

ORGANIC FOOD BETWEEN CONSUMERS' INTEREST AND INDIFFERENCE

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The purpose of this paper was to identify several of consumers' perceptions, beliefs and actions related to organic food and also possible differences between groups of consumers. The studied variables were: interest or indifference in eating organic vs conventional food, food label information reading behaviour, perceived healthiness degree of organic food, perceived seriousness of the preference for organic food. The study revealed: an average concern for the food type (organic vs conventional: 57% of the sample declare they care what kind of food they eat); a high interest in label information (76% declared they read the food label in at least 26% of the cases when they buy food); dominant perception of organic food as a healthier option than conventional food (by 95% of the tested consumers) and as opposite to a fad (by 62% of the subjects); a statistically significant difference between men and women in terms of their appreciations (perceptions) of organic food as being healthier than conventional food ($p=.036$); a statistically significant difference between people who cared if they ate organic vs conventional food and those who didn't care in the levels of label reading frequency ($p=.000$).

Key words: *consumers, perceptions, label, organic food*

JEL classification: M31, D12

INTRODUCTION

In developed countries food has long passed the stage of being just a means for survival or pleasure and consumers tend to adopt complex behaviours related to food, where safety, health, economic and environmental concerns are present (Loizou, Michailidis&Chatzitheodoridis, 2013, pp. 918, 928). Food production, also, raises problems beyond mere production, and started to raise questions and impose solutions in relation to environmental, social and ethical aspects (Givens et al, Eds, 2008, passim). The understanding of consumer behavior related to organic food brings benefits for all three components of sustainable development: social, economic, environmental. So far, on present day market, conventional food is more convenient than ecological food for at least four reasons: conventional food products are more available (easier to be found), cheaper, already known and used (so the functional perceived risk is smaller), more

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attractive because they display more numerous varieties and are more widely and intensively promoted than ecological food products. There are only a few reasons left that are usually not found in conventional food and can push consumers towards organic food: concern for health, for the environment and animal welfare, for the conservation of traditional activities and products, interest in projecting a certain image. Studies have found that some of the most powerful reasons to buy organic food are health and environment concerns (de Magistris, Gracia, 2008, p. 942; Paul, Rana, 2012, p. 419; Pearson, Henryks, Jones, 2011, p.175; Petrescu et al (b), 2013, p. 8), but they can differ according to the type of product (Padel, Foster, 2005, p. 623-624). Of course, common food motivation forces also have impact on the purchase of organic food, such as price, availability, taste, packaging, freedom of choice, etc. (Zanoli, Naspetti, 2002, p. 652; Ward et al, 2012, p. 466-467); another influencing factor is the stage in the family life cycle, as families with small children and those whose children have moved out spend more on organic food than families with older children (Riefer, Hamm, 2011, p. 797).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper presents partial results from an extensive study on consumer perception, knowledge and behavior related to organic food. The results presented in this paper were obtained through a random survey run on persons over 18 years old from Cluj-Napoca (NW Romania), consumers of organic food. They are real or self-assumed consumers of organic food, as the first filter question asked if they have consumed organic food during the past twelve months. This means that they believe they eat organic products, but it doesn't necessarily mean this food is organic, because they might not know the real meaning of organic and because the food provider might mislead them. The sample size was 76 persons. The method used for the data collection was a face-to-face interview, the instrument was a structured questionnaire, with closed-ended and open-ended questions. The objective of the study presented here was to determine consumers' perceptions of organic food and their interest in the characteristics of the food they eat. The terms organic, ecological (eco) and bio in relation to food are used here as synonyms. The statistical analysis was carried out using the software SPSS version 21. For comparison of differences regarding an ordinal variable, between two groups, we used the Mann-Whitney U test. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to understand several of consumers' perceptions, beliefs and actions related to organic food and to identify possible differences between groups of consumers according to these variables. The studied variables were: interest or indifference in eating organic vs conventional food, food label information reading behaviour, perceived healthiness degree of organic food, perceived seriousness of the preference for organic food. The research questions for this study were: (1) How much do consumers care if the food they eat is organic or conventional?, (2) How often do consumers read the label/information on the package of the food they buy?, (3) What is consumers' perception regarding the quality of being healthier of organic food compared to conventional food?, (4) What is consumers' perception regarding the characteristic of organic food of being just another fad?, (4) Is there a difference according to gender

regarding the four previously mentioned variables on one hand and also between combinations of two of these variables on the other hand?

The sample was roughly divided in half by gender (using question/request no. 1: “Indicate your gender: a) M, b) F”), as showed in Figure no. 1.

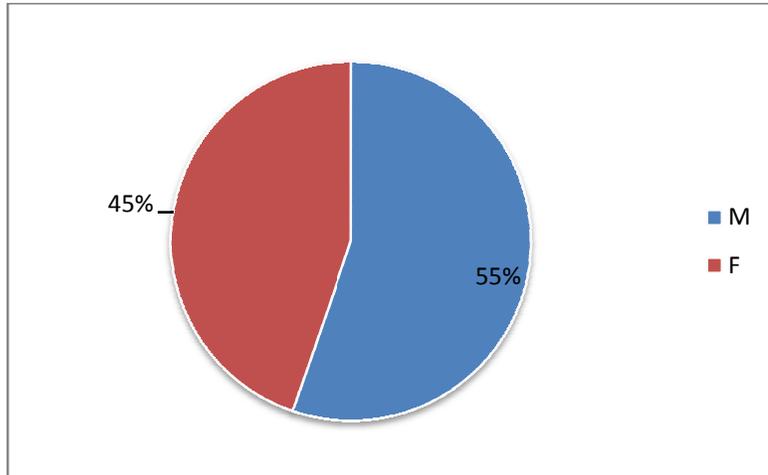


Figure no. 1. Sample structure by gender (%)
Source: authors' elaboration based on survey data

We wanted to know how much consumers care if the food they eat is organic or conventional and therefore introduced question no. 2: “How much do you care if the food you eat is organic or conventional? (conventional food = food that contains preservatives, colouring, flavouring chemicals, food additives, pesticides, chemical fertilizers etc.): a) not at all/very little b) a little c) average concern d) much e) very much” (Figure no. 2).

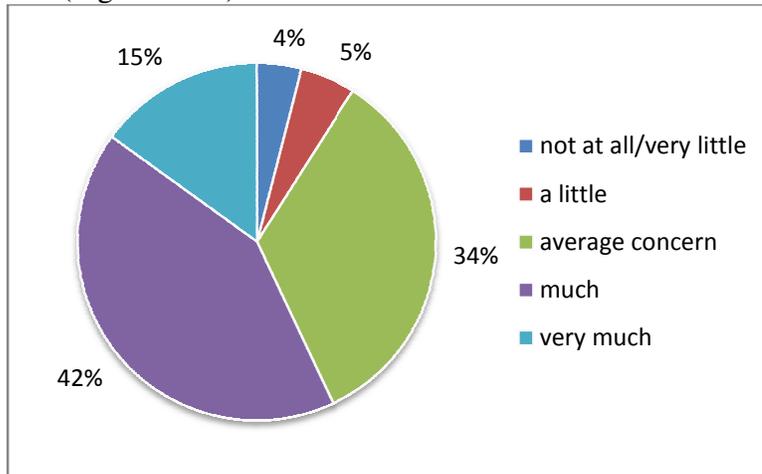


Figure no. 2. Concern for food type – organic vs conventional (%)
Source: authors' elaboration based on survey data

The interest consumers assign to type of food they eat is mainly influenced by two variables: the perceived differences between the food options and the impact that food has on issues of their concern (health, budget, image, environment etc.). Consumers'

perception of the differences between organic and convention (for healthiness characteristic) was tested by question/request no. 4 (Figure no. 6). About half of consumers (57% of the total sample) declare they care if the food is organic or conventional. This percentage should increase if we consider this aspect a key variable for changing consumption behaviour towards preference for eco food and if we see ecological food (and organic agriculture) as an important contributor to sustainable development. Moreover, the answers came only from that segment of the population that assumed they used organic food, which means that within the general population the percentage is even smaller.

We can observe also an average interest level of the whole sample by calculating a score like this: we assign a score to each level of interest (from 0 to 4), multiply it by the number of customers that had a specific level of interest and sum them up ($0*3+1*4+2*26+3*32+ 4*11=196$) and we obtained a score of 196 points out of 304 possible, which represents 65% of the maximum (ideal) score (Figure no. 3).

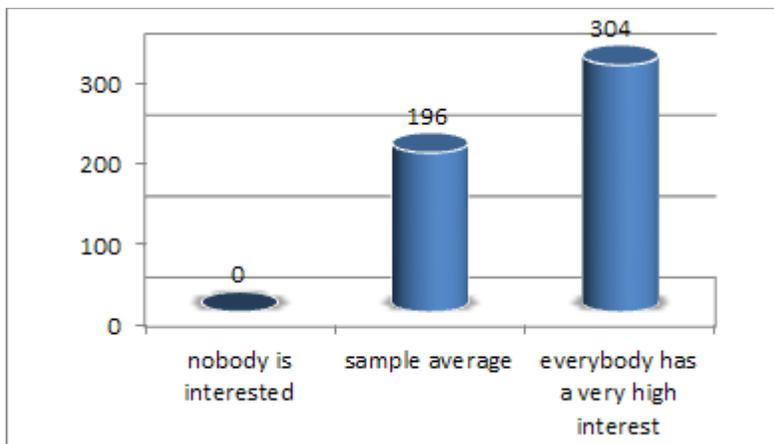


Figure no. 3. Score of sample for the interest in consuming organic or conventional food
Source: authors' elaboration based on survey data

We investigated (using Mann Whitney U test) if men and women differ in terms of their concern for the consumed food type – organic vs conventional; we obtained $p=0.144$, which means the probability value (p) is greater than .05, so the result is not significant. There is no statistically significant difference in the levels of concern for the food type (organic vs conventional) of men and women.

A concerned consumer (about the food he/she eats) should want to know more about the nature of the food he/she consumes. The easiest ways to find out more information is to read the label and ask the seller. Question no. 3 tested the label reading frequency (regardless of the type – organic/conventional): “How often do you read the label/information on the package of the food you buy: a) never b) in 1-25% of cases c) in 26-75% of cases d) in 76-100% of cases” (Figure no. 4).

