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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 62 (2012) 1308 – 1312

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WC-BEM 2012

Romanian consumer lifestyle and attitude towards bio products purchase

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Abstract

The “bio” trend widely spread at international level it is just starting to develop in Romania. In order to better understand the implication of “bio” phenomena it is important to shape the consumer buying behaviour. Therefore, a more thorough understanding of the consumers’ lifestyle and attitudes with respect to “bio” products is an imperative for producers and distributors of such products. In a university level survey, based on an on-line questionnaire among students it was intended to correlate the students’ knowledge and attitude towards “bio” products in connection to their lifestyle. According to the research results the bio products are perceived as being healthier, with increase protection of the environment, tastier and with a higher content and quality of nutrients. Still, the concept of “bio” product could not be well defined by the consumers. In relation to lifestyle, activities, interests and opinions were pursued with interesting conclusions. Students with medium and higher revenues are more likely to constantly read the entire product label. Persons with higher education are most susceptible of buying at least for trying the bio products. Women are more likely to buy bio products due to their opinions related to culture, future and social problems, as well as their interest concerning work, family and alimentation.

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Keywords: bio products, lifestyle, attitude, buying behaviour;

1. Introduction

The necessity of understanding and meeting consumers’ needs has resulted in a goal supported by considerable efforts in marketing. An important concept in achieving this goal is what has become a common notion nowadays, namely lifestyle. More than 70 years ago, Alfred Adler (Ansbacher, 1967) used the lifestyle construct to describe one’s personality, the unity of the personality, opinion about oneself, about common problems and his whole attitude to life and others. Recent sociologists saw it as a possible criterion for social classification, but greater recognition has received in the marketing literature, being used both as an independent and dependent variable in consumer behavior studies. The relationship between lifestyle patterns and marketing was first pointed out in 1963 by William Lazer (p. 130). The author defined these patterns as “a systems concept. It refers to the distinctive and characteristic mode of living, in its aggregate and broadest sense, of a whole society or segment thereof. It is concerned with those unique ingredients or qualities which describe the style of some culture or group, and distinguish it from others. It embodies the patterns that develop and emerge from the dynamics of living in a society”. To conclude, we can say that the consumers’ lifestyle is seen as the sum of its interactions with the

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environment (Berkman & Gilson, 1978). Formation of attitudes and of such subjective internal activities, although not necessarily observable, is definitely related to behavior. So lifestyle is the integrated system of consumers' attitudes, values, interests and opinions, but also of its own behavior. As a result, the construct has received special attention in the field of consumer behavior, along with the term psychographics. Its popularity as a basis for market segmentation can be attributed to several factors. First, the quality of motivational resorts obtained from research has proven to be very useful in understanding consumer behavior. Secondly, the generality of consumers' profiles is applicable to a wide range of goods and services. Thirdly, the conceptual framework is flexible enough to allow the use of research instruments in specific fields. Finally, the obtained profiles can be implemented, providing guidelines for developing new products or constructing promotional messages.

Lifestyle has many features, highlighted by Feldman and Theilbar (1971) in four major groups of characteristics. The first one concerns lifestyle as a group phenomenon, as a result of one's lifestyle interaction with social groups and with other individuals. The second feature indicates that lifestyle goes through different aspects of life, in the sense that the consistency of behavior may allow predicting how an individual will react in certain situations, knowing in advance the way he acted in a different situation. The third characteristic says lifestyle involves a core interest of life, given that an individual can have more interests toward family, work, religion, politics, etc. that may affect his interaction with the environment. The last feature points out that lifestyles vary according with relevant sociological variables (sex, age, religion, social class, etc.).

2. Considerations regarding Romanian market of “bio” products

In the last few years the bio phenomenon began to grow in Romania also, following trends in Western countries and USA. Thereby, equivalent terms such as bio, organic, ecologic are widely spread and used, but often without their proper meaning.

The nutritional quality is superior to regular food, containing more antioxidants, a higher level of essential minerals and higher amounts of nutrients. Also, the products in question have a high content of amino acids, vitamins and trace elements. However, organic foods are healthier than the conventional ones only if their conventional equivalent is healthy. If the reference food is harmful in any system would get all the same remains (InfoMina, 2008). And last but not least, an important benefit obtained from bio products consumption is saving and protecting the environment, as bio agriculture respects biodiversity and natural balance. If in Western Europe and overseas bio products have sparked extremely increased interest among consumers concerned about a healthy life and a natural diet, Romania is at the shy beginning of bio movement. So, the bio market in our country is during the crystallization, but it has recorded an upward trend.

Domestic bio market is driven primarily by offer, because the presence of products actually awakens the interest of consumers. Developing the market involves the change of mentality and of lifestyles, efforts to educate and inform, considering that products in question have a special character. Because of the early stage of market development, there aren't many official data about bio products and research companies have not yet made enough measurements. Still, in July-August 2010, Cult Market Research, a specialized company in social and marketing research, has conducted an independent study called “Bio products market in Romania, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It was estimated that Romanian bio market is currently about 1% of consumer goods market, located in value around 13 mil Euros, while the European average is around 4-5%.

Another study (Teodorescu, Vegheş & Roşca, 2009) aimed at consumer attitudes on environmental issues highlights relevant data, but without claim to national representation. Thus, in attitudinal terms, bio products are perceived to be more healthy, more expensive, but with a higher quality level. Also, the authors propose a consumer's profile based on research findings: women over 35, married, highly educated, with one or two children and with a family income above average.

3. Research methodology used in determining the influence of students lifestyle on buying “bio” products

The overall goal pursued by this research was measuring the implementation degree of bio concept in everyday life of individuals, the importance of lifestyle variables and how they reflect in consumer purchase behavior.

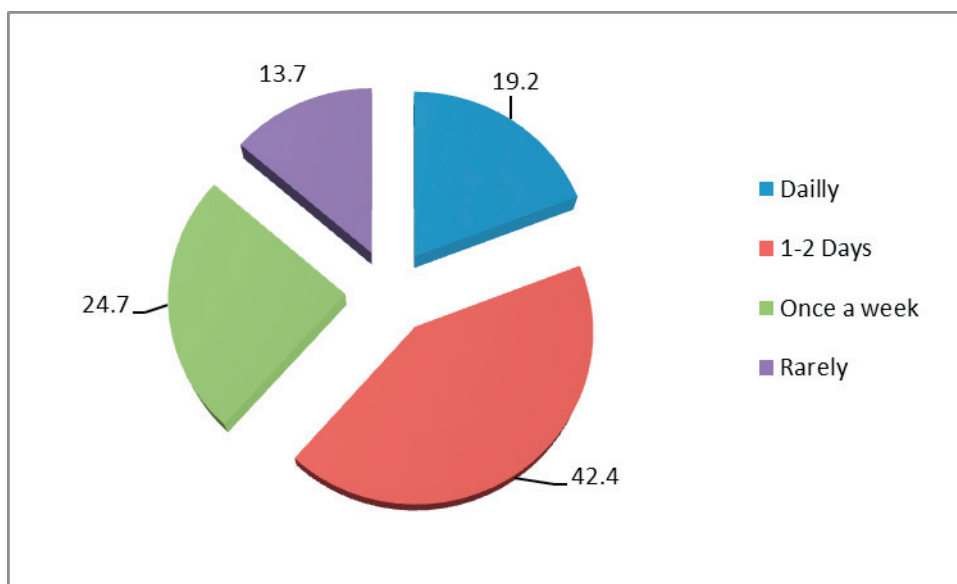
The sample includes individuals from the academic field, mainly students and professors. As the sampling method we have chosen a simple random sampling using “Isondaje” program for data collection. The questionnaires

were self-managed via Internet, after participants had received e-mails with the link. Because of different organizational restrictions and because the non-probabilistic method is subjective, it is impossible to know how representative the sample is and therefore, generalization of results in the study population is inadequate. Nevertheless, the findings outline some interesting aspects that can be used as reference points for future research.

The main research variables used were: the quality of bio consumer or non-consumer, informing degree, buying frequency, use of bio products, preferred distribution endpoints, attitude towards characteristics of bio products, the importance of activities (work, hobbies, social events, vacation, entertainment, club membership, community, shopping, sports), interests (family, home, job, community, recreation, fashion, food, media, achievements) and opinions (themselves, social issues, politics, business, economics, education, products, future, culture) and socio-demographic characteristics.

The first question was also a filter question, asking if respondents have ever consumed bio products. A percentage of 93.4 have consumed at least once bio products, while 5.4% of participants said they don't know if they both or not bio products. We can conclude that the last category has not shown any interest in bio products, paying no attention to their consumption.

In figure 1 we can see that 42.4% consume bio products every 2-3 days, which means they are periodic consumers, but not loyal. The causes of this phenomenon could be the high price of this product class or lower availability in terms of distribution. Still, it's obvious that these people would like to adopt a bio lifestyle, but they



haven't made this step yet. Heavy users represent 19.2% of respondents, while only 13.7% consume bio products once a week, situation which is rather accidental.

Figure 1. Frequency of use

Even though domestic bio market is in an early stage of development, we can say that most consumers have tried or at least have heard of ecological products, having some degree of information about them. On the other hand, few participants recognized all the characteristics of this product category (21.9%). Certification provided by an authorized body was almost 30% of the total responses, which is a worrying situation considering that it is a prerequisite for a product to be included in the bio class.

Further, consumers start to pay increasingly larger attention to purchased product labels (only 4.1% never read the product label). Moreover, those who had a bio product in the house when completing the questionnaire were around 67% of the total participants, showing that they were interested in what they were buying. Important to note is that the first among purchasing preference points are super and hypermarkets, followed by stores specialized in selling bio products. Answers to the requirement to mention other places for buying bio products shows that consumers make a major confusion between real organic goods and products bought from groceries or from domestic producers.

Table 1. Attitude towards bio products

Statement	Score
Consumption of organic products keeps us healthy.	1.52
The use of bio products contributes to environmental protection.	1.20
Bio products are tastier.	0.68
Bio products contain high quality nutrients.	1.39
The price of bio products is too high.	-0.87
Bio products contain artificial preservatives.	-1.38

In terms of attitude towards bio products, these are perceived as being healthier, as having an increased influence on environmental issues, being slightly tastier than regular products and containing superior quality nutrients. However, bio product class is considered to be too highly priced. Claim that organic products contain artificial preservatives was greeted negatively by respondents, but not so drastically. This fact can be caused by a deficiency of question wording, meaning that consumers could understand that it refers to the actual content of artificial preservatives in relation with the declared one.

In the activities under investigation (table 2), it appears that most grades have high enough values, except for three items. First in order of importance lies work, with a score of 8.6, closely followed by hobbies, indicating that most bio products consumers are active, dynamic. Vacation and entertainment are also placed at a relatively high level in the hierarchy of importance, suggesting that green people tend to have a balanced life properly allocating efforts to different activities as work and social life. A score of 7.78 corresponds to the importance given to sports, being located at an acceptable level in the hierarchy, but not quite satisfactory for some people who apply a healthy lifestyle. Last in the hierarchy of importance lies club membership (5.13), which means that respondents are indifferent and do not perceive organic lifestyle as a fashion.

Table 2. Importance given to activities, interests and opinions

Activities	Score	Interests	Score	Opinions	Score
1. Work	8.60	1. Family	9.50	1. Themselves	9.30
2. Hobbies	8.42	2. Home	9.15	2. Social issues	7.21
3. Social Events	6.54	3. Job	8.63	3. Politics	5.52
4. Vacation	8.28	4. Community	6.93	4. Business	7.00
5. Entertainment	8.02	5. Recreation	8.63	5. Economics	7.00
6. Club membership	5.13	6. Fashion	6.01	6. Education	8.78
7. Community	6.97	7. Foods	8.31	7. Products	8.05
8. Shopping	7.39	8. Media	6.90	8. Future	8.91
9. Sports	7.78	9. Achievements	9.45	9. Culture	8.39

Regarding the interests of respondents, the notes are also obtained only at the top of the scale, with values starting at note 6. First, in order of importance are placed family interests, with a close note to the maximum score (9.50). This positioning is normal, especially as people adopt a healthy lifestyle and want the same thing for their family, mainly for children. Within walking distance lies the interest on personal achievements, with a score of 9.45. Naturally, some active and dynamic people will pay attention to their personal development, trying to reach the highest goals.

Also, a score over 9 was obtained by home, showing that respondents are concerned about living in a pleasant environment, but this also, could betray in the same time, that there are interested in the opinion of nearby. Job and recreation scores achieved the same level of 8.63, which shows that have great importance in people lives. In last place was interest in fashion, whose score of 6.1 shows that it is somehow important in consumers’ minds, but it isn’t an essential factor in how their manage their lives. All of these show more clearly, that all those that declare themselves consumers of bio products, do not declared only because it is the trend.

Opinions about study variables considered obtained scores from the top of the scale, over 7, except for one item. Opinion on themselves is the most important in the consumers’ vision; it is an expected opinion from people who try to run their lives based on some strong principles. Opinions regarding future (8.91) show that it is of very high importance for the respondents; especially given that consuming organic products means taking into account the need to participate in the evolution of humanity in a way that protects the environment and provides quality products

for generations to come. Education and culture are also highly regarded for respondents who want to evolve in terms of personal achievements and to better understand mechanism of the current society and how they can intervene in its headed direction. In the opinion about politics, the respondents do not perceive it as being of much importance, placing it at a level of 5.52. However, this note could be the result of inadequate behavior of politicians and unstable situation in Romania, which impels educated people in inertia of indifference.

As far as can be seen, no variable considered when measuring the importance of activities, interests and opinions did not get a note in the middle of the scale (less than 5). Assuming that all options presented have medium, high and very high importance is hard to believe. It can therefore be said to have been more appropriate a scale with fewer steps to further reduce the tendency of respondents to pay attention only to the higher scores.

4. Conclusions

Even if the research was based on a non-probabilistic sampling procedure, making it impossible to generalize the results to the population studied, it can be used as a reference point for future research. Results reveal some interesting aspects, which are discussed below.

Although the domestic market of organic products is in early stages of development, we can say that most people have tried or heard about the products included in this category, with some degree of information about them. Also, consumers start to pay an increasingly larger attention to labels on the products they purchase.

In terms of attitude towards bio products, these are perceived as being healthier, as having an increased influence on environmental issues, being slightly tastier than regular products and containing superior quality nutrients. However, bio product class is considered to be too highly priced.

Regarding the importance given by respondents to the 9 activities presented, the results reveal that the work, hobbies, recreation and entertainment are among their preferences, and community and shopping related activities are seen as relatively important. Consumer of organic products is therefore a dynamic, active person, which emphasizes both career and the life, trying to strike a balance between the two. In the interests of consumers, family, home and personal achievements occupy a crucial role as work, leisure and food are considered as well of relatively high importance. Thus, bio consumer is a person with an active family life, concerned with physical and mental development and personal attention to how he lives his life. Opinions expressed reveals that a consumer of bio products is a person who places great emphasis on education, and wishing to know very well himself, but also understand the world he lives. Also, this type of consumer is looking towards the future, trying to adopt the attitudes required to be consistent with a good development of society they live in.

Women are the ones who put more emphasis on opinions regarding the future, culture and social issues but also interests concerning the service and food. Those who are residents of larger cities tend to place in a higher position sports and those who have average to high income places the activities to the community as the most important activity.

Besides the fact that the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire population, research has other limitations, like the fact that many respondents are graduates of colleges that intersects with marketing and research area, and also the bio phenomenon, being better informed about the field.

In conclusion, we can say that our lifestyle significantly influences buying organic products, but is necessary to conduct extensive and representative research from which local companies to start work in the information and change of mentality.

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