CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ROMANIAN CONVENIENCE MARKET

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Consumers find convenience – understood as a quick and effortless shopping and consuming processes – anywhere where providers make life easy for them, and not just in a few selected convenience channels. Seen this way, the concept of "convenience" clearly extends far beyond the food industry. Nevertheless, the present study (having both qualitative and quantitative research components) regarding the Romanian market, has concentrated on consuming processes of on-the-go consumption with food and drinks for immediate use. Findings showed that there is an obvious behavioural difference due to the social status, age, education, work place that reflects directly on the way Romanian consumers perceive the market of food and drinks on the go.

Key words: convenience, on-the-go products, consumer behaviour, convenience channels

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Convenience – an emerging complex concept

There are important driving forces impacting consumption. According to scientists in the field of economy globalization, economic situation, work models or employment along with complex social changes (demographics' dynamic, the networking phenomenon, new life styles and values, higher mobility and flexibility) are major variables influencing consumers' habits. In the same direction are acting technological progress (New Products, E-shopping) and legal aspects (like regulation, taxes etc.) or the environmental challenges (Climate, Pollution, Sustainability). Society, relations, businesses are shifting toward a new direction difficult to forecast. Researchers are trying to build possible scenarios in order to "light" the future for all domains of activities, including businesses.

The convenience mega-trend reflects the increased time pressures, stresses and work-life balance problems that consumers increasingly experience. A desire to overcome the pressures of a hectic lifestyle and free up time for leisure activities or relaxation are the main drivers for sales of goods that provide consumers with convenient solutions. Convenience is anything that is intended to save time, energy or frustration. A convenience store at a petrol station, for example, sells items that have nothing to do with gasoline/petrol, but it saves the consumer from having to go to a grocery store. "Convenience" is a very relative term and its meaning tends to change over time. What was once a convenience (*e.g.* an automobile) is today regarded as a normal part of life. Likewise today's luxuries may be perceived in the same way in the future. The convenience store is usually a small shop that typically sells drinks, magazines, and pre-packaged foods such as rice balls and lunchboxes. Also, many stores sell toiletries and cigarettes. Often, they stock daily necessities and miscellaneous goods.

Operating multiple channels, in store as well as non-store, allows a retailer to cater to the different shopping motives of its customers. Specialists in the field (Schröder, H.; Zaharia, S, 2008) revealed that most customers use only one channel within a buying process, selecting the channel that best satisfies their shopping motives (divided in five categories: "recreational orientation", "convenience orientation", "independence orientation", "delivery-related risk aversion" and "product- and payment-related risk aversion" in each situation). In the majority of the store channels examined in this study (chain stores and bakeries), single-channel users primarily look to satisfy emotional and social needs. Single-channel users of non-store channels

(catalogue and online-shop) look for convenience and strive for independence. Multi-channel users, who obtain their information from the online-shop and then make their purchase in the chain store, are combining the independence of online-shop information with the reduction of risks associated with buying products in the chain store.
An interesting approach exploring the impact on convenience (Steimuller, 2008) is transition from a "Post-Modern Times" to a "Post-Post-Modern Times" characterized by: changing values (plurality of value systems in a multiethnic society), loss of tradition, crisis of traditional institutions; networking replaces hierarchies; acceleration of all aspects of life and flexible lifestyles (plurality of lifestyles, multiple temporary relations, post-materialistic life styles, permanent search for oneself, high mobility (in work and leisure – travel, moving, Surplus of options), changing gender roles, high impacts of technology. The elderly people become Master consumers, diversity in family's types (multi-generational patchwork families, multi-parent children etc.) are also variables to take into consideration. If the old, "modern" consumption lied on unsaturated markets, mass consumption, stratification according to social status or brand loyalty, the present, "post-modern" consumption should deal with: saturated markets; individualized consumption; consumer sovereignty.

Convenience in Romania: research objectives and methodology

In order to identify convenience main features on the Romanian market a complex research was carried out. It was integrated in a cross-country survey initiated by professor Sabine Moeller (International University Schloss Reichartshausen/Germany) and included Germany and Netherland too. The research aimed at: outlining the way the concept of Convenience is perceived both by consumers and providers; identifying motives for on-the–go consumption and potential of new costumer groups. The study answers three fundamental questions: who consumes on-the-go? Where does the on-the-go consumption take place? Why does the on-the-go consumption take place?
The study on Romanian convenience Market took place in a three-stage procedure, in the form of qualitative study sections – expert interviews and focus groups – and the consumer survey as the quantitative study section. This kind of approach is always recommended when a field of research, as convenience is, is still comparatively undeveloped. The qualitative preliminary study was also used in this study to attain a deeper understanding of the subject area and thus to prepare the quantitative study section.
The interviewees were experts with a relationship to the subject of convenience and on-the-go consumption. The goal of the discussion was to bring together background knowledge from various areas and reflect this in the consumer survey. The basis of the conversations was a standardised interview guide. Questions posed included those of the understanding of convenience, the reasons for the convenience trend, and the description of a typical convenience product consumer.
The second study section of the survey consisted of focus group interviews. Questions on attitudes and buying patterns in on-the-go consumption were asked with the help of a standardised interview guide. In choosing participants, care was taken to include people from all age groups and with as varied backgrounds as possible. Following the views of experts, the aim of these talks was to observe consumers' opinions. In addition there was the opportunity to direct questions back to the participants and in this way to carry out a detailed analysis. The transcripts of the expert interviews and focus groups were screened and served as the source for the material orientation of determinants of propensity for the on-the-go consumption.
Finally, a large consumer survey represented the third study section of the survey. On the basis of a scarce literature analysis and both qualitative preliminary studies a structural equation model to account for the determinants of the propensity for on-the-go consumption was conceived and operationalised. The propensity for on-the-go consumption represented the dependent variable.

The individual variables such as propensity for on-the-go consumption or time pressure were each measured through several questions. The tool used to collect the data was the questionnaire based on the model. Most questions were measured on a 5-points Likert scale. The universe of survey was formed by all consumers of 16 years and above in Romania. The sample was compiled representative of the population with regard to age, sex and employment. The survey was carried aut via „paper and pencil" method. As the number of valid returns is less predictable with this method, the city population sample is somewhat over-represented. Data collection took place during June 25th – July 25th 2008, in both urban and rural areas. During the mentioned period 570 questionnaires were available but only 402 of them were filled-out in a valid form. Analysis was carried out by using the SPSS (version 15) software. SPSS files (with tables and graphs) were generated with each researched variable' frequency of appearance and correlations has been tested among variables.

Convenience trends on the Romanian market: research findings

By correlating qualitative and quantitative information valuable results emerged regarding Romanian consumers' preference for on-the-go consumption. Findings were grouped according to several relevant criteria: general attitude of Romanian consumer behavior related to food (time pressure for food buying and consumption and price sensitivity for food); nature of food (encompassing health orientation and enjoyment of food); planning of consumption referring to the extend of planning food consumption; premises for self-production reflecting the extend of cooking capability; nature of consumption process (encompassing the preference for social food consumption and traditional eating habits); nature of the offering (encompassing the perceived availably of products and their quality).

The concept of Convenience is rather unknown in Romania. The meaning of "on-the-go shopping and consumption" is interpreted more broadly by consumers than the providers. For Romanian consumers, convenience is anything which makes their life easier while shopping and consuming and which enables convenient on-the-go consumption. There is an enormous development potential of convenience market correlated with the country's growth rate. Two third of questioned respondents displayed a *pronounced propensity for on-the-go consumption*. The respondents' answers revealed that there is quite an equal distribution in the range that goes from the people who are always on the go to those who are not, with a slight predominance of the first category.

Due to the dynamic pace of life, people in Romania *feel the pressure of the time in their everyday living* (64.2%), more than half of the respondents confessing they rarely have time to eat their meals in peace, or at regular time lately. The stressed rhythm of Romanian working and living lives reflects also in their shopping behavior. Thus, 58% consider that in their daily shopping they avoid wasting time and energy. This can lead to the conclusion that, the decisional process of choosing one product or another has speeded up.

Romanian consumer *is quite informed about the prices* of the products and especially about the prices of the food and drinks on market. However, the price is still an important element, half of the respondents saying that they pay attention to the prices of the minor items and they compare them too. Even if attentive to price (including minor items) this does not appear to deter Romanian consumer from on-the-go consumption. When shopping for grocery products, Romanian consumers prefer in high percentage (80.1%) to acquire supplies for several days, the shopping for these products being generally made in quite hurry according to half of the respondents. Also, related to grocery products, many consumers say that they pay attention to the price (69.2%) and three quarters said that they are familiar with the prices of the groceries they usually purchase.The level of *prices is perceived as rather high* for convenience products. Thus, survey's respondents usually consider snack and food worth their price.

Another important aspect brought into light by the research results is that most Romanian consumers' *are paying attention to the potential impact on their health* of the aliments they acquire. Another important aspect is that Romanian consumers' education in what regards the nutritional characteristics, labeling and health of the aliments they acquire. Thus, more than three quarters (76%) of the interviewed persons said that it is important that the food and drinks they buy on the go are healthy and only 7.9% said that they pay no importance to this aspect. Directly connected to the importance of having healthy food and drinks on the go, the results of the study revealed that there is almost the same proportion (74.9 %) in the number of the consumers who know quite well which on the go food and drinks are healthy and which are not. Hence, the consumers who consider health of the food on the go as critical are the consumers who are also informed. However, though informed and though health of food was declared as important, it is interesting to remark that there is a lower percentage of consumers (59%) that pay attention to a balanced diet when purchasing food and drinks on the go. In reality paying attention to the nutritional facts on the label is recognized by only 53.7% of the consumers. Looking over the results of the survey above presented it may be stated that the Romanian consumer is informed about the health of the food and drinks, but this education is not sustained entirely on the knowledge of the nutritional facts of the aliments and their effects in consume. It can be considered that Romanian consumers' food education is a rather general one, developed due to mass-media's actions. Thus, Romanian people know in general which food and drinks are healthy, they know that is important that they consume healthy aliments, but they are not so informed about the components the food and drinks contain and about the effects their combination has upon their health. It is a decrease from three quarters down to almost half in the number of the informed consumers that pay attention to a balanced diet and that read nutritional facts shown on the label. With regard to health awareness' of food and drink to go, Romanian consumers *seams to fear food poisoning* more from food on-the-go than when cooking at home.

Being able to provide oneself with food anywhere he/she goes *is not perceived as increasing the sense of freedom.* Romanian consumers *do not experience jet a real joy in on-the-go consumption*. Consuming food and drinks on the go give the Romanian people a certain sense of feeling good, but still *they confess they are traditionalist*, in the sense that cooking done home is an important part of the culture in Romania (86%) and that in general, people in Romania are used to eating meals together at home (82.6%). More than that, only 9% totally agree that consuming food and drinks on the go is part of the Romanian lifestyle, while 40.5% disagree with this idea. Even though having meals at home is frequent habit, cultural acceptance of on-the-go consumption has a growing trend.

A similar phenomenon can be remarked when referring to the extent people feel *flexible in their life* because of the availability of food on the go. There are 43% who agree in a certain degree that food on the go brought flexibility in their lives, while 25.4% disagree. However, the feeling of flexibility given by food on the go seen in perspective is not as positive. Here also is registered a slight fall (-7.2%) in the number of those who perceive food on the go as opportunity to make their lives more flexible. In the survey, there are 3 queries that search for the current opinion the consumer have about food and drinks on the go, and further on search for their opinion in respect with the effects these products will have upon them in the future. The 3rd query referring to the taste of the snacks and food on the go consumers bought recently, a quite large number (62.7%) said that they tasted good, while only 12.5% disagreed this. Following the same trend as the other 2 above mentioned queries, when referring to their prediction about the taste of the future acquired on the go snacks and food, Romanian consumers tend to be less confident these products will be good. The results of the analysis show a drop from 62.7% consumers who consider that until now the food on the go tasted good, down to 45% consumers who stay positive in respect to this aspect for the future. Consequently, it has been registered a growth in the number of the consumers that feel pessimist about the taste of the future purchased food on the go, from 12.5% up to almost 22%. Looking over the results of the three above presented queries similar reactions were monitored: although a quite large number of consumers appreciate as high their frequency of buying food and drinks on the go, the flexibility brought in their lives by the possibilities of having food and drinks available on the go and the good taste of those, however the vision of their future behavior in relation to food and drinks on the go is less positive. The drop off perspective for the future of on the go products, as perceived in present by the Romanian consumers, raises questions about other factors behind the motivation of their buying.

Overall, the *decision of buying food and drinks on the go is mostly a spontaneous decision*. According to the research, only 21.2 % has not agreed this affirmation. One of the reasons may be the lack of planning the food consumption in advance. Almost half of the respondents confessed they rarely manage to plan it. The lack of food consumption planning may be also attributed to the fact that more than half of the Romanian consumers know what kinds of food and snacks are available on the go (58.2%). Also, the study showed that is rather common for Romanian consumers to purchase food or drinks along the way, rather than taking them from home, more than 67% agreeing they usually do so. Directly connected to this observation, the survey indicated a slightly higher preference for taking the drinks from home (almost 50%), rather than food (37%). When referring to their future plans for consuming further on food and drinks on the go, Romanian consumers tend to be less positive, being observed a decrease with 10% in the number of those who say they will continue to buy food and drinks along the way in the future.

Having available food and drinks on the go is certainly a thing almost half of Romanian consumers care about. However, though considered practical, convenient in respect to the number of choices offered, having food and drinks on the go is not one of the life's pleasures for them. From the *offer*'s perspective Romanian convenience scene is *less developed*, virtually two thirds of the total desire a greater selection of convenience products. The largest share of consumers prefers to buy in the supermarket and fast food restaurants. Regarding the benefits brought by the development of food and drinks on the go choosing opportunities, only 16.2% disagree that having so many possibilities to choose from is a practical and almost the same percent (16.4%) said that buying those products was not convenient. Though a wide selection of food and drinks on the go was admitted by 70.9% of the consumers, still a quite large number of consumers (63.2%) said that *they would like to have a larger selection of on the go food and drinks*. Referring to the purpose of food and drinks on the go, almost three quarters of the Romanian interviewed people considered that they are designed for easy immediate consumption. Still, considering their answers about the readiness and availability of the food on the go when they were out and about, we noticed a drop in the percentage of people who agreed that the food on the go was delivered fast and easy (58%). The conclusion is that still food and drinks on the go providers, do not offer them in the time desired and considered to be appropriate by consumers. *Satisfaction toward the taste of on-the-go snacks and food bought recently is rather high*.

When analyzing the distribution of the number of days when they are not at home, other than their commute to work, in correlation with their habits of buying drinks or food along the way, interesting distribution can be remarked. More than a half of the respondents said that they were out of home for about 1 day/week, other than their going to work. Another quarter of the interviewed persons declared that they went out in general 2 days/week. An insignificant percentage (0.04%) does not go out of home at all, other than to work. The interviewed persons that were gone from home in general 1 day/week had the lowest rate of acquisition food and drinks on the go(62%), followed surprisingly by those who are not at home almost non of the days of a week (66%). The highest percentage of food and drinks on the go buyers is that of 2days/week out of home respondents (76.6%). One may think that the 1 day/week out of home segment acquire food and drinks on the go more seldom than the other segments, since they are

out and about only one day, except for days for work. This is also the segment that buys in a higher rate grocery products for several days (84%), as compared to 2 days/week segment (74%), almost every day segment (75%), and also that tries to avoid in a higher number wasting time and energy for daily shopping. Another interesting finding is that when referring to the extent they feel the pressure of time in everyday life, 62.6 of the 1day/week out of home and 63% of 2 days/week out of home respondents declared they felt often this pressure in their everyday living. While, the largest number of those who confessed that they feel often the time stress in everyday life belongs to almost everyday out of home category (75%). People belonging to 1 day/week out of home category state, in the highest number, that their everyday working life follows a similar pattern (54.5%), while the most varying work belongs to 3-5 days/week out of home category, only 32% of them seeing their working days as following similar patterns. Also, regarding eating regular meals habit almost all days/week out of home category are those who disagree in the highest percentage this affirmation: 64.5%. There *is an obvious behavioural difference due to the social status, age, education, work place* that reflect directly on the way Romanian consumers perceive the market of food and drinks on the go. *Young people have a greater inclination for on-the-go consumption*. They are more often on the go and desire a greater selection. *Old people tend to plan more* their food consumption. They find cooking together in the family important. Old people tend to value more the style and tradition when snacking. There are both a lot of similarities (in inclination for on-the-go consumption; frequency of being on the go; food consumption planning etc.) and differences (men take less frequently something along to eat or drink from home, while women are more price-conscious) among Romanian consumers according to gender criteria. *Convenience is definitely more popular, in the city* than in the country. There are important differences in urban area compared with the rural one. In the urban areas there is a high pressure for time and eating spontaneously occur more frequently. The population in the urban area is more demanding and desires a larger selection, is more health conscious. On the contrary, people in the rural area have more time to eat in peace but, surprisingly are more satisfied with the on-the-go selection.
The study also points out that new customer groups and their main motives to buy on-the-go products. Providers can realize potential in this growing market if the needs of these new customers are fulfilled. Romanian customers form an extremely attractive target group which will certainly develop a greater taste for convenience in the course of further developments.

Conclusions

As a whole, the study is thus based on an extensive empirical procedure which uses qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The study thus enables the capture of empirically grounded statements on consumer behaviour in Romania. There is an enormous development potential of convenience market correlated with the country's growth rate. Two third of questioned respondents displayed a pronounced propensity for on-the-go consumption. They also seam to value the possibility of consuming on-the-go. The study is also pointing out new customer groups and their main motives and demands for on-the-go consumption. Romanian consumer *has irregular daily routine and commute frequently, having little time to shop and cook*. *There is rather little planning of consumption*. Romanian customer *values on-the-go products' quality*. However there is clear potential for improving the present offer's quality. Also, there is a uniform distribution of the respondents in what regards their regular working hours and lunch breaks. However, almost half consider their working days follow a similar pattern in general.
Providers can realize potential in this growing market if the needs of these new customers are fulfilled. Romanian customers form an extremely attractive target group which will certainly develop a greater taste for convenience in the course of further evolutions.

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