

SUMMARY

of the doctoral thesis entitled:

RESEARCH ON THE BEHAVIOR OF ROMANIAN CONSUMERS OF AGRI-FOOD PRODUCTS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW ECONOMIC REALITIES

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Individual decisions in daily life have a much greater effect than each of us realizes. In complex systems, seemingly insignificant actions can have major and unpredictable consequences, showing how interconnected and sensitive our world is, thereby demonstrating the difficulty of accurately predicting the evolution of such systems and the necessity to consider all variables, even those that seem insignificant at first glance. Careful analysis and understanding of the factors influencing individual consumption decisions can thus result in an understanding of how agri-food chains are affected as a whole.

The turning point regarding consumption in Romania for all sectors was represented by Romania's integration into the European Union in 2007, opening up new economic and trade opportunities, and the Romanian consumer was the entity that benefited the most from this change. Access to the European common market allowed Romanian consumers to benefit from a wider range of products and services as imports of consumer goods increased, and major international commercial chains expanded their presence in the Romanian market. The transformation of consumption in Romania post-EU accession has been profound and multi-dimensional, influenced by economic, commercial, and social changes brought about by integration into the European common market. Not only access to a much wider range of products and services influenced the way consumers make choices, but also increased mobility facilitated by joining the EU, as cultural exchanges have become much more accessible. Whether it is Romanians who went abroad and came into contact with other cultures by assimilation on the spot or

European citizens who visited Romania or relocated here and brought with them cultural elements that they shared with the locals.

Economic, cultural, human, and capital exchanges have introduced international trends into the local market, transforming it irreversibly. New food products, unique recipes from international cuisines, exotic spices, and diverse diets have redefined how Romanians perceive and consume food. However, they did not adopt these novelties in their raw form; instead, they adapted them to their own tastes, traditions, and mentalities, recalibrating their food preferences in a way that is unique and specific to the local culture.

Understanding how internal factors (such as socio-demographic characteristics or psychosocial factors) and external factors (such as culture, socio-economic environment, or situational factors) impact consumption behaviors is fundamental to the study of consumer behavior and the analysis of consumption patterns.

The current thesis, titled "**RESEARCH ON THE BEHAVIOR OF ROMANIAN CONSUMERS OF AGRI-FOOD PRODUCTS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW ECONOMIC REALITIES**," aims to study consumer behavior, focusing on how the combined influences of internal and external factors generate unique consumption patterns in the Romanian market.

The five objectives of the current thesis aim to construct a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of consumer behavior, analyzing current trends and anticipating future changes by evaluating several elements:

1. **Analysis of the academic landscape and identification of works published by Romanian researchers on agri-food consumption** - This analysis will include a systematic review of the academic literature to highlight existing contributions and identify gaps in current knowledge. Articles and review materials from specialized journals will be examined to provide a solid database that supports further research. This evaluation will allow for understanding the theoretical and methodological perspectives adopted by Romanian researchers in this field and determining research trends.
2. **Determining the current context of the Romanian agri-food market and analyzing the influence of environmental factors on food consumption in Romania** - This action involves a detailed evaluation of the agri-food market, including consumption trends, consumer preferences, and market structure. Socio-economic, cultural, and demographic factors influencing Romanian consumption behavior will be analyzed. Additionally, using statistical data, the impact of various environmental variables on the population's food choices and consumption habits will be outlined.
3. The third objective is to **evaluate the degree of awareness and the importance given to sustainability by Romanian consumers**, both at the declarative level and in their practical behavior. The investigation will look at

how well Romanian consumers understand the concept of sustainability and how much they value sustainable practices in their daily lives. Through questionnaires, attitudes and behaviors related to sustainability will be measured, analyzing the discrepancies between what consumers declare and their actual actions, providing insights into the alignment of sustainable values with consumers' daily practices.

4. **Determining the environmental impact of Romanian consumer behaviors** - This stage involves evaluating the ecological footprint of consumption habits and identifying the main sources of pollution and waste associated with them. A combination of statistical data interpretation and questionnaire responses will help quantify the environmental impact of different consumption behaviors.
5. **Evaluating the interest in sustainability in the online environment by studying social platforms and media content websites** - Discussions, posts, and comments on social networks will be analyzed to understand how users perceive the concept of sustainability and how active they are in promoting it. Additionally, specialized sustainability websites and blogs will be investigated to assess the level of public information and engagement and the target audiences' response to published materials.

The research objectives constituted the central pillars in establishing the academic direction of this work and were essential in determining the structure, selection of materials, and methods used in the research, as well as in the analytical approach to the studied issue. These objectives guided the entire investigation process, ensuring that each stage of the research aligns with the proposed goals and contributes to a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the analyzed topic. From the formulation of hypotheses to the interpretation of results, the objectives were decisive in directing academic efforts and in obtaining relevant and well-founded conclusions.

Following closely the rigorous methodology required for doctoral theses and aiming to fulfill the research objectives, I have structured the present paper into two distinct sections. The first part of the thesis, consisting of two fundamental chapters, focuses on the theoretical aspects of the study of consumer behavior and provides a detailed assessment of the current state of knowledge in this field. The second part constitutes the empirical research component of the work, with a more substantial structure regarding the practical applicability of the theory, focusing on the consumption patterns of the Romanian consumer and their reactions to market dynamics.

The first chapter of the bibliographic study aims to introduce the reader to the studied topic, detailing aspects related to consumer definitions and consumption behavior in the context of modern marketing. Marketing, as a field, has evolved significantly over the decades. If at the beginning of the 1900s it predominantly focused on the market and economic indicators, today marketing, having undergone a profound

transformation, emphasizes an integrated approach to the market, the company, and the consumer.

Understanding the consumer and their defining characteristics is therefore essential, as it constitutes the starting point for the study of consumption behaviors. Throughout the consumption process, each consumer action is activated by a specific set of demographic, psychological, and behavioral characteristics, and consumer behavior, as a branch of study, analyzes how these characteristics influence the individual in the consumption decision-making process.

The decision to consume is not a random process but a well-structured one, consisting of five essential stages: need identification, market prospecting, evaluation of opportunities and consumption alternatives, purchase decision, and, finally, performance evaluation of the product or service. The duration and intensity of each stage depend on the importance and cost of the purchase for the consumer: the more significant and expensive a purchase is, the more attention the consumer will pay to the decision-making process. This chapter provides a solid theoretical basis for the subsequent chapters and the practical application of the concepts discussed in the second part, ensuring a comprehensive and well-founded approach to the subject.

If in the first chapter we learn who the consumer is, what consumption behavior is, and how the purchase process unfolds from the formation of the idea to the performance evaluation, in **the second chapter** the factors that influence all stages of this process and how their action determines attitudes and behaviors are studied. This chapter starts from how internal factors affect behaviors, value systems, and individual processes, demographic characteristics, along with psychosocial ones, form the basis upon which preferences and consumption habits are built. Demography, including age, gender, education level, and income, plays a crucial role in shaping purchasing behavior, and psychosociology, which analyzes social, cultural, and emotional influences, completes this picture, offering a complex perspective on how people make consumption decisions.

Next, the chapter explores the external factors that influence consumption behavior, such as the influences of social groups around the individual, cultural elements, situational factors, marketing strategies, and economic influences. It will analyze how globalization and access to information have changed market dynamics and created more informed and demanding consumers. Additionally, it will examine how advertising and product promotion influence consumer perceptions and choices. In conclusion, the second chapter will provide an in-depth understanding of the complex interactions between various internal and external factors and their impact on consumption behavior. This analysis will be grounded in our case study and empirical data, highlighting not only theoretically but also practically how consumption behaviors are formed and changed in the current context.

Each of the elements presented in these first two chapters of the thesis represents key, interdependent pieces that contribute to the efficient functioning of marketing.

Therefore, the analysis of consumer behavior and influencing factors are fundamental aspects of any successful marketing strategy.

In **the third chapter**, the transition to the practical section of this work is made. This chapter aims to deepen the objectives of the work, describe the research materials and methods, and how the work topic is approached. The intention behind this work is that the obtained results will contribute to the development of an agri-food sector adapted to contemporary needs and expectations, providing valuable information for industry actors, policymakers, and the academic community. Following the preliminary analysis of academic sources and the observed discussion topics around food consumption, I decided that the approach to researching consumption behavior in this work should explicitly include the sustainability component. This is a dimension of major importance, reflecting current trends not only globally but also nationally and locally, and the results of sustainable behavior in the long term are predominantly positive for the environment and society. To effectively achieve the research objectives, three main tools were used:

- **Bibliometric Analysis:** conducted to evaluate and synthesize the relevant academic literature, identifying trends, gaps, and essential contributions in the field of agri-food product consumer behavior. Through this method, we were able to obtain an overview of existing studies and contextualize our research within the current scientific landscape.
- **Online and Face-to-Face Questionnaires:** These generated a solid database, consisting of 509 valid responses, representative of the adult population of Romania. The questionnaires were designed to collect detailed information on the sustainability of consumer attitudes and behaviors regarding agri-food products. The mixed methodology of applying the questionnaires, both online and face-to-face, ensured the diversity and representativeness of the sample.
- **Netnographic Analysis:** This involved examining articles from the online media environment and social media interactions. The aim was to understand the emerging discussions and trends related to sustainable food consumption and to observe consumer behaviors and attitudes in the digital environment. The netnographic analysis allowed us to capture the nuances and real dynamics of consumer dialogues and reactions, thus providing a deep insight into the subject.

Complementary to the information collected through the questionnaires, two online monitoring platforms, Mediaboard and Sentione, were used for the netnographic analysis to gather elements of online dialogue. Additionally, secondary data sources included the National Institute of Statistics, European statistical databases – EUROSTAT, and statistical information from prestigious institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, and The Economist.

By integrating the data and results obtained from these methods, the thesis succeeds in outlining a detailed and nuanced picture of the factors influencing Romanian consumers' decisions, with a special emphasis on the sustainability component.

Chapter four explores the behavior of Romanian consumers of agri-food products in light of new economic and socio-political realities, structuring the analysis into a series of interconnected subchapters. In the first part, the evaluation of the academic context is carried out through a detailed bibliometric analysis of the specialized literature, identifying the main trends and gaps in existing research.

The starting point in the bibliometric analysis was the extraction of relevant articles for the topic of this thesis from the SCOPUS database, using a series of criteria detailed in the subchapter. This selection generated a database with 3926 academic articles, which were subsequently analyzed based on relevance, impact in the academic sector, and addressed themes. This analysis revealed that the Romanian academic community has produced a substantial collection of materials in the field, addressing the topic in a complex manner, but predominantly from a conceptual and theoretical perspective or through practical studies conducted on modest sample sizes. In addition to existing materials related to Romania, the current thesis brings as a novelty the fact that it represents the first practical study focused on sustainable consumption conducted post-pandemic on a considerable sample. This aspect provides a unique and updated perspective on the consumption behavior of Romanians, significantly contributing to the specialized literature and providing valuable data for future research and public policies.

Furthermore, the analysis of the socio-economic context and the consumption of agri-food products in Romania details how socio-economic variables influence consumption habits. This includes a detailed examination of agri-food consumption, based on information collected at the national level by the National Institute of Statistics (INSSE). The analysis will compare the local context with the situation at the European level, highlighting differences and similarities in consumption behavior. An important aspect of the analysis is evaluating how estimates of the necessity for a decent living in Romania are covered by the population's financial availability. It will analyze whether Romanian households' incomes are sufficient to cover the costs associated with a decent living standard, considering food product prices and average consumption expenses. This evaluation will provide a clear picture of the accessibility of basic products for different population segments and identify potential economic disparities. Additionally, an important aspect of this chapter is analyzing how the agri-food market has responded to major global impact events, such as the pandemic context and geopolitical disturbances at the border. These events have highlighted the necessity of creating a sustainable agri-food supply chain, preferably as short as possible and with a high degree of self-sufficiency, to reduce the negative impact of such crises. The COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine have highlighted existing vulnerabilities in agri-food supply chains, demonstrating how quickly the flow of essential products can be

disrupted. The analysis will include an evaluation of how these events affected the availability and prices of agri-food products, as well as the capacity of local producers to respond to these challenges. It will also examine the impact on consumers, who faced price fluctuations and food product availability issues. Measures such as diversification strategies of supply sources, investments in local infrastructure, and promotion of local products support the consolidation of self-sufficiency and reduction of import dependency, making the Romanian agri-food market more robust and capable of more effectively handling future crises. This holistic approach will contribute to formulating efficient strategies and policies aimed at supporting the development of a sustainable and resilient agri-food chain, capable of ensuring food security during periods of global instability.

The chapter continues with a study of Romanian consumers' perceptions of responsible food consumption. In this regard, a point system was created to evaluate the sustainability of consumption behaviors, with each consumer being assessed based on a sum of their consumption behaviors. A high score indicates wasteful behavior, characterized by frequent in-person shopping from various places, rare cooking, and frequent dining out or ordering from restaurants. Conversely, a low score reflects frugal behavior with high sustainability values. The analysis highlighted the influence and importance of socio-demographic characteristics in sustainable consumption behaviors. It was found that the sustainability of behaviors varies significantly by generation; as people age, the tendency to adopt more sustainable consumption increases. There was no direct link identified between the level of education and the sustainability of behaviors, but family structure significantly impacts consumption sustainability. Families with children have higher scores than those without children, and single parents with young children exhibit the highest scores, due to the demands of the children and the need to constantly provide fresh and varied food. Differences between declared attitudes and actual consumer behaviors are also explored by comparing behavior scores with the quantities of food declared as wasted, considering the respondents' socio-demographic aspects. Often, although behaviorally there is no indication of wasteful tendencies, declarations about quantities contradict the behavioral score. The most aligned segment in the behavior score/declared quantities ratio is that of students, who record high scores for wasteful behaviors and declare significant quantities of discarded food. This correlation indicates a pronounced tendency among students to exhibit less sustainable behaviors, directly reflecting a high level of food waste. This population segment is often characterized by a hectic lifestyle, a lack of time for cooking, and a preference for convenience, leading to frequent purchases of food products and, implicitly, higher waste. A detailed analysis of this group reveals that factors such as variable schedules, lack of experience in managing food resources, and access to quick food alternatives significantly contribute to this behavior. Another component of the analysis was studying how guilt influences attitudes towards food waste. This analysis provides valuable insights into the motivations and barriers to

sustainable behaviors, considering the transgenerational education component received on this topic and how it influences current consumption behavior.

In the subchapter dedicated to food waste analysis, the work examines the quantities of food wasted across different product categories and their short- and medium-term environmental impact. Starting from the calculation of greenhouse gas emissions for the main consumed foods, we determine the emissions associated with individual monthly and annual consumption. Subsequently, applying the declared waste percentages by food categories, we estimate the greenhouse gas emission values associated with food waste, thus determining its environmental impact.

The analysis also includes forecasting future consumption and food waste trends, and proposing solutions to align agri-food product consumption with sustainable development goals. It highlights the need to develop strategies to reduce food waste, such as educating consumers about meal planning and efficient resource management, as well as encouraging recycling and composting practices. Furthermore, the work emphasizes the essential role of the Romanian consumer as the key link in promoting sustainable consumption in the medium and long term. Achieving sustainability goals requires a profound change in individual behaviors, supported by effective public policies.

This holistic approach not only provides a detailed picture of the environmental impact of food waste but also underscores the importance of concerted action to promote responsible and sustainable consumption. Thus, it creates a solid foundation for developing policies and strategies that support the transition to a more sustainable agri-food system in Romania.

The chapter concludes with a netnographic analysis of social attitudes towards sustainable consumption, exploring discussions and interactions in the online environment. This analysis offers a comprehensive view of social perceptions and behaviors in the digital context, contributing to understanding how sustainable attitudes are formed and propagated. Our study found that interest in sustainability is growing online, both from the perspective of generated informative materials and the interest shown by the general public. The analysis is based on the examination of a total of approximately 23.500 articles and mentions in social media, collected from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2023.

We observe a clear interest resulting from frequent interactions with content focused on sustainable food consumption. Additionally, online dialogue predominantly centers around local products, an attitude that has gained popularity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This interest is followed by concerns for food safety, product labels, and healthy eating. Trends revealed by the netnographic analysis highlight an increasing orientation towards responsible and sustainable consumption, reflecting a deeper awareness of the impact of food choices on the environment and health. By conducting this type of analysis, the chapter provides valuable conclusions about how sustainable attitudes are formed and spread in the digital environment. It also

emphasizes the importance of continuing efforts to educate and inform the public through all available media to support and amplify the positive trends identified. It can be said that the analysis offers a starting point for developing communication and intervention strategies that promote more sustainable consumption among Romanian consumers, thus contributing to achieving sustainable development goals.

Through all these examinations, chapter four provides a deep understanding of the factors influencing the sustainability of food consumption in Romania and emphasizes the need for well-thought-out interventions to promote more responsible and eco-friendly consumption practices among Romanian consumers.

Finally, **chapter five** synthesizes the results obtained throughout the work and offers a set of recommendations to support sustainable attitudes and behaviors. It is necessary to implement concrete measures to encourage sustainable behaviors, such as public policies that support the production and consumption of local products, consumer education campaigns about the impact of food waste and the benefits of responsible consumption, as well as financial incentives for adopting sustainable practices. Additionally, developing appropriate infrastructure for efficient food waste management and promoting recycling and composting is essential. However, the importance of collaboration between the public and private sectors must be emphasized, as it is vital to create a favorable framework for sustainability and ensure a long-term positive impact. Moreover, education and public awareness play a fundamental role in changing consumption behaviors. It is imperative to invest in educational programs that form and strengthen knowledge about sustainability, from school levels to local communities. Raising awareness among young people and involving them in volunteer activities and ecological projects can have a lasting effect on the consumption behavior of future generations.