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CONSUMER PERCEPTION REGARDING CERTIFIED PRODUCTS

Abstract. The European Union initiated a scheme for product certification with three important categories: Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG). The present study aims to analyze the perception of people from Cluj-Napoca, Romania regarding certified products. Secondary objectives of the research are: to determine the socio-demographic profile of the population; consumers' knowledge related to certified products, recognition of the label and the logos of certified products; and consumer behavior in respect of certified products. A research was conducted among the population of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County (Romania) on a sample of 102 respondents using the method of convenience sampling and the questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. The results of research indicate a high level of certified products consumption. The most purchased certified products include the organic category and traditional products.

Keywords: organic products, traditional products, food attributes

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, food has become a very sensitive subject because of the risks associated to the chain of production, transport, selling and consumption and due to the need to assure the necessary food products for the entire global population. The European Union initiated a scheme for product certification with three important categories: Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG). The system protects and promotes trade names of European agricultural products and traditional food. Work of thousands of farmers and food

producers ensure the preservation and development of the European Union rural heritage. The system also guarantees consumers that they can trust labeled food providers. Once the trade name of a traditional agricultural product or foodstuff is registered under one of the three quality brands (TSG, PDO, PGI), the EU ensures that the same name is not used by other manufacturers. In the EU, there are 1,452 protected products, mostly coming from Italy, France, Spain and Germany. Romania has currently three products recognized at a European level: Sibiu Salami as a product with geographical indication (PGI), cheese from Ibănești as a product with protected designation of origin (PDO) and marmalade

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plums from Topoloveni, a product registered as a protected geographical indication. Also, according to European quality product systems, the documentation for the registration of “Novac smoked from Bârsa” (TSG) is pending analysis at the European Commission. At present, according to *Gazeta de Agricultura*, the documentation for two other Romanian products, namely “Cheese of Saveni” (Botoșani county) and “Plescoi Sausages” (Buzău county), have been submitted to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) for consideration and submission to the European Commission.

STUDIES ON CERTIFIED PRODUCTS

A study conducted in Thailand (Sangkumchaliang and Huang, 2012) with 390 respondents concluded that the main reason why people purchase organic food products is related to their expectations for healthier and environmentally friendly means of production. The main barrier to increasing the market share of organic food products is considered to be the lack of consumer information on this food category. Buyers of organic products are older and more educated than non-buyers. Padilla et al. (2007) analyzed the consumers’ preference and willingness to pay for a certified product. The study was conducted in Chile with 234 persons from cities like Santiago and Talca. The results indicated that the officially certificated quality label is the most important attribute influencing the consumers’ choice. Consumers are willing to pay more for a traditional product with a certificated quality label than for a product without one. Menapace et al. (2009) stated that the willingness to pay varies; the consumers are more willing to pay a higher price for a GI-labeled product than for a non-GI-labeled product. Also, there is a stronger willingness to pay for PDO products than for PGI products. In Serbia, Zaric et al. (2009) observed that while the promotion of traditional food is not satisfactory, the customers are willing to buy traditional products in the future. Consumers believe that home-made products have a high quality and are produced in an environmentally friendly way. The Italian consumers’ ability to recognize and distinguish the denomination of PDO and PGI origin trademarks was analyzed by Vecchio and Annunziata (2011). They concluded that PGI and PDO were the most frequently purchased products, and that consumers who did not recognize the European origin trademarks tend to buy products at a lower price.

The most important attribute chosen by respondents when distinguishing a typical product from a conventional one was the indication of origin. Bozga (2013) analyzed the Romanian consumer perception on the price of organic products. The Romanian young and middle-aged population is willing to pay extra for organic products while people well informed about organic products are not willing to do so. The main motive behind purchasing such products are health aspects. A study conducted in China by Xia and Zeng (2005) was aimed to identify consumer attitudes towards and perceptions on green-labeled milk; according to the results, the labeling logo plays an important role in enhancing the consumer knowledge of green food.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to analyze the perception of residents of Cluj-Napoca, Romania regarding certificated products. Secondary objectives of the research are:

- to determine the socio-demographic profile of the population,
- to explore the consumer knowledge of certified products, recognition of the label and the logos of certified products,
- to analyze consumer behavior in respect of certified products.

The research was conducted among the population of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County (Romania) on a sample of 102 respondents, using the method of convenience sampling and the questionnaire as an instrument for data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As regards the consumers’ socio-demographical profile, it can be stated that 76.46% of the respondents are urban residents and 23.53% come from rural areas. Of the respondents, 29.41% are male and 70.59% are female. Because most of the respondents (38.23%) are aged between 25–29, the sample consists of young people. The sample is also highly educated: 70.68% of the respondents are graduates of a bachelor’s or master’s program; 25.49% of the sample population are pupils/students while 60.78% are employees. The marital status of respondents indicates that 71.57% persons are single and 26.47% are married.

One of the objectives was to identify the respondents' level of knowledge of certified products. Generally, most consumers (50.60%) associate them with products based on traditional raw materials. For instance, the consumers associate organic food with healthiness and safety (Oroian et al., 2017; Żakowska-Biemans, 2011). The same percentage of consumers believe that these types of products are free from additives being obtained using modern techniques. A smaller percentage of 31.37% associate certified products with homemade products. The low level of awareness regarding certified products is similar to that of Greek consumers; according to Botonaki et al. (2006), this is due to inadequate product promotion and market availability.

An important issue related to the consumers' awareness is the recognizability of labels and logos. The organic product label was the most widely known (recognized by 44.12% of the respondents), followed by protected designation of origin (27.45%), protected geographic indication (29.41%), traditional specialty guaranteed (25.49%) and mountain products (29.41%).

As regards logos, the organic product logo was recognized by 58.82% of the respondents, followed by traditional specialty guaranteed (48.04%), mountain product (37.25%), and protected geographic indication (33.33%). The protected designation of origin (recognized only by 29.41% of the respondents) was the least familiar logo to the interviewees. The popularity of the organic and traditional logos can be explained by the large availability of products in the Romanian food market compared to other ones which are not so easy to find. Moreover, in Romania, the European certification process is at an early stage.

The results of this research indicate a high consumption level of certified products: 60.78% of the respondents declared to consume this type of products, while 39.22% declared they do not. The highest percentage of respondents (45.1%) buy organic products while a smaller group (16.67%) buys mountain products (Fig. 1).

The most purchased category of certified products are fruits and vegetables (42.16%), followed by milk and milk products (35.29%) and meat and meat products (34.31%), ranked nearly equally. Comparing the results with the best-selling label (organic product), it can be stated that consumers usually associate organic products with this category of food. The least preferred category of certified products are alcoholic beverages (10.78%) (Fig. 2).

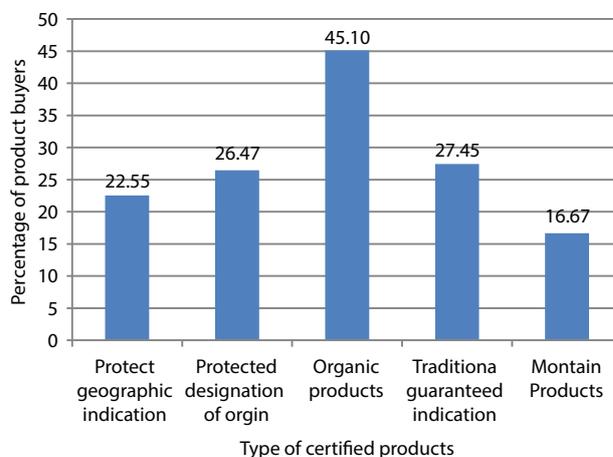


Fig. 1. Types of certified products consumed

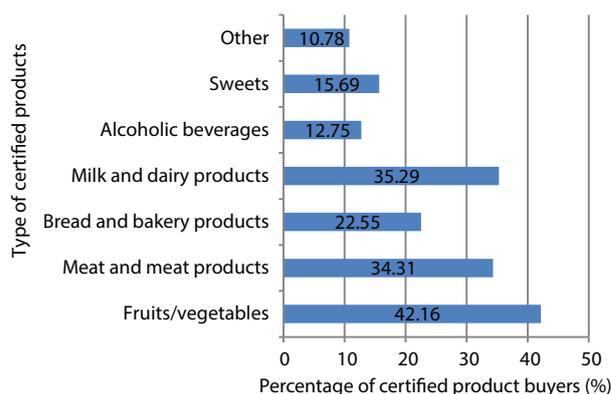


Fig. 2. Categories of certified products purchased

The frequency of purchasing certificated products is as follows: 37.25% of respondents buy fruits and vegetables weekly, 11.76% do so daily, 5.885% buy it a few times a year, 0.98% do not buy it and 2.94% do not know. For the category of meat and meat products, the highest percentage of respondents buy weekly (32.35%), 13.73% buy monthly, 6.86% do not buy, 2.94% do not know and 1.96% buy daily. In the case of bread and bakery products, 22.5% of respondents are weekly buyers, 21.57% are daily buyers, and 3.92% do not buy it at all. Milk and milk products are bought weekly by 36.27% of respondents; 7.84% are daily buyers, 5.84% are monthly buyers and 1.96% do not buy such products at all.

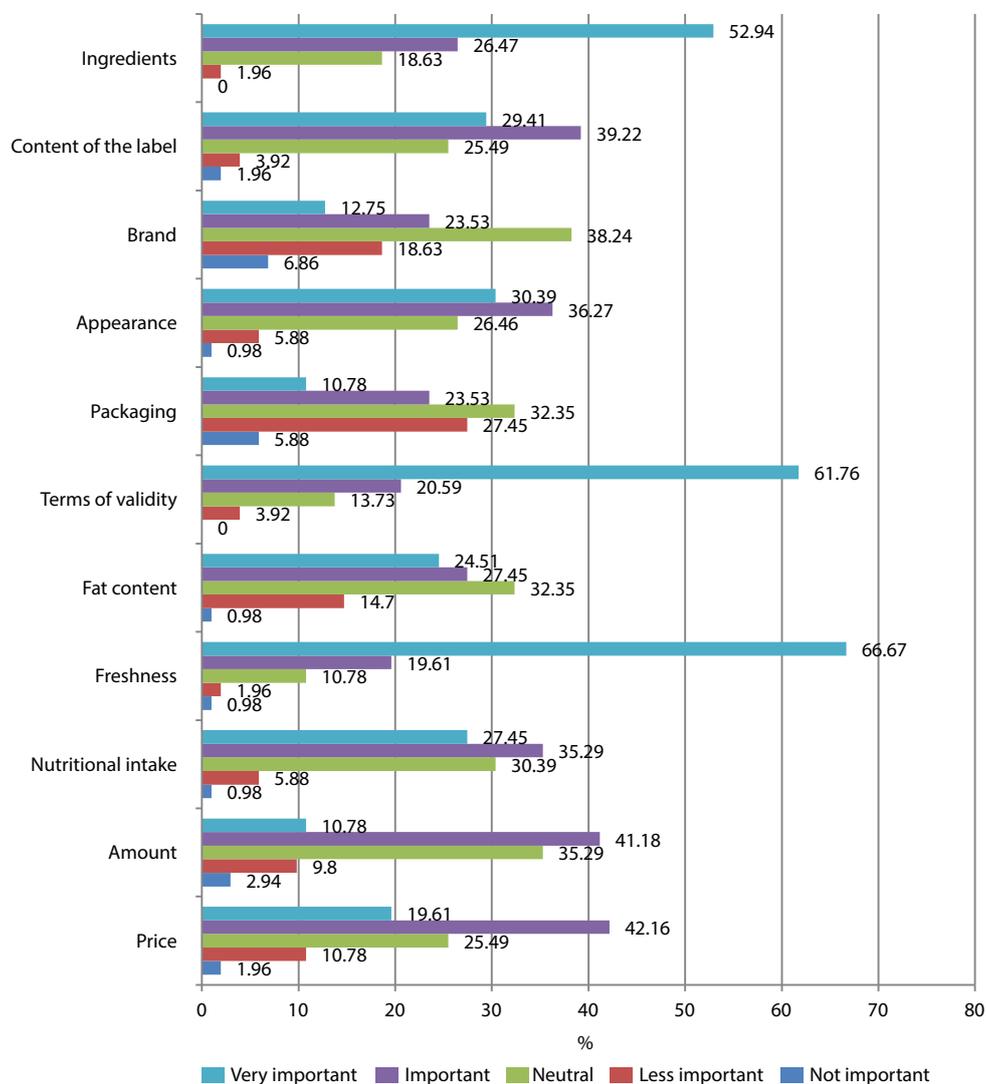


Fig. 3. Importance of attributes

Another specific objective of this research was to determine the attributes considered important for the consumers when purchasing food products. For 66.67% of the respondents, freshness is a very important attribute, followed by a short expiry date (61.76%) and ingredients used (52.94%). Extrinsic attributes of food, such as packaging and brand, are the least important ones (Fig. 3).

Another important aspect refers to places where certified products are purchased. Super- and hypermarkets are the preferred option for 39.22% of the respondents, closely followed by 35.29% of the respondents who

choose to buy at food markets. A significant percentage of 25.49% buy directly from producers, while 23.53% buy at specialized shops. The least preferred option is online shopping (5.88%). Zaric et al. (2009) obtained similar results after analyzing the Serbian market.

When analyzing the perception regarding the products' characteristics, it can be stated that the Romanian origin of the product is a very important attribute. Similar results were obtained by Aprile et al. (2010) in Italy where 96% of respondents used to purchase local products. Consumers give less importance to attributes

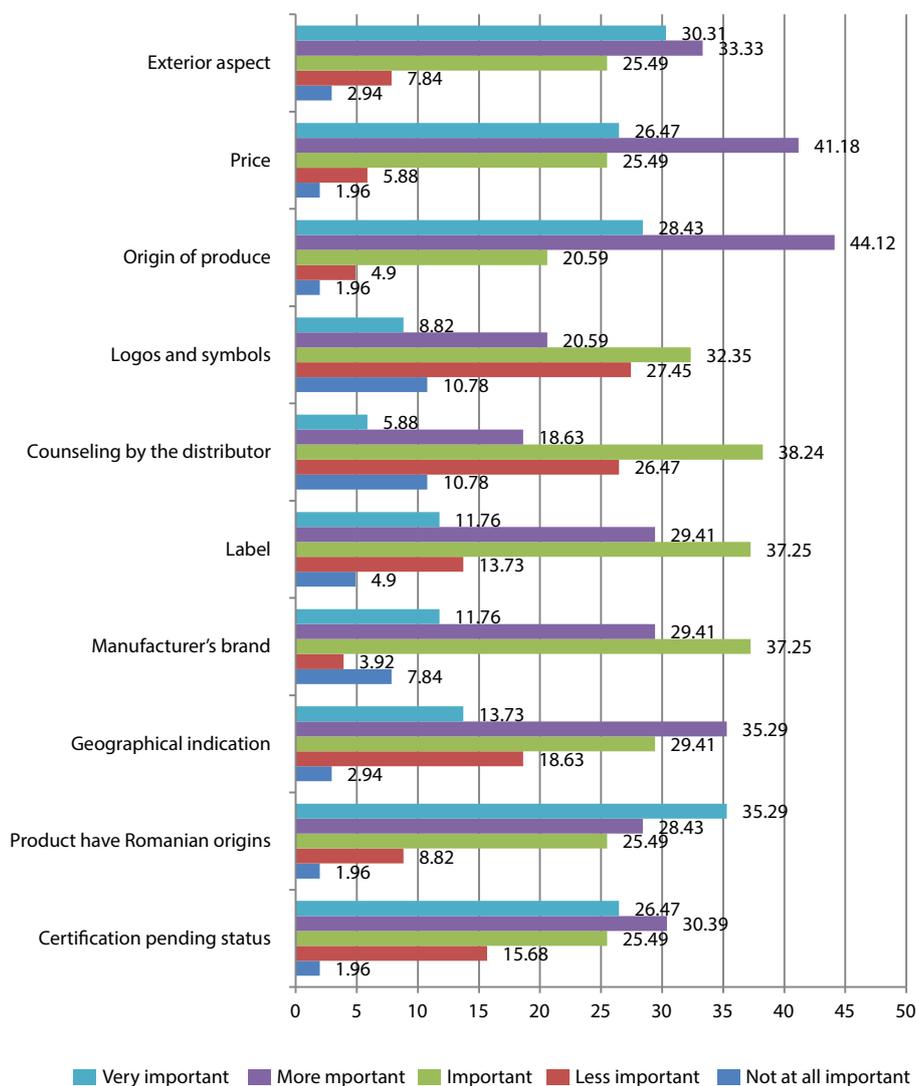


Fig. 4. Perception of product characteristics

such as “product origin” or “price,” a surprising finding given the relatively low incomes of the Romanian population compared to European Union citizens. Another interesting aspect is the Romanian consumers’ indifference towards “logos,” “counseling,” “label” and “brand”. It was quite the contrary for Chilean consumers who found quality labels to be the most important attribute which influences the buying decision (Padilla et al., 2007) (Fig. 4).

The respondents were asked about the perceived quality of certified products. Only 16.67% consider such

products to be of a high quality while 47.06% appreciate them as being of quality. Also, 33% of the respondents believe that this product category is of an average quality (Fig. 5).

The most important sources of information on certified products used by consumers are the shops (supermarkets and hypermarkets) (51.96%). For a group of 48.04%, it is a family tradition to purchase this food category. Other important sources are festivals and newspapers, while friends’ opinion and mass media are less important (Fig. 6).

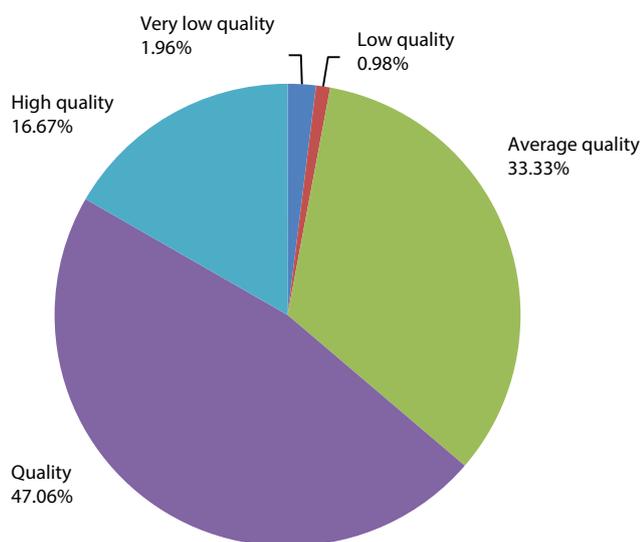


Fig. 5. Consumers' perception regarding the quality of certified products

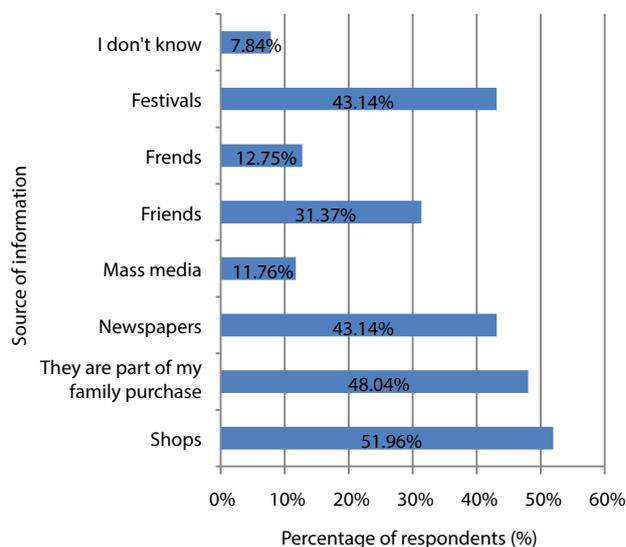


Fig. 6. Sources of information of certified products

CONCLUSIONS

At the European level, a number of product categories were developed to protect the producers and to highlight their superior quality. The most common are traditional products, geographical products, mountain products and organic products. The results of the present study indicate that in the category of certified products, organic products are the most commonly consumed ones. The reasons are related to their perceived attributes such as better nutritive values, safety and better taste compared to conventional food. The respondents find it very important for the products to be of Romanian origin which means made from local raw materials. Local food is usually fresher, more tasteful, ripe, and seasonal. Buying local food means living in tune with the seasons because not everything is available all year round. Based on the findings, it can be recommended that certified products be more promoted, mainly during fairs and festivals, in order for the consumers to become more aware of their importance among foodstuffs. The producers should focus on attributes like "Romanian products" or should indicate the place of manufacturing which, unlike logos or brands, is an important aspect for the consumers.

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PERCEPCJA KONSUMENTA DOTYCZĄCA PRODUKTÓW CERTYFIKOWANYCH

Abstrakt. Unia Europejska uruchomiła system certyfikacji produktów, w którym uwzględniono trzy ważne kategorie: chronioną nazwę pochodzenia (PDO), chronione oznaczenie geograficzne (PGI) i gwarantowaną tradycyjną specjalność (TSG). Na potrzeby niniejszego artykułu zbadano, w jaki sposób mieszkańcy Klużu-Napoki postrzegają produkty opatrzone certyfikatem. Ponadto wyznaczono następujące cele dodatkowe: ustalić społeczno-demograficzny profil badanej ludności; zbadać wiedzę konsumentów na temat produktów opatrzonych certyfikatem oraz rozpoznawalność etykiet i logo tych produktów; a także zbadać, w jaki sposób zachowują się wobec nich konsumenci. Badanie przeprowadzono wśród mieszkańców Klużu-Napoki w rumuńskim okręgu Kluż. Oparta na doborze wygodnym próba objęła 102 respondentów, przy czym dane zebrano za pomocą kwestionariusza. Wyniki badania wskazują na wysoki poziom konsumpcji produktów opatrzonych certyfikatem. Do najczęściej kupowanych produktów z tej kategorii zaliczają się artykuły ekologiczne i tradycyjne.

Słowa kluczowe: produkty ekologiczne, produkty tradycyjne, atrybuty żywności