

CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION OF "GEZO" IN ROMANIA: A TRADITIONAL PRODUCT FROM KURDISTAN

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Abstract

The paper aimed to analyse Romanian consumers' perception towards a traditional product from Kurdistan. For this purpose a research was conducted among consumers of traditional products from Cluj-Napoca City. To achieve the purpose of the study a face to face survey was conducted. The research instrument was divided into 3 main parts: (i) expectation regarding the attributes of traditional product; (ii) perception of "Gezo" a traditional sweet product from Kurdistan; (iii) socio-demographic profile of the respondents. To determine if there are any differences between the perception and expectations regarding the traditional analysed product, a set of 13 items related to product attribute were evaluated on a scale from 1 to 5. The results indicated that the analysed product did not meet the Romanian consumers expectations especially in terms of taste (-1.1) and flavour (-0.22), but were positively appreciated the low content of fats (0.45) and sugars (+0.28). This study represents a first step in analysing the possibility of exporting traditional products outside of Kurdistan, and offers valuable information to adapt future development product strategies.

Key words: Romanian consumers, expectations, product attributes

INTRODUCTION

Traditional food products have their origins in an area, region, country, or geographical location, just like the majority of foods. as a result, it is difficult to pinpoint traditional food products due to the wide range of paradoxical characteristics linked to the concept [7].

In Europe, traditional foods compose a specific category of the food market and play an important part in everyday dietary consumption. They have historically had a significant influence on the customs of many nations and areas, enhancing their sense of pride and identity [12].

Product qualities have drawn a lot of attention in the literature on food marketing since it has been recognised that they are important in how products are chosen for consumers. However, there is a limitation in the literature on food product characteristic measuring, but not much on which qualities ought to be measured. The characteristics of food might vary across ethnic foods [3].

Consumers' decisions made by (individual, household, and societal levels to use and dispose of food and feed others, with the consideration of gender, age, and social factors; as well as actions to promote changes in their food environments [2].

Consumers' decision making process is influenced by a set of factors related to socio-demographic profile of the consumers such as: gender, education, age, family status [14, 6].

The objectives of the paper were to identify Romanian consumers' expectation towards traditional products, and the perception of "Gezo", a traditional product from Kurdistan.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The product is known locally as Gezo and internationally as Manna [11, p. 423]. "Gezo" is gathered from oak trees in the Penjween and Sharbazher regions of the Sulaimani governorate, particularly those of the genus *Fraxinus ornus* ("Manna Ash"). To extract the mixture of sugars on the surface of leaves, gather them and boil them in water [9].

To identify the Romanian consumers' perceptions towards "Gezo", a pilot study was conducted among 112 consumers of traditional products from Cluj-Napoca city. The collected data were divided into three main categories: (i) expectations regarding the attributes of the traditional products; (ii) perceptions regarding "Gezo" a traditional sweet product from Kurdistan; (iii) the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, education, children in the family). Each of the used attributes to evaluate the expectations regarding the traditional products were evaluated on a 5 point type Likert-scale, where 1 means not important at all, and 5 means very important, while the same attributes were evaluated in the case of "Gezo" product, using a 5 point type Likert-scale, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 5 means very satisfied. For each of the 13 attributes a score was calculated, based on the difference between perceptions and expectations. Each of the participants in the survey, were first asked to express their expectations towards traditional products, secondly they taste a sample of the analysed products, and expressed their perceptions regarding analysed product. A positive score indicates that the analysed traditional product "Gezo" exceed the expectations of the consumers in terms of traditional products, a negative score indicates that the analysed traditional product "Gezo" does not meet the consumers' expectations, while a score equal to zero indicates that the perceptions meet the expectations of the consumers. The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics analysis. Mann-Whitney U test was employed in order to test if there are statistical significant differences between different analysed groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the socio-demographic profile of the respondents revealed that 63.1% of the respondents were female, with an average age of 42.2 ± 14.2 years, with university degree in 64% of the cases. From the total number of the participants of the study 40.5% declared

that they have children in the family (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Characteristics	Variables	Percentage
Gender	Female	63.1
	Male	36.9
Education	Less than university degree	36.0
	University degree	64.0
Children in the family	Yes	40.5
	No	59.5
Monthly average income	< 4,500 RON	53.2
	>4,500 RON	46.8

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

Furthermore descriptive statistics was used to analyse the expectations of the consumers towards traditional products. The results indicated that the higher expectations of the consumers of the traditional are related to the taste of the products (4.80 ± 0.536), quality of the products (4.68 ± 0.632) content of natural ingredients (4.65 ± 0.722), lack of additives (4.37 ± 1.128) (Table 2).

Table 2. Expectations towards traditional products

Product characteristics	Mean	SD
Taste	4.80	0.536
Texture	3.80	1.069
Special flavour	3.98	1.095
Natural colour	3.86	0.995
Pleasant appearance	3.93	0.983
Low content in fats	3.37	1.328
Low content in sugar	3.54	1.333
Lack of food additives	4.37	1.128
Natural ingredients	4.65	0.722
High nutritional value	3.61	1.215
Organic product	4.14	0.939
Freshness	4.20	0.980
Quality	4.68	0.632

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

Attributes that influences consumers' buying process of the traditional products are similar to other categories of products, such as organic ones. [8] revealed the fact that the Romanian consumers are very interested in the content of natural ingredients when they decide to buy an organic food product, no artificial ingredients, taste. Less important aspects when consumers are choosing a traditional product were noticed to be low content in fats (3.37 ± 1.328), low content in sugar (3.54 ± 1.333), high nutritional value (3.61 ± 1.215) (Table 2), similar to the case of organic products [8].

After the determination of the expected scores, were calculated the scores for perceptions of the analysed product (Table 3). As it may be observed the respondents highly appreciated the content of natural ingredients (4.59 ± 0.667), lack of additives (4.44 ± 0.794). At the same time respondents appreciated the product as being an organic one (4.22 ± 0.836). Less appreciated were the texture (3.24 ± 1.185), which may be explained by the fact that the product is a bit sticky, taste (3.69 ± 1.152) which may be lead to the combination between cardamom and pistachio, which are not necessary traditional flavours in the Romanian cuisine.

Table 3. Perceptions towards “Gezo”

Product characteristics	Mean	SD
Taste	3.68	1.152
Texture	3.24	1.185
Special flavour	3.76	1.177
Natural colour	3.94	1.073
Pleasant appearance	3.68	1.207
Low content in fats	3.82	1.130
Low content in sugar	3.83	1.167
Lack of food additives	4.44	0.794
Natural ingredients	4.59	0.667
High nutritional value	3.83	1.069
Organic product	4.22	0.836
Freshness	3.98	0.972
Quality	4.07	1.006

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

The next step was to calculate the scores for each of the attributes used to analyse the expectations and perceptions of the traditional products (Table 4). The results revealed the fact that the analysed product did not meet the expectations of the consumers in terms of taste (-1.11 ± 1.248), texture (-0.55 ± 1.456), quality (-0.61 ± 0.964), appearance (-0.25 ± 1.504), freshness (-0.21 ± 1.082).

Table 4. Total scores

Product characteristics	Mean	SD
Taste	-1.11	1.248
Texture	-0.55	1.456
Special flavour	-0.22	1.346
Natural colour	0.07	1.379
Pleasant appearance	-0.25	1.504
Low content in fats	0.45	1.487
Low content in sugar	0.28	1.149
Lack of food additives	0.07	1.173
Natural ingredients	-0.06	0.887
High nutritional value	0.21	1.296
Organic product	0.08	1.079
Freshness	-0.21	1.082
Quality	-0.61	0.964

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

At limit of meeting the expectations were the attributes related to the content of natural ingredients (-0.06 ± 0.887). The higher score was determinate for the low content in fats (0.45 ± 1.487), low content in sugar (0.28 ± 1.149) and high nutritional value (0.21 ± 1.296).

Subsequently Mann–Whitney U test was run to test of there are statistically significant differences regarding the perceptions, expectations and registered scores between males and females, respondents with children and respondents without children, consumers’ less than 40 years and over years. The results indicated that in general female had higher expectations regarding the traditional products compare with male respondents, but there were no statistical significant differences ($p > 0.05$) (Figure 1). Females tend to be more concerned regarding the natural ingredients, nutritional value of the products [1, 8].

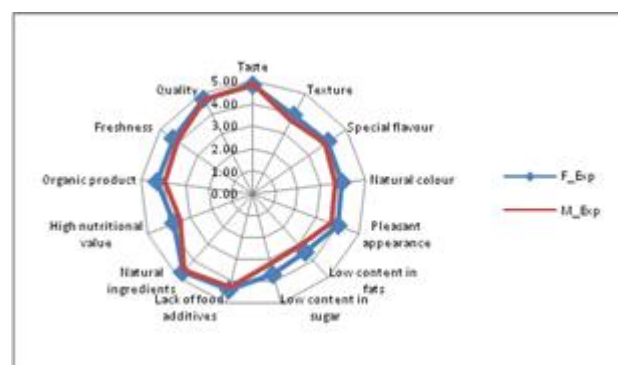


Fig. 1. Expectations distribution by gender

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

At the same time female respondents perceived more positively the analysed product compare with the male group.

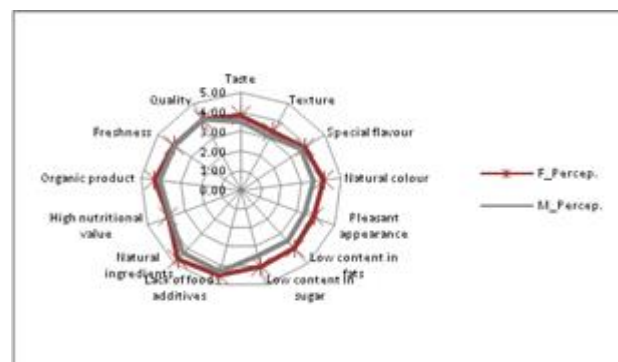


Fig. 2. Perceptions distribution by gender

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

The differences being statistically significant for the natural colour (4.13 vs. 3.61), appearance (3.86 vs. 3.37), low content in fats (3.01 vs. 3.49) and sugar (4.04 vs. 3.46), and natural ingredients (4.71 vs. 4.37) ($p < 0.05$) (Figure 2), similar to previous studies [13, 5]. The analysis by gender of the differences between perceptions and expectations regarding the traditional products revealed the fact that for both groups female and male, the lower score was for the taste (-0.97 ± 1.285 vs. -1.36 ± 1.156) (Figure 3), but with no statistical significant differences ($p > 0.05$). In the case of the female group the higher score was obtained for low content in fats, this attribute exceeding their expectations (0.51 ± 1.567), while for male was for the high nutritional value attribute (0.36 ± 1.479). The Mann–Whitney U test revealed no significant differences between the scores registered by the two groups (female and male) for each of the analysed product attribute ($p > 0.05$).

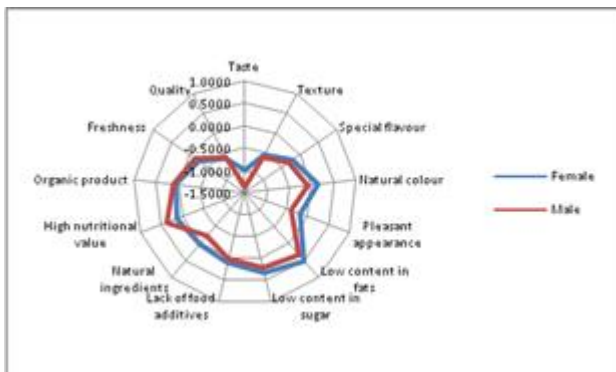


Fig. 3. Comparative analysis of scores by gender
 Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

A comparative analysis was conducted between the respondents with children, and respondents without children. The results indicated that for both of the groups the taste is the most important attribute (4.84 ± 0.424 for the group with children vs. 4.77 ± 0.602 for the group without children), the content of natural ingredients is also important for both of the groups (4.76 ± 0.609 vs. 4.58 ± 0.786), while less important was the low content in fats (Figure 4). The results of Mann–Whitney U test revealed there were no statistically significant differences between the group with children and the group without the children regarding the expectations for traditional

products towards the analysed attributes ($p > 0.05$).

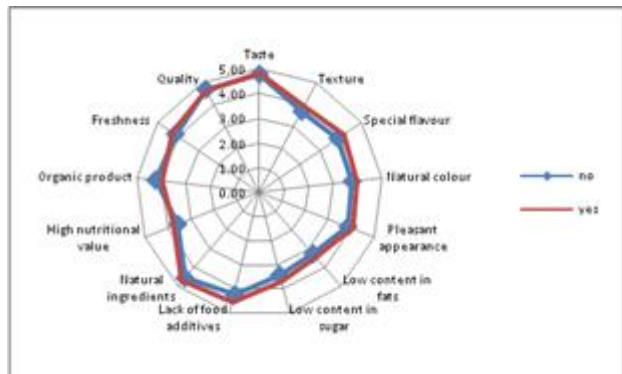


Fig. 4. Expectations distribution between respondents with children and without children
 Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

Regarding the perceptions of the attributes for the analysed traditional product both groups highly appreciated the content of the natural ingredients with an average of 4.78 for the group with children, and 4.45 for the group without children (Figure 5), reinforcing the results of [10] that pointed out that the presence natural ingredients influence the decision making process for families with children. The difference recorded was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Less appreciated by both groups was the texture of the analysed product (3.49 ± 1.121 vs. 3.08 ± 1.207), but with no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$).

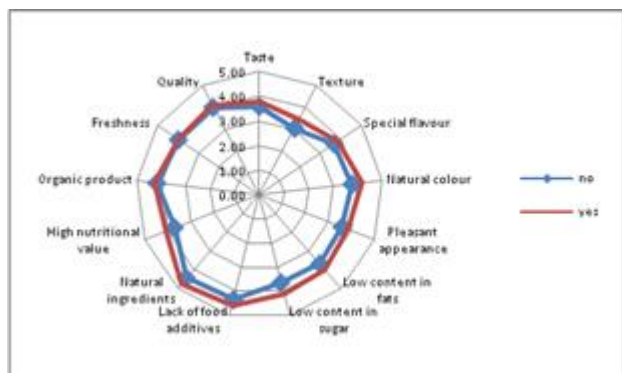


Fig. 5. Perceptions distribution between respondents with children and without children
 Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

Analysing the scores obtained by the group with children compared to the one without children was noticed that there were no significant statistically differences ($p > 0.05$). Like for the entire sample, even in these cases,

the lower score was obtained by the taste of the analysed product (with children: -1.04 ± 1.086 vs. -1.16 ± 1.354) (Figure 6).

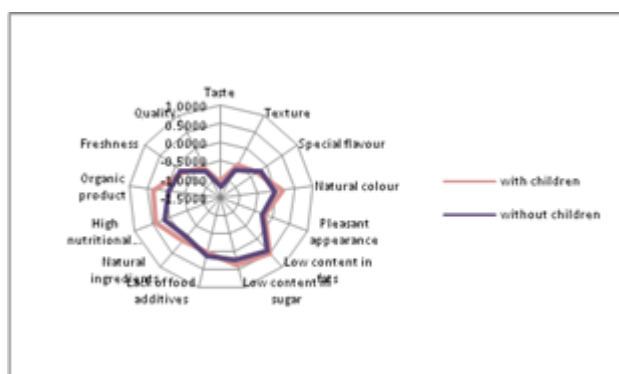


Fig. 6. Scores distribution of respondents with children and without children

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

Age represents another important variable that influence consumers' behaviour. To identify to which concern the respondents' age influence their expectations towards traditional products and perceptions regarding the analysed traditional products, and furthermore the recorded scores, the

participants to the survey were grouped based their age into two groups: the first group was represented by respondents less than or 40 years (50.5%), and the second group represented by respondents over 40 years (49.5%). The higher expectations regarding the traditional products, for both groups, were for the taste (less than 40 years: 4.80 ± 0.483 vs. 4.80 ± 0.590 over 40 years), content of natural ingredients (less than 40 year: 4.69 ± 0.711 vs. 4.60 ± 0.735 over 40 years) and quality (less than 40 years 4.66 ± 0.668 vs. 4.70 ± 0.599 over 40 years), while less important were fats content (less than 40 years 3.37 ± 1.369 vs. 3.36 ± 1.296 over 40 years) sugar content (less than 40 years 3.41 ± 1.359 vs. 3.67 ± 1.306 over 40 years), and high nutritional value (less than 40 years 3.55 ± 1.159 vs. 3.67 ± 1.277) (Table 5), confirming the results of [4].

There were not statistically significant different between the group less than 40 years, and the group over 40 years, in terms of expectations towards traditional products ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5. Comparative analysis by age

Product characteristics	Expectations		Perceptions		Scores	
	<40 years	>40 years	<40 years	>40 years	<40 years	>40 years
Taste	4.80 ± 0.483	4.80 ± 0.590	3.61 ± 1.155	3.76 ± 1.154	-1.19 ± 1.197	-1.03 ± 1.304
Texture	3.73 ± 1.070	3.87 ± 1.072	3.18 ± 1.130	3.31 ± 1.245	-0.55 ± 1.400	-0.56 ± 1.524
Special flavour	4.10 ± 1.090	3.85 ± 1.096	$4.0 \pm 1.095^*$	$3.51 \pm 1.215^*$	-0.10 ± 1.316	-0.34 ± 1.377
Natural colour	3.94 ± 0.999	3.78 ± 0.994	4.05 ± 1.034	3.82 ± 1.107	0.10 ± 1.302	0.03 ± 1.465
Pleasant appearance	3.81 ± 1.002	4.03 ± 0.962	3.54 ± 1.334	3.82 ± 1.056	-0.29 ± 1.717	-0.21 ± 1.272
Low content in fats	3.37 ± 1.369	3.36 ± 1.296	3.61 ± 1.186	4.04 ± 1.036	0.23 ± 1.439	0.67 ± 1.516
Low content in sugar	3.41 ± 1.359	3.67 ± 1.306	$3.59 \pm 1.156^*$	$4.07 \pm 1.136^*$	0.17 ± 1.389	0.40 ± 1.605
Lack of food additives	4.23 ± 1.279	4.50 ± 0.940	4.34 ± 0.815	4.55 ± 0.765	0.10 ± 1.274	0.03 ± 1.070
Natural ingredients	4.69 ± 0.711	4.60 ± 0.735	4.54 ± 0.687	4.64 ± 0.649	-0.16 ± 0.910	0.03 ± 0.859
High nutritional value	3.55 ± 1.159	3.67 ± 1.277	3.79 ± 1.057	3.87 ± 1.090	0.23 ± 1.205	0.2 ± 1.393
Organic product	4.14 ± 0.943	4.12 ± 0.944	4.09 ± 0.859	4.35 ± 0.799	-0.05 ± 1.197	0.21 ± 0.936
Freshness	4.00 ± 1.128	4.40 ± 0.760	$3.79 \pm 1.091^*$	$4.18 \pm 0.796^*$	-0.21 ± 1.246	-0.21 ± 0.896
Quality	4.66 ± 0.668	4.70 ± 0.599	4.16 ± 0.949	3.98 ± 1.063	-0.50 ± 0.972	-0.72 ± 0.951

* $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own results based on the data from the survey.

The analysis of the perception regarding "Gezo" revealed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) for flavour, sugar content and freshness of the products. Respondents less than 40 years old were more satisfied

with the flavour of the products (4.0 ± 1.095), compared with the respondents over 40 years (3.51 ± 1.215), which may indicate that the consumers less than 40 years are more open in trying now products, but still this was not

above their expectations, the score recorded for this attribute was a negative one (-0.10 ± 1.316). Consumers' over 40 years appreciated highly the low content in sugar (4.07 ± 1.136) compared to consumers less than 40 years (3.59 ± 1.156). This could be explained by their preoccupation regarding the health. Also they (the consumers 40 years) appreciated the product as being more fresh (4.18 ± 0.796) compared with the group below 40 years (3.79 ± 1.091). There were also other aspects (eg. taste, appearance) for which the group over 40 years perceived the analysed product more higher compared with the group below 40 years, but the differences were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). For both categories of consumers, in terms of age, the lower score was obtained by the taste attribute (less than 40 years: -1.19 ± 1.197 vs. -1.03 ± 1.304 over 40 years), followed by the texture and quality, respecting the same trend observed at the entire sample. The scores recorded were not statistically significant different between the two analysed groups ($p > 0.05$).

CONCLUSIONS

Consumers' expectations are important in order to develop future product strategies. Attributes like taste, quality, and content of natural ingredients are important factors during the buying decision making process. In general female and consumers' with children have higher expectations regarding the attributes of the traditional products; this could be explained by the preoccupation for health higher in the case of female consumers, and families with children. The research offer valuable information for traditional producers regarding the consumers' expectations, which could be useful for development strategies. Future studies could focus on a comparative analysis, of the traditional product "Gezo", on the Romanian consumers and Kurdistan consumers of traditional products.

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