

THE PREVALENCE OF EMOTIONAL CRITERIA IN FOOD CHOICE - THE MAIN SOURCE OF IMBALANCE IN THE EATING BEHAVIOUR OF THE YOUNG CONSUMERS FROM ROMANIA

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Abstract

Analyzing how individuals, in their hypothesis of foodstuff's consumer, use their psychological endowment, consisting of both rational and non-rational components, to make choices, we can distinguish two main and relatively antagonistic typologies: a traditional consumer and a new consumer. We observe at the traditional consumer a preponderant reflexive attitude that affirms the supremacy of thinking in using the components of endowment, because his perception of food quality is decisively influenced by technical aspects, generally measurable through objective methods. On the opposite, the new consumer appears to be completely seduced by the sensory dimension in assessing the foods' quality, a situation that reveals the supremacy of sensation or sensory perception on thought. Being the palate slaves, young consumers believe that a tasty foodstuff which is also good looking, has implicitly a good quality. But, considering that the most part of the industrial food supply on the market is represented by ultra-processed and sensory improved products, which most often has a profoundly unbalanced nutritional profile, it is obvious why the behaviour of the new generation of consumers is marked by many errors and imbalances. Having the aims to highlight the main characteristics of food behaviour among the new generation of consumers in Romania and to determine the rational and emotional criteria that guide their foods' selection, we conducted a marketing research, based on the method of the selective survey. The information was collected using a structured questionnaire, applied to a sample of 678 respondents, between 18-35 years old, selected by non-proportional random layered sampling.

Keywords

Alimentary behaviour, new generation of consumers, cognitive reactions, emotional reactions, marketing research

JEL Classification

D91; D12

Introduction

In the analytical psychology, it's widely accepted the idea according to which the human knowledge does not start from an absolutely empty place or a tabula rasa, but from certain

premises, embodied in the information which psychic mechanisms operate with. It is therefore obvious that its evolution will depend equally on the quantity and quality of these premises, whose influence can be both favourable and unfavourable (Zlate, 2006). Analysing the opinions expressed by the most important analytical psychologists, we have noticed that they assumed that all people possess the same psychological endowments through which they perceive what is happening outside and within them, formulate opinions on all of these, and decide how to respond to events as they happen.

Carl Gustav Jung (2004), in developing the famous model of the eight psychological types, shows that the endowment consists of *four psychological functions: sensation, thinking, feeling and intuition*.

The sensation, meaning the perception through senses or sensory perception, says that something exists. The thinking says what exactly is something. The feeling used to make judgments about the inner and outer events tells whether something is pleasant or not, and because it involves an evaluation in the light of the past experience, thus it can be considered a rational process. The intuition tells where it comes from or where something is going on. Thinking and feeling are considered rational functions, while feeling and intuition are non-rational functions. Considering the use of endowment's components, what distinguishes people from each other is that function out of the four that they use preferentially (Jung, 2004; Stevens, 1994).

Analysing the manner in which the individuals, in their hypostasis of food consumers, use their psychological endowment to make choices, we can distinguish between a *traditional consumer* and a *new type of consumer*.

We observe at the traditional consumer a reflexive behavior that affirms the supremacy of thinking in using the components of endowment, because his perception of quality is decisively influenced by the technical aspects, materialized in chemical composition, nutritional value and innocuity, the product's sensorial aspect remaining in the second plan. This approach is the result of knowledge and information gained successively through education and settled through personal experience (Popescu et al., 2010; Negrea and Voinea, 2013; Bobe and Popescu, 2015).

Unlike the traditional consumers, we observe that, in general, the exponents of the new generation of consumers are seduced by the sensory dimension in assessing the quality of the foodstuff. This situation, which reveals the supremacy of sensation or sensory perception on thought, can be explained by the fact that the new consumer has formed his eating habits in the period of the maximum boost of the food industry and he is generally accustomed to consume the ultra-processed and sensory improved products, but most often with a profoundly unbalanced nutritional profile, created by the modern food industry (Bobe and Procopie, 2011; Voinea, 2013). Having the images of such products stored in memory, the new consumer's possibility of knowing, which requires, as Carl Gustav Jung (1994; 2006) claimed, the comparison between the perceived images of the food product with those from memory, is obviously more limited. This may explain the new consumer's predilection to render absolute the role of sensory properties in perceiving the quality of the food products and to neglect or even disregard the nutritional properties (Negrea and Voinea, 2010; Popescu et al., 2011). This is one of the common findings of many international studies aiming to identify the decisive factors in guiding the food choice of young people. These studies have showed that the taste is the characteristic which has the critical role and also that in the process of changing the food consumption behavior, the young people are less willing to make compromise on taste (George and McDuffie, 2008, Louis et al., 2007, Davis and Carpenter, 2009). Therefore, it can be said that the exponents of the new generation of consumers are palate slaves, considering that a tasty foodstuff, which is also good looking, it has mandatory a good quality (Onete et al., 2014, Popescu et al., 2015; Voinea et al., 2015).

Another explanation for the young consumer's preference for industrial, refined foods rich in saturated fats and sugar is the mental association of this eating behavior with the idea of independence and fun with friends, while eating healthy foods is associated with the parents' control (Beasley et al., 2004).

Based on all the above assertions, the fact that in the selection of foods the emotional criteria prevail over the rational ones, it can be a plausible explanation for the imbalance that characterizes the eating behaviour of young consumers. In this respect, our research, having the main aim to study the main aspects of food behaviour among the new generation of consumers in Romania, also highlights the rational and emotional reasons that lead young people to adopt the eating style.

Methods

The **purpose** of the present marketing research was to study the main characteristics of food behaviour among the new generation of consumers in Romania. The direct research carried out was quantitative in nature, using the selective survey **method**.

Research **objectives** focused on the following dimensions of the problem investigated:

To identify the extent to which young Romanian consumers have concerns about healthy eating;

To understand the content of the image that the concept of healthy nutrition has among the new generation of consumers in Romania;

To determine the rational and emotional reasons that cause difficulties for young Romanian consumers in adopting a healthy food style;

To find out the degree of trust that the new generation of consumers have towards different sources of information on healthy eating;

To identify the rational and emotional criteria underlying the selection of food products by young consumers as well as the relative importance they hold in the buying decision process;

To explain the healthy and unhealthy eating habits of the new generation of consumers in Romania.

The **target population of the research** was made up of people aged 18-35 from Romania, so that both the observation unit and the survey unit were represented by the individual.

The information was collected using a **structured questionnaire**, applied to a **sample of 678 respondents**, selected by **non-proportional random layered sampling**. Layers were based on demographic variables, including sex, geographic region, and income.

The sample consisted of 43% men and 57% women, 94.21% of urban areas, distributed by geographical regions as follows: Bucharest: 55.4%, Muntenia: 24.2%, Moldova: 8.2%, Oltenia: 6.4%, Dobrogea: 4.3%, Ardeal: 1.4% and Banat-Crişana-Maramureş: 0.3%. Regarding household net monthly income, the structure of the sample was as follows: below 1000 RON: 16.1%; 1001 - 2000 RON: 32.4%; 2001-3500 RON: 35.7%; 3501 - 5000 RON: 12% and over 5000 RON: 3%.

Results

Regarding the concern *to have a healthy diet*, the majority of respondents said they are concerned about this issue to a high degree (49.4%). In the proportion of 26.5%, the respondents are indifferent to a healthy diet. Another 16.1% of the respondents said that they are concerned about having a healthy diet. Around 8% of respondents are not concerned about this problem (6.5% are concerned about a low level, and 1.5% to a very low degree).

When they was asked *to choose from a range of variants on those that best illustrate a healthy diet* (Figure 1), the respondents answered as follows: keep the main meals of the day - 35.1%; Consume at least one hot meal per day - 17.6%; keep a diet to lose weight - 5.6%; I

count the calories permanently so I do not get fat - 3.4%; I assure myself the daily needs of nutrients from a variety of healthy foods - 27.1%; I eat what I like - 10.7%.

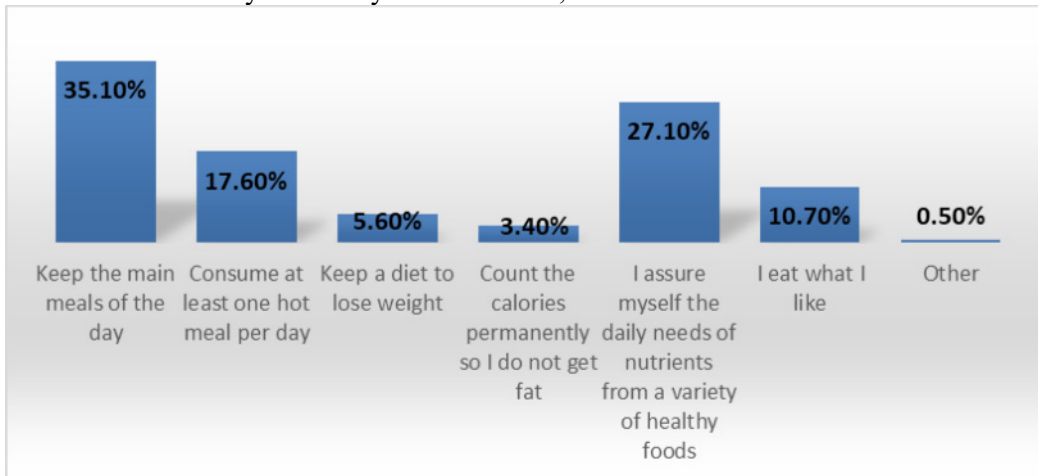


Fig. no. 1 Behaviour related to a healthy diet

The answers show that consumers generally associate healthy eating with respect to the three main meals of the day and the consumption of a variety of foods to ensure trophic requirements. However, the results show that 1 in 10 respondents believe that having a healthy diet means eating just what you like.

On request to enumerate *the reasons why they think they can not have a healthy diet* (Figure 2), most respondents claim the lack of time (28.2%). In a ratio of 25.9%, respondents believe that raw materials are generally polluted or genetically modified, and processed foods contain food additives, which prevents them from having a balanced diet. In a ratio of 14%, respondents have reasoned that they can not have a healthy diet because healthy foods are too expensive. Approximately 10% of respondents say they can not have a healthy diet because they do not have the necessary expertise. It is important to note that around 21% of respondents said they consume only the foods they like without being interested in their health consequences (8.0% say they consume only the foods they like and 12.9% say that I can not give up to the foods I like, though I know most are not healthy).

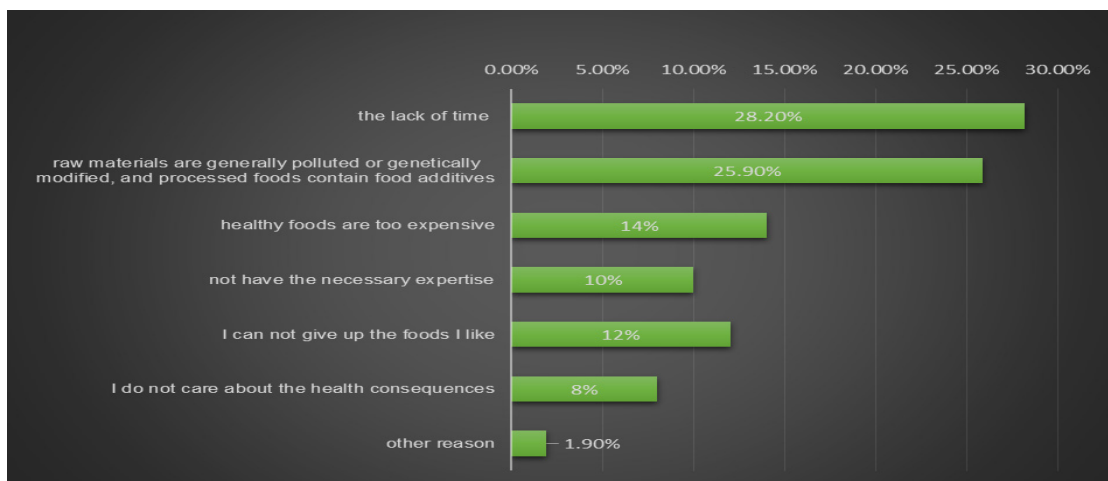


Fig. no. 2 The reasons why they think they can not have a healthy diet

As regards the respondents' confidence in various sources of information on healthy eating, on average, the results are as follows: information from the food label - 3,475; specialized shows on TV or radio - 3,211; Internet (sites, blogs, forums, social networking sites) - 3,379; various publications - 3,178; family and / or friends - 3,878; family doctor / specialist - 4,174; other sources (listed by respondents: nutrition blogs, books, personal knowledge, nutritionist, people working in the field, product price, professors, seller recommendations, specialty magazines, traditions) - 2,793. (See Figure 3)

We note that although the health care system in Romania has numerous dysfunctions, which are reflected in the quality of the medical services provided, however, the consumers who participated in the research have the highest trust in the family doctor or the specialist. On the second place, as a trust level, is family and / or friends, and on third place are the information from the food label.

It should be noted that the Internet (sites, blogs, forums and social networking sites) is ranked fourth as a level of trust, before broadcasting on TV or radio. This result confirms a series of previous research, both nationally and internationally, which shows that, in present, among the current generation of consumers is now obvious the trend of increasing confidence in the online content generated by their peers, with whom they interact in virtual environment (blogs, forums, review sites, social networking sites, etc.).

Young people are generally characterized by Internet addiction, the information environment that enjoys growing confidence from them, and from which they obtain the information that guides their purchasing decision. This trend is explained by the fact that the online environment is the one that gives young consumers the complete freedom to find the information most relevant to themselves, even if the selection of this information is not always done correctly, rationally / objectively.

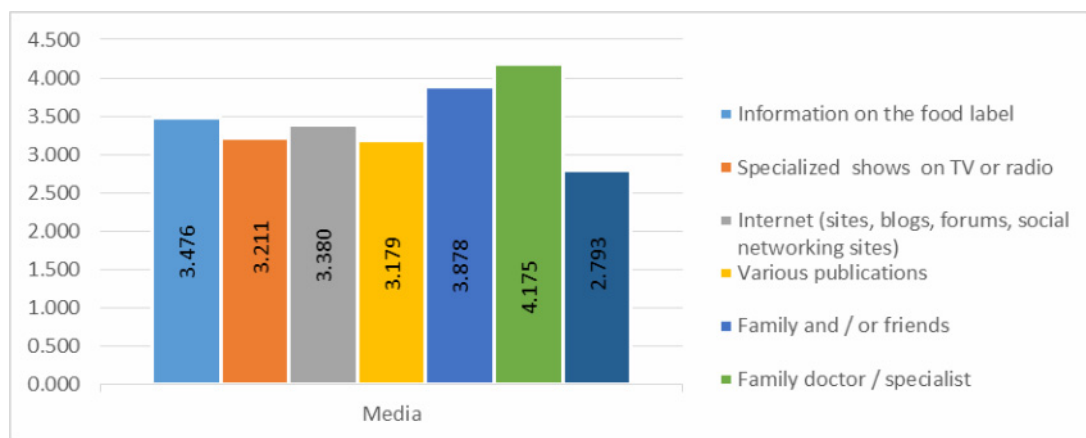


Fig. no. 3 Average of respondents confidence degree in various sources of information

On average, the importance given by respondents to food choice criteria is the following (see Figure 4): the packing - 3,519; brand - 4,022; taste and / or other organoleptic characteristics (appearance, shape, color, flavor, etc.) - 4,553; price - 4,036; intake of nutrients - 3,918; reduced content of substances with negative impact on health (salt / added sugar / saturated fats / cholesterol) - 3,846; low content of food additives - 3,892; origin of Romanian agriculture (in the case of agri-food raw materials) - 3,782; other criteria (listed by the respondents: calories, curiosity, history, 100% natural products, known, country of origin, shelf life) - 3,280.

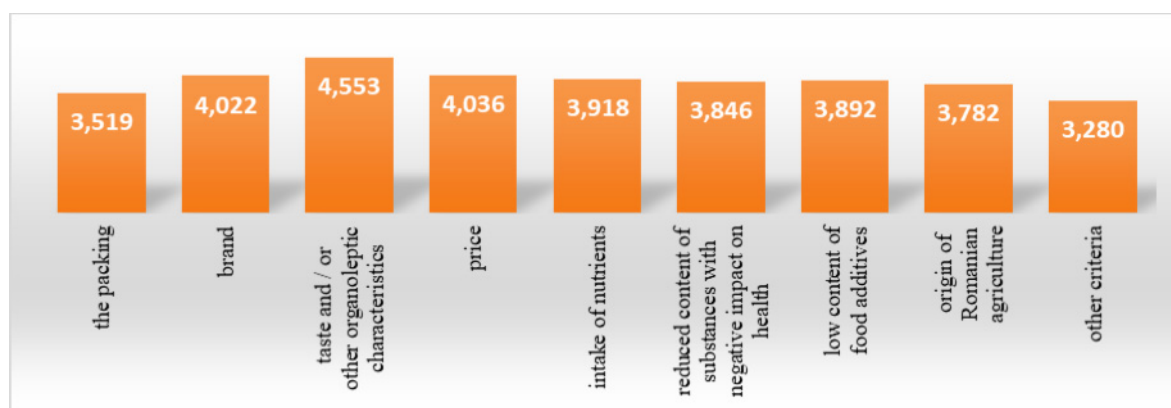


Fig. no. 4 Average of the importance given by respondents to food choice criteria

Another objective of the research was to *highlight the eating habits* (especially the unhealthy) *of the new generation of consumers*. Regarding this, a number of habits related to the diet of a regular week were listed, for which the respondents were asked to indicate the frequency. Analyzing the answers provided by the respondents, we highlight the fact that they show strong trends towards unbalanced food consumption, because only 6.6% of them follow the main meals of the day and only 0.7% consume at least one hot meal per day. It is also worrying that only 1.3% of respondents target the daily intake of a variety of foods to cover their nutritional needs, while 13.7% of them consume pre-cooked foods. It is also noted that only 2.8% of the respondents consume at least 1.8 liters of water per day, but also 6.8% of them use salt, while 6.5% regularly consume fried foods.

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

Conclusions

Apparently, to meet the current consumption needs of mankind, Earth does not reach us. However, as we do not yet have a second planet, and we want the human race to survive, we need to change our consumption habits as quickly as possible.

Many times, the discussion of sustainable development starts from the (slightly unrealistic) view of consumer sovereignty on the market, which often leads in the collective mind to the hope that industrial societies will make the transition to sustainable consumption if the majority of consumers prefer goods made under sustainable production conditions. It is forgotten, on this occasion, that sustainable consumption is often a "niche" in the sense that there is no chance for the broad mass of consumers to adopt sustainable consumption habits as long as they are oriented towards production unsustainable.

Considering food consumption and its associated habits, we can say that most specialists believe that sustainable development can only be imposed as a result of the joint effort of production and consumption in a market that does not act as a collective force against, but in favor of sustainability.

In this context, it is important to know the eating habits of the younger generation of consumers and how these habits are influenced by cognitive and emotional reactions.

Research results indicate that 65.5% of respondents show a willingness to have a healthy diet (49.4% say they are highly concerned, and 16.1% say they are very concerned). In this respect, 35.1% of the consumers belonging to the young generation in Romania associate the healthy diet with keeping the main meals of the day, while 27.1% of them consider that the consumption of various foods, covering the recommended daily intake of nutrients, is

the main criterion for ensuring a balanced diet. On the third place, with a proportion of 17.6% from them, are the consumers for whom a healthy diet supposes the consumption of at least one hot meal a day.

The main reasons why respondents say they can not provide a healthy diet are, in decreasing order, the following: lack of time (28.2%), high pollution and genetic modification of raw materials (25.2%) and the high food price of the healthy foods (14%).

Regarding the respondents' trust in different sources of information on healthy diet, on the first place is the family doctor or the specialist doctor with an average of answers of 4.17 (although the Romanian health system presents some dysfunctions), followed by the family or group of friends, with an average of 3.87 and the food label, with an average of 3.47. There is also a trend to increase respondents' confidence in online content about healthy eating, generated by their peers, with whom they interact in the virtual environment (blogs, forums, review sites, social sites, etc.), which ranks fourth with an average of 3.37.

Taste and other organoleptic properties are the main criteria of foods choice, with an average of 4.55, followed by price and brand, with an average of 4.03 and 4.02.

Finally, based on the results of our research, we can state that among the young generation of consumers in Romania there is a growing tendency toward unbalanced food behaviour, because: 21% of them consume only the foods they consider sensory attractive, only 6,6% of them follow the main meals of the day, 13,7% usually eat precooked foods, 6,8% frequently use salt in food and only 1.3% try to eat a variety of foods to cover their recommended daily intake of nutrients.

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