

THE PERCEPTION ON ECOLOGICAL PRODUCTS – A RESEARCH ON THE URBAN CONSUMER

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This paper is about the consumers of organic products. The work is important because in Romania, although consumption data show a small percentage consumption of organic products, in words it is still high. The difference consists between the definition and the perception of the concept of ecological products in respondents' eye.

This work aims to study the consumer perception of such niche products from a narrow perspective and that of products certified or not. Trying to prove that there are differences in behaviour between the two groups.

Problem arising in this field is that there are many concepts of period of environmentally-friendly. Marketing and criterion by which to do all the market report shows green products from the point of view as they are legal certificates. Only that in Romania, there are two different segments of shoppers. Those who buy green products certified and those who buy green products uncertified. These latter, which many call the peasant market supplies, are an interesting group of future investigation for this type of sale. This paper comes as a complete research done in this market and brings attention to a new variable of analysis for motivational research.

This research is an exploratory research that proposed method is very common in research of this kind. We held three focus group meetings divided by a selection questionnaire.

The first group of 7 persons included only persons who have declared that they have bought certified products and the second group of 9 persons included only people who bought uncertified products. The third group also of 9 persons included people in both categories. So we could identify what some say about others when they are face to face and also when they are not.

The results are as expected. We can say there difference between the two groups in terms of motivation choosing those types of products, the same reasons are for buyers and their family, taste and the appearance of a child in the family. However there are differences in what way those products are defined. If some consider as only those who are eco-certified, having confidence in the certification scheme more tightly, the other group has more confidence in their long term relationships with suppliers-manufacturers, and also in the taste of the products.

This research was necessary as part of a wider analysis that aims to build a model of purchase and consumption of organic products.

Listen

Read phonetically

Dictionary

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I. Introduction

Green Products form a market more and more interesting for scientific community. Started from mere observation as the man came in conflict with nature in the early 1970s, the theme was working till today many specialty studies, law and social movements. But the concept of eco-

label is hard to catch with a single study. (Bahn and Wright 2001: 51-55), (Roberts 1996:217-231)

First of all, the answer to the question what is an organic product? It is very difficult to give. There are many works to define environmental performance, durable products green, ecological services and not least for organic food. (Magdoff 2007: 109), (Ottman 1993), (Polonsky and Mintu 1995)

All these products also started as a niche market, some markets such as the food have developed representing true market segments more than 5% of the market in certain countries. But to be able to ease the development of these markets requires research methods unit. But researchers define the term differently law and her interviews with a number of restrictions and consumers understand anything by this term. This work comes from this third perspective, that of consumers. Designed on a qualitative study, research aims to analyze two types of consumer perception of organic products certified and the uncertified ones. Because marketing puts its spotlight the consumers need not the legislation, in this study we'll consider as ecological those products that consumers consider them environmental friendly and not only if there are certified as such. This paper aims to fine out the perception of the consumers, both of certified and uncertified products, have on the issue of the legal labeling, and also if there are any differences between the two opinions.

II. Literature review / previous research

In view of marketing, organic products have been defined by many authors from different perspectives. At first she appeared in the 70 marketing term ecological products were seen as products that accompanied the ecological behavior. They were simple consumer products and the way the consumer does not affect the environment. Direction of study is human behavior and ecological behavior of people. The first definition of green marketing has been made to the AMA seminar, "Ecological Marketing" in 1975 and emphasized the study of positive and negative aspects of marketing activities in terms of pollution and depletion of energy resources as well as the non-energy. This approach to analyze the degree of damage to the environment by marketing activities quickly turned into a concept that was very well defined by Mintu and Lozada as "Green marketing is the application of marketing tools to facilitate the exchange to satisfy the needs organizations and individuals, so that the environment to be protected and preserved"(Mintu and Lozada 1993:18). In this view any type of product could be green as long as the design, manufacture, distributor, use and then remove its use is taken into consideration the natural environment. This concept is defined as organic food if the product does not replace another product grown better environment in place. It cannot be considered organic grain, if it is grown in place of a piece of forest that was deforestation, or if during transportation to the consumer market for that product was consumed too much energy as fossil fuels. This concept is suitable for all categories of products from consumer goods to the durable. The concept was expanded including green buildings, green cars and other durable products.

If we talk about scientific terms should be noted and the view of some authors who say they cannot talk about green product but about greener products. (Smith 1998: XX) Any human activity affects the environment so that eventually every product is itself a part of non-organic production. Other authors have opened the front for organic food products of ecological agriculture. Chemical-free products or products provided local dispute the term of organic. The unconventional farming without plowing the earth (the polluting factor considered here is the energy necessary for plowing and excessive fragmentation of land resulting from damage while lifting texture and excessive amounts of dust.) Or biological treatment methods based on plant and crop insects that are working better then chemicals. Note that the term of organic product is multifaceted also for the scientific community. Being an important issue both for market and for consumers the authorities tried to clarify the issue. (European Commision) So they came up with

a new approach to the term. This work comes from a customer perspective as we came from the very beginning with a description of organic products as seen by them.

III. Research method

We have talked to a total of 25 people divided into three groups. Selection questionnaire included only information related to: sex, age, occupation, education level, family structure and income and if they bought in the last month any labeled organic products or eco or green as they presumed. A key objective of the study was to understand the Romanian consumer perception of organic food and their associations, including attitudes and buying motivations. Another objective of this study was to evaluate and acquire knowledge about consumer attitudes and perceptions in order to explore Romanian market opportunities for organic food and use of qualitative approaches such as focus group was considered as suitable for data collection. The three focus groups included 25 participants, grouped in buyers of: certified organic, uncertified organic products and the third group consist of people who have bought both certified and uncertified organic products.

Were considered as certified products those labeled products or certified available for sale in big chain stores, hypermarkets, supermarkets, specialized stores. Uncertified food products were "unintentional ecological" products, produced by people in rural areas. Most participants believe that demand for these products is high in most urban centers in Romania and that are more favorable than those certified. All consumers have been buyers of food products, over 18 years old, with permanent residence in Bucharest.

In the purpose of this study, buyers of organic products were defined as those who bought at least one believed organic product in the last month and depending on the type of organic product were divided into 3 categories.

Four major themes were explored:

- i) general knowledge and awareness of organic food,
- ii) associations of organic products,
- iii) the major barriers to purchasing organic food,
- iv) sources of information and the role of different stakeholders in promoting organic food.

Within these themes a number of topics were discussed such as: What is meant by the term "organic", price and willingness to pay a higher price for organic products, taste, healthy eating issues, selection of organic products confidence, the home, labeling, availability of green products, environmental concerns.

IV. Results

Participants were defined similarly organic food, especially focusing on the lack of chemicals (fertilizers or pesticides like) and the absence of artificial ingredients (such as preservatives, food additives "E's" modified organisms genetically).

Word officially designated and used by the Ministry of Agriculture is "ecologic". However, during discussions, the participants used different terms to describe them, namely "eco", "biological", "bio" and "natural". Since most organic products sold in Romania are imported, the existence of various labels explains the participants' confusion.

Examples of are products manufactured and handled using defined means of certification bodies:

"Foods that are not genetically modified"

"Grown without chemical fertilizers"

"Quality food with 100% natural ingredients"

"Farmed animal grown with bio-food"

In addition, participants have linked organic food with small scale farming systems, small traditional peasant farms. Thus this method was considered more of a "natural" food production, with lower productivity and thus with less impact on the environment.

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"From what I understand, there are certified products. I like natural foods "
"I am convinced that there uncertified organic food in the market, for example"
"My parents raise chickens and their eggs are safe to be organic because they do not give anything artificial, outside the grain"

"Why pay a high price for a product you can buy cheaply at all?"

The main benefits and barriers to buying organic food were identified.

They can be represented as positive and negative consumer associations on organic food. A joint award was recurrent consumption of organic products with a healthy diet. Some buyers of green purchasing organic products perceived as a potential way to prevent diseases such as cancer or cardiovascular disease. Encouraging children to consume ecological products was seen as an attractive opportunity to increase hope and quality of life.

"Because environmental means health ";

"I am much healthier";

"If you are really green and healthy are clear";

"Grandpas' ... environmental diet extended his life";

"Are ideal for children"

Physical defects of organic food are perceived as evidence of their authenticity, as a trusted source for organic buyers.

"I avoid products that look unnaturally good; may look for a wormy apple or a dirty carrot"

"I went and bought the ugliest leeks available there"

Discussion groups also commented about the taste and organic food.

Some have made it clear that organic products taste better and have more natural. Others could not identify any difference. Extracted significant idea was that organic products are more filling.

"Taste it shows if bio or not";

"There is not difference in taste but what you put in you"

"Eat less. Two bites you get filled."

All participants bend organic products of tradition, and in some cases of childhood nostalgia.

Participants recognized, however, that the traditional diet is not necessarily healthier.

"When you think of how much fat you eat ..."

"You lick your fingers but your cholesterol is over your head."

It was discussed in the group also the possible link between the consumption of organic products and the effect of consumer snobbery. In the group that consumed organic certified products it didn't sow such a connection: "In Romanian culture, snobbery is something else, is a strong car and a mountain villa with swimming pool. It doesn't mean a healthy diet."

Ask what they think there is a difference between those who buy organic products from stores and from fairs; they felt that there is such link. "To give so much for these products means you snob. Buy them to feel well and to have something to discuss".

Higher prices and lack of confidence in what you write on the label are the main barriers to consumption.

Organic food truly certificated as label and taste seems to be perceived as a luxury only for a narrow segment dedicated of consumers, thus creating a niche market.

"There are too expensive";

"There will always be luxury items for only part of the population";

"The problem is price. Nothing we know what we buy, if we have no money to them and give. "

"I'm not sure if I could have confidence in products labeled"

Another barrier to use would be limited diversity of products with limited distribution. These things characterize organic products market in Romania because of low demand nationwide.

"I found only some labeled products on the market, that I care for";

"There are fruits and vegetables labeled";

"You cannot find them in any store";

Were praised "locals shops" those little stores that distribute local traditional products from Sibiu. Selling what they industrialize and blend without cargo.

"There wasn't always have the same taste but that's why I trust they are natural"

In terms of information sources, there were clear differences between buyers for certified and uncertified products. This is mainly due to the different degrees of awareness of participants.

"We see ads all crap, cigarettes, alcohol, but any good products"

"Green culture should be taught in schools";

"Even if the government's task should be to worry about the health of the population, that doesn't happen to us";

"I think we are not sufficiently informed about the benefits of natural products and about what we lose by all methods of production".

The main sources of information identified were the media, some specialty publications, the Internet and major sale points such as hypermarkets.

However, all participants agreed that it feels the need for information campaigns and greater involvement on behalf of the government.

When asked about buyer profile of ecological products in Romania, buyers tended to talk about themselves and their own experiences.

Participants in all three groups have defined the green consumer in positive terms: people informed, with above average income and who can afford the money and also the time, to seek to buy such products.

Those who do not buy products labeled clearly identified two types of organic consumers:

- (i) urban consumers who buy certified organic products from hypermarkets, and
- (ii) the consumer area, which produces "unintended ecological" products for self-consume.

In their view you cannot buy in town truly organic products you buy them because there are certified and because you don't know what you buy, only the peasant for his only use produces truly organic products.

In their view "eco consumer is a woman, highly educated, concerned with health and with an income above average".

"You go and buy organic food in the store because you are educated enough to believe everything that seller tells you in the market"

"After me, the organic consumer is primarily because he has the time for this"

"Clearly there are two kinds of eco-consumers. Most are those from the country that produce only for own consumption"

Low involvement in decisions related to food has been attributed to young consumers themselves, who do not buy organic products.

"Just by accident I happened to buy bio"

Was noticed a link between greater involvement in food choices and buying organic products. This was attributed to increased involvement of self-care behavior of some health problems or small children in this household.

"In my case, I changed a lot after I was born"

"I'm selfish. I eat this food because I like to take care of me"

"Keep and age, when you get older you start to think twice about what you eat"

This research is part of a broader research that aims to build a model of buying behavior of organic products. Research tries to conceptualize and crystallize the main study variables and to examine whether the main factor segmentation consumption of certified organic and uncertified imply different behaviors in the two groups.

V. Conclusions

In conclusion we can say that both groups mainly buy organic products for their own health or the family. The consumption is being enhanced by special programs and doctors but also the appearance of a child in the family.

There is one significant difference regarding the two groups. Among those who buy certified products are considered more educated and do not trust the sellers while the second group focuses more on the direct relationship they develop with the seller – producer, having not confidence in the present certification label. These last ones focus more on product taste. They tried certified products and didn't repeat the buy because of the flavor. "I ate certified cereal tasting like wood chips".

We could say that the second group cook more, this is a conclusion extracted from the research analysis and not a variable that was followed by early research. This is a new research direction.

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