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RESEARCH ON ATTITUDE AND THE BEHAVIOR OF THE ROMANIAN YOUNG GENERATION IN RELATION TO THE PURCHASE AND CONSUMPTION OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS

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Abstract

The paper aimed to study the purchase habits and behavior of the young generation regarding consumption of organic products. For this purpose, literature in the field was studied regarding the EU organic production and consumption. In order to determine the young Romanian consumers' perception concerning the organic products, a field survey based on a questionnaire was run during March -June 2021 on a sample consisting of 191 students from Sibiu and Brăila. Organic agriculture is a dynamic system in Romania, registering in the last 10 years an ascending trend, from 182,706 ha in 2010 to 468,887.05 ha in 2020. The organic products are consumed by the 90.6 % of the young people investigated (173 persons). They purchased organic products mainly form local markets (81.15%), super (80 %) or hypemarket (70.1%). Also, an amount of 66 % respondents use to buy organic products from specialised stories. The young generation believes that the most effective way to promote the consumption of organic products are: events organised in hyper or supermarket, specialised fairs for organic products, events like"open doors" at ecological operators. The students who were part of the target group of this study are in the category of well-informed consumers. They know how to recognize organic products by the existing marks on the packaging (69.6%). Young people say the main qualities of organic products are: healthy (93.2%), tasty (71.2%), contain fewer chemicals (61.8%), improve quality of life (51.3%), do not contain synthetic additives (48.7%). At the same time, organic products protect the environment (45%), support family farming (40.3%) and the local economy (40.3 %).

Key words**:** *knowledge, buyers, behaviour, consumption, organic products*

INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of food production systems is a global challenge. Even with lower average yields, organic farming and sustainable animal husbandry can offer alternative solutions to conventionally obtained products [3].
Organic farming is practiced worldwide on approx. 13,095,756 ha, and in Europe on 16,528,677 ha Aand has continuosly an increasing trend [17, 28].
More than 200 countries worldwide practice this system of agriculture [9].
The organic production system seeks to strike a balance between the three areas of agricultural sustainability: environmental, economic and social [29].
The Community's agricultural policy pays special attention to organic farming, considering that it must be increasingly promoted in order for the organic food market to grow. Thus, the main objective is that by 2030 more than 25% of EU agricultural land will be worked in an ecological system. Organic farming helps maintain biodiversity, creates jobs and attracts young farmers [14]. EU action plan on expanding organic farming in Member States is in synergy with the European Green Pact, Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Fork Farm Strategy [12, 14].
All these strategic documents provide for urgent measures aimed at bringing improvements and transformations to the food system.

In the current period traversed by the Covid 19 pandemic crisis, the need for changes in farming and animal husbandry practices, for the increase of organic farming systems or alternative production systems is becoming increasingly evident. Changes are also needed in food distribution, with increasing importance for local producers and short food chains [18].

In 2019, Austria had 24.1% of the agricultural land certified in ecological system. Four EU Member States: Spain (2,354,916 ha), France (2,240,797 ha), Italy (1,993,225 ha) and Germany (1,613,785 ha) owned more than 57% of the total EU certified organic area [11, 17].In the same year, 2019, at the U.E. level. the land area in ecological system was 14.6 million ha, representing approx. 8.5% of the total agricultural area [17] Sweden is the country with the largest area of cereals and vegetables in the organic system, and Greece the country with the largest number of cattle in this system [15, 16].

Starting from the current growth rate of organic farming, the forecasts predict the expansion of organic land in the EU. up to approx. 15-18%. In order to reach the target of 25% organic agricultural area in the EU, the inclusion in the CAP 2023-2027 of eco-schemes that benefit organic operators is envisaged. The main tools that can support the increase of ecological areas are: the organization of promotion events, the creation of cooperation networks, the exchange of good practices, research and innovation, local processing. Better collaboration between the agricultural and tourism sectors is also planned for the creation of "Biodistricts" in order to sustainably manage local resources [13].

Most published studies show that plant productions made in an ecological system are approx. 20% lower than in conventional agriculture [21].

Raising animals in an ecological system is based on the following principles: raising local, resistant breeds; the animals must be able to show the behavior characteristic of the species to which they belong; access to pasture; maintenance in free housing; optimal areas per animal in shelters; sanitary shelters; prevention of diseases and illnesses; banning antibiotics and growth regulators in animal feed.

There is a trend in research to find alternatives to the use of antibiotics. Thus, between a study on the treatment of mastitis in cows with alternative solutions, extracts of medicinal plants and propolis were used. According to the authors, such preparations are safe, cheap and effective solutions in treating these diseases [26].

The situation of organic agriculture in Romania

A study published in 2014 shows that the first association dedicated to organic farming in Romania appeared in 1997. The first law on organic farming appeared in Romania in 2000, and the first inspection and certification bodies were accredited since 2004.

In 2020, the ecologically certified land area in Romania reached an area of 468,887.05 ha (of which about 67% arable land), increasing by 256% compared to 2010 (182,706 ha) [8].

In the same time, the number of certified operators in organic farming increased from 3,155 in 2010 to 10,210 in 2020.

According to the data presented by Eurostat, the number of animals exploited in an ecological system in Romania in 2020 were: 19,870 head of cattle, of which 12,837 head of dairy cows; 13,189 heads of sheep; 830 heads of goats, 143,198 heads of laying hens; 27,045 broiler heads and 170,789 bee families [16].

An article published in 2021 confirms the upward trend of land areas in the ecological system and the number of ecological operators in Romania [1].

The data presented by the relevant ministry show that currently in Romania are accredited 11 inspection and certification bodies for organic farming [24].

In Romania, few studies have been done on organic farming and consumption of organic products [22].

Such study on organic farming in Romania in 2012 showed: 288,261 ha, 15,315 organic operators, 105 organic processors and 3 importers of organic products [5].

The evolution of food quality is dictated by consumer requirements [25].

The current study contributes to knowledge regarding the routines of younger generation in organic food consumption behaviour.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is based on a deep documentation based on various reports provided by European Commision and published articles concerning the EU and Romanian organic production.

To know the habits of young consumers regarding the purchase and consumption of organic products, a survey was carried out, using as a working instrument a strutured questionnaire, including: the socio-demographic profile of the respondents; buying and consuming habits of organic products; the place of purchase of organic products and the frequency of purchase; sources of information on organic products.

The questionnaire was applied to individuals aged over 18 years old, and the tool used for collecting data was the structured questionnaire applied to a sample of 191 Romanian students (students at Agricultural Faculties from Sibiu, Bucharest and Brăila, Romania).

After setting up the questionnaire, the contact with the young individuals included in the sample was made through internet, the questionnaire being sent online, and completed during the period March - June 2021. The collected data were classified, then statistically processed, and interpreted.

The young persons included in the sample of respondents were obliged to characterize themselves regarding their socio-demographic profile: gender, age, stable domicile, last graduated education unit, job status, profession, number of family members and income/family.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Till present, just a few studies were carried out both at the international level and in Romania regarding the behaviour of purchasing and consumption of organic products [32].

A study published in 2021 shows that Romanian education campaigns are needed to develop healthy eating habits and to make sustainable food choices [31].

Current patterns of food consumption are not sustainable, neither in terms of health nor in terms of the environment. In the current context of the Covid 19 pandemic, there are specific changes in food consumption behavior [20].

Some studies show that adopting a certain healthy style of eating is a matter of social, economic and environmental sustainability [23].

A study conducted in Switzerland segmented consumers based on eating habits in relation to environmentally friendly technologies used for production [19].

In Romania, in 2013, it is shown that the motivation of buyers of local/traditional and BIO products is difficult to observe and appreciate [30].

The first store with ecological products was opened in Sibiu in 2004. Within it, 15 farmers sold their agri-food products, the promotion being done through their own site from which there were links for the farmers' own sites [4, 7]. Some studies aimed to identify useful fauna from organically grown gardens in Sibiu County [2].

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Respondents structure by gender

Of the 191 individuals included in the survey, 59.2 % were females and 40.8 % were males (Table 1).

Respondents' distribution by age group

The main characteristics of the studied sample are: 62.8% are young people, under the age of 30 (120 persons).

Respondents' distribution by the domicile

the sample consited of 62.3% respondents living in the urban area and 37.7% in rural area.

Respondents' distribution by the number of persons in the family

A number of 143 respondents repreeznting 75% of the total had large families consisting of 3-5 or more than 5 people.

Respondents' structure by monthly income

The average monthly income of the family is: less than 2,000 lei (8.4%); between 2,001 and 6,000 lei 59.2 %; between 6,001-8,000 lei

17.3% and only for 15.2 of respondents the familiy income is more than 8,001 lei.

Respondents' structure by education level

About 39.3% of the respondents have at least a high school diploma, being currently undergraduate or master's degree students of an agricultural faculty (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Variable	Operational variable	Respondents distribution, number (%)
Sex	Male	78 (40.8)
	Female	113 (59.2)
Age	Under 20	18 (9.4)
	21-30	102 (53.4)
	31-40	36 (18.8)
	41-50	26 (13.6)
	51-60	8 (4.2)
	Over 60	1 (0.5%)
Areas of living	Urban	119 (62.3)
	Rural	72 (37.7)
Net income/month/ Family	Under 2,000 lei	16 (8.4)
	2,001-4,000 lei	72 (37.7)
	4,001-6,000 lei	41 (21.5)
	6,001-8,000 lei	33 (17.3)
	More than 8,001 lei	29 (15.2)
Education level	Gymnasium	10 (5.2)
	High school	75 (39.3)
	University degree	82 (43.9)
	Post graduated	24 (12.6)
Labour market status	Pupil	14 (7.3)
	Student	58 (30.4)
	Employee	103 (53.9)
	Entrepreneur	12 (6.3)
	Unemployed	3 (1.6)
	Other	1(0.5)
Number of people in the household	1	12 (6.3)
	2	36 (18.8)
	3-4	115 (60.2)
	5 or more	28 (14.8)

Source: Own processed results based on respondents' answers, Survey, 2021.

Buying and consuming habits of organic products

90.6% of young people surveyed buy and consume organic products (173 people). In general, they do not give importance to the origin of organic products, but most of them , more exactly 51.3% declared that they prefer Romanian organic products. About 38.2% respondents buy both Romanian or other origin products. It is noted that approx. 10.5% of those surveyed do not pay attention to the origin of the organic products they buy. The majority of respondents (65.5%) have been buying and consuming organic products for more than 2 years (125 people), which shows that they know the quality of organic products and their benefits.

The diet of young respondents is generally based on meat products for 148 people (77.5%) and an ovo-lacto-vegetarian for 40 people (20.9%).

Frequency of purchasing organic products

The frequency of purchasing organic products is also quite varied. Thus, 41.4% (79 people) of the respondents usually buy fresh BIO products 1-2 times a week, and 28.8% buy this type of product once every two weeks (55 people). It is noted that 5.8% of respondents (11 people) buy this type of product once a month, and 22.5% of respondents buy organic products occasionally (43 people).

In a study published Bogza (2015), it is shown that depending on the level of knowledge about organic products, there are four categories: respondents who can not say anything about these products; respondents whose level of knowledge is difficult to determine; respondents who know what organic products are and very well informed respondents [6].

Young respondents, students of agricultural or food industry faculties recognize organic products according to the BIO specification on the packaging (69.6%), according to the leaf type design on the packaging (36.1%). There is also a percentage of 9.9% of respondents who do not know how to identify organic products according to the special marks on the packaging.

Extrapolating the answers received from the subjects in this study to the 4 types of consumers identified in the paper mentioned above, it is observed that the young people in this study are part of the category of very well informed respondents.

A study published in 2014 by a group of authors showed that Romanians have little knowledge about organic products. In the case of young students of some agricultural faculties this is not confirmed [10].

Frequency of consumption of organic products

The frequency of consumption of organic food varies by category. Thus, the main categories of organic food consumed regularly are: eggs (73 respondents), vegetables (69

respondents), honey and bee products (67 respondents) and fruits (61 respondents). The main organic foods often consumed are: fruits (61 respondents), vegetables (59 respondents), dairy and cheese (56 respondents), eggs (51 respondents), meat and butchery products (50 respondents) and honey and bee products (46 respondents).

Sources of supply of organic products

In general, organic products are purchased from local agri-food markets by 81.15% of respondents (155 people), from specialized supermarket districts by 80% of respondents (153 people), from hypermarkets by 70.1% of respondents (135 people) or from specialized stores for organic products by 65.96% of respondents (126 people). It is generally observed that the majority of buyers of organic products associate this production system with local products, encountered in producers' markets. It is noted that 81% of respondents stated that they are not used to order organic products online (155 people). Also, short supply chains that include orders for weekly shopping baskets are not well developed locally. A share of 81.6% of respondents (156 people) stated that they had not heard orders for weekly baskets of agri-food products coming directly from farmers. These answers allow us to say that organic products are insufficiently promoted through online platforms.

Elements that can influence the decision to buy organic products

Within the specialized districts for ecological products existing in hyper and supermarket, the attention of the buyers is attracted especially by the product labels in the case of 38.2% of the respondents (73 people), the aspect of the product packaging in the case of 18.3% of the respondents people) and the promotions that take place in the store in the case of 16.2% of respondents (31 people). Less attention is paid to the arrangement of products on the shelf (15.2%) or billboards (12%).

Sources of information on organic products and the perception of their effectiveness

The main sources of information on organic products are that we could identify are: the internet (50.3%), family/friends (42.9%), promotion made by producers (38.2%). Other sources of information are: producers' stands at specialized fairs (19.90%), information campaigns (14.7%), product tastings (14.1%). Respondents consider that the least efficient source of information is the agricultural profile program broadcast on national television.

On a scale from 1 to 5, the maximum efficiency of the various sources of promotion is perceived in the following order: the organization of tastings in large stores (98 people); organization of fairs specially designed for organic products (86 people); open day at ecological operators (85 people); broadcasting of radio and TV commercials (78 people). Respondents consider that promotion through documentaries is not effective (about 63%). Although they are students at agricultural faculties, only 43.5% (83 people) of those surveyed stated that they personally knew an ecological operator.

A study published in 2019 that focused on the analysis of consumer behavior regarding the purchase of honey shows that the main sources of information about honey are: beekeepers, honey fairs, newspapers and magazines and the Internet [27].

Qualitative attributes associated with ecological products

Respondents associate organic products with their following benefits: they are healthy (93.2%), they are tasty (71.2%), they are products that contain fewer chemicals (61.8%), they improve the quality of life (51.3%), do not contain synthetic additives (48.7%).

67.6% of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with the relationship between the quality and price of organic products. Although they are aware of the direct relationship between the quality and price of organic products, the young respondents consider that the price of organic products is high (49.7%) or medium (42.9%).

CONCLUSIONS

Organic agriculture is a dynamic system in Romania, registering in the last 10 years an ascending trend, increasing in the decade

2010-2029 by +156.63% and accounting for 468,887.05 ha in 2020.

In order for Romania to have a healthier society, a sustainable agriculture must be developed and it is necessary to make the population aware of the importance of healthy nutrition. Future development strategies must focus on the development of a sustainable and competitive agri-food sector that will improve the quality of life and ensure living conditions in rural areas close to those in urban areas. Information campaigns for the younger generation are needed to promote organic production systems.

In general, for consumers, organic products are associated with the sustainability of agriculture and the local economy. Respondents believe that such products protect the environment (45%), support family farming (40.3%), support the local economy (40.3%).

There is a need for better promotion and use of food registered on various national and European quality schemes. These quality schemes focus on both healthier food production and food safety and security. The purchase and consumption of these foods registered on national quality schemes (traditional products, with a well-established recipe, organic or mountain) bring multiple benefits on social, environmental and economic sustainability.

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