses. Regarding the degree to which their rights as consumers are observed, 63.6% of the students consider that their rights are observed to a large or very large extent, being the highest percent as compared to the respondents from the other levels of education (The European Commission, 2010). The potential directions to follow in future researches may aim both at the extension of the research area, to all the EU member states, and at conducting deep interviews with the decision factors in the consumer protection area, some focus groups, to achieve an exploratory research and some conceptual models of optimising the protection of consumer rights and interests.

The performed research represents a step forward for the scientific knowledge because we investigated the students' rights and interests' perception as consumers both for theoretical, scientific and specific comprehensive procedures of domestic and international researches, and testing the hypotheses through direct quantitative research. We appreciate that only by the logical coordination of activities in the area of the protection of young people, students' rights and interests as consumers, both domestically and internationally, efficient objectives can be achieved in different national cultural contexts, using diversity valences to increase performances. By the present research a small scale pilot project has been developed, with a flexible nature, which can be extended, adapted and refined according to the specific requirements of the process analysis.

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