

DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES BASED ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF THE BRAND. *MAGAZIA MORĂRIȚEI* CASE STUDY, IASI, ROMANIA

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Abstract

In the global agricultural landscape, small producers play a crucial role in preserving tradition, fostering resilience, and driving innovation. Despite operating on modest plots of land, they contribute significantly to feeding communities, conserving biodiversity, and sustaining rural economies. This study goes deeper into the world of small producers, focusing on "Magazia Morăriței", a well known brand, renowned for producing ecological bread and other bakery products since the 1990s. Through a mixed-methods approach involving surveys and psychological tests, the study explores consumer perceptions, online engagement, and buying behaviours associated with the brand. The findings reveal that consumers perceive Magazia Morăriței positively, associating it with strong brand personality traits, particularly reflecting the owner's image as a resilient businesswoman. Furthermore, consumers strongly associate the brand with traditional values, quality, and ecological certifications, driving their purchasing decisions. While the brand maintains a significant online presence, there exists a gap between online engagement and physical store visits, suggesting opportunities for improvement in bridging this divide. Moreover, the study unveils the neural networks formed in consumers' minds, highlighting core associations such as good bread, quality, tradition, and yeast bread, which reflect the brand's strong connection with its core products. Additionally, the brand's emphasis on ecological certifications and locally sourced products resonates with consumers, influencing their buying behaviours. Overall, this study underscores the importance of understanding consumer perceptions, leveraging online platforms effectively, and emphasizing brand values to drive consumer engagement and purchasing decisions. By addressing these insights, brands like Magazia Morăriței can enhance their market position and strengthen relationships with consumers, contributing to the sustainable growth of small producers in agriculture.

Key words: consumer behaviour, neural networks, perceptions, small producers, ecological certificate, traditional certificates

INTRODUCTION

In the sphere of global agriculture, small producers make threads of tradition, resilience, and innovation. These individuals and families, often operating on modest plots of land, play a fundamental role in feeding communities, preserving biodiversity, and sustaining rural economies worldwide. As pillars of agricultural diversity and guardians of traditional farming practices, small producers cultivate crops ranging from heirloom varieties to indigenous staples, enriching the tapestry of our food systems with flavours, textures, and nutritional diversity [12].

Small producers in agriculture are tending to the land with care and respect, mindful of its finite resources and inherent value [11].

Across generations, they have honed their craft, drawing upon traditional knowledge passed down through time-honoured practices. Their intimate connection to the land fosters a deep sense of responsibility, as they navigate the complexities of weather patterns, soil health, and pest management with ingenuity and resourcefulness. Yet, despite their vital contributions to global food security and agricultural sustainability, small producers face a lot of challenges in today's rapidly evolving agricultural landscape [9]. Limited access to resources, including land, capital, and technology, constrains their ability to compete in an increasingly competitive marketplace [4].

In recent years, however, a growing recognition of the unique role and potential of

small producers has sparked a renewed focus on empowering and supporting these vital stakeholders. Governments, NGOs, and international organizations are increasingly investing in initiatives aimed at enhancing the resilience, productivity, and market access of small-scale farmers [5]. From sustainable agricultural practices and value-added processing to market linkages and financial services, a lot of interventions seek to unlock the full potential of small producers and foster inclusive agricultural development [15].

Producers could create a coherent value proposition for their agricultural product, having three options for: a producer brand, a geographical brand or a certification brand. All of them are the emblem of quality and encourage consumers to purchase [7].

Nevertheless, the main challenge they all encounter is how to build brand equity and establish a sound positioning strategy.

In this article, we go deeper into the world of small producers in agriculture, by taking an example from Iasi agricultural marketplace and explore their challenges, opportunities, and their marketing strategies. The chosen brand is Magazia Morăriței, a brand which has been on the market since 1990 and it's a brand which promotes ecological products, also by having ecological certifications for flour and traditional products.

Brand Magazia Morăriței is on the market since the 1990s, and their story starts with an electrician who, unafraid of venturing into unfamiliar territory, decided to explore the world of milling [13]. Residing in the town of Probota, in Iași county, he heeded the encouragement of local residents and embarked on the construction of the commune's first wheat and corn mill with rollers [13]. Over the passage of time, fuelled by diligent labour and unwavering commitment, and happy by the unwavering support of their entire family, the electrician-turned-miller introduced the novelty of cold-pressed sunflower oil to the community [13]. However, his aspirations extended beyond milling alone; a lifelong dream of establishing a bakery lingered in his thoughts. This aspiration was not exclusive to him alone but

shared by others as well. Today, it is the daughter of the miller who extends an invitation to savour her dream: an odyssey through childhood. Nowadays, the business has more than just oil and wheat, it extended and today, they produce organically certified flour and also have certified products labelled traditional products [13].

Ecological certificates play a crucial role in giving incentives for sustainable agricultural practices by providing recognition and assurance of environmental trust [8]. These certificates, often issued by third-party organizations or government agencies, certify that agricultural products have been produced using methods that minimize negative environmental impacts and promote biodiversity conservation.

Ecological certificates serve several important functions within the agricultural sector. Firstly, they offer consumers assurance that the products they purchase have been produced in an environmentally responsible manner. This assurance is particularly relevant in today's market, where there is growing consumer demand for sustainably produced goods [1]. Secondly, ecological certificates provide farmers with tangible incentives to adopt and maintain sustainable practices.

By adhering to the standards set forth by certification programs, farmers can access premium markets, command higher prices for their products, and differentiate themselves from competitors [6].

There are various types of ecological certificates tailored to different aspects of agricultural production.

For example, organic certification focuses on the absence of synthetic inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers, as well as the promotion of soil health and biodiversity. Fair trade certification ensures that farmers receive fair prices for their products and adhere to social and labour standards [16].

Despite their benefits, ecological certificates face several challenges and limitations.

One major challenge is the complexity and cost associated with certification processes, which can be prohibitive for small-scale farmers, particularly those in developing countries [3].

Additionally, concerns have been raised regarding the effectiveness of certification programs in achieving meaningful environmental and social outcomes, as well as the potential for greenwashing or certification fraud.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research problem is that there is not enough available information regarding how small producers are perceived on the market and whether their marketing is effective.

The scope of this study is to explore the mental connections consumers form by observing the neural networks formed when hearing about a certain brand, in this case, the brand *Magazia Morăriței* and analyse their online presence.

This brand was chosen due to its long living on the market, but also because it promotes a better lifestyle, using ecological products.

The objectives set for this study are:

O1. To identify the brand personality for the brand *Magazia Morăriței* perceived by consumers.

O2. To identify if social media engagement ends with a visit in the physical store.

O3. To identify the neural networks formed in consumer minds' when faced with the brand *Magazia Morăriței*.

O4. To identify consumers' buying behaviours for the brand *Magazia Morăriței*.

In order to find out what was emphasized by the set objectives, a questionnaire was created. This consisted in 13 questions regarding the *Magazia Morăriței* brand and 5 identifications items.

The questionnaire was distributed on local platforms regarding ecological agriculture like, for example, "Gust de Iași" platform.

There were 123 responses, from which 108 respondents heard of the brand we focus on, and 15 did not hear about it, therefore, leaving our final sample size at 108 respondents.

This study is conducting a quantitative type of study using the survey method. For the interpretations of the results, there were two methods utilized from psychology: the Chinese Portrait method and the Spontaneous Mental Association test.

The Chinese portrait method is a creative exercise where individuals imagine themselves as objects, animals, or characters based on a series of questions. It is often used as a tool for self-reflection and introspection, but it can also be used in marketing, because the method involves answering a set of questions about preferences, personality traits, and characteristics [14]. The answers can be used to construct a portrait of oneself, or as well for a brand. Participants are encouraged to think creatively and metaphorically, drawing parallels between their own attributes and those of the object, animal, or character they choose [2]. Based on the answers given, it is easy to get to know the conscious associations made for certain brands.

The Spontaneous Mental Association test is a psychological tool used to assess unconscious or implicit associations that individuals may have between different concepts or stimuli [17]. It is designed to measure the strength and nature of these associations, which can provide insights into underlying attitudes, beliefs, and biases that may influence behaviour. The test typically involves presenting participants with a series of stimuli, such as words, images, or sounds, and asking them to respond as quickly as possible with the first word or phrase that comes to mind. The respondents were asked to say the first word that comes to their mind when they see the brand *Magazia Morăriței*.

The spontaneous mental association test is often used in research settings to explore unconscious cognitive processes and attitudes, in order to assess individuals' attitudes and beliefs [10]. It can help researchers and practitioners better understand how individuals perceive and categorize the world around them, and how these perceptions may impact behaviour in various contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings are going to be displayed based on the objectives set.

O1. To identify the brand personality for the brand *Magazia Morăriței* perceived by consumers.

Getting to know the brand personality helps because first of all, it humanizes the brand, since our example Magazia Morăriței, already has a human attribute given that it is translated to “Milled Warehouse”.

In the constructed questionnaire, there were two questions related to how consumers perceive Magazia Morăriței brand: firstly, they were asked to associate the brand with an important personality, and secondly, they were asked to associate a colour with the brand.

In Figure 1, it is observable the VIPs which had a frequency number higher than 1.

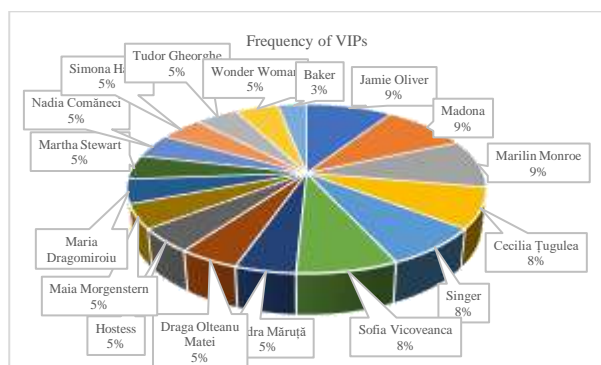


Fig. 1. The VIP distribution for the brand Magazia Morăriței
 Source: Own computation in Excel.

The great majority represent names of important people, known in the Romanian actors and singers industry, however, it should be highlighted that one of the VIPs which got a high number, is Cecilia Tugulea, which is the actual owner of the business. This shows the fact that consumers know the person behind the brand. Another association made with the owner of the business is the response „Wonder Woman”, this shows the fact that consumers perceive Cecilia as being a strong business woman.

There are also some words, which do not necessarily show a VIP, but they mention an occupation, like for example baker, singer and hostess. The words baker and hostess are linked with the area of work, giving the fact that Magazia Morăriței is also baking bread and other types of pastries.

To further interpret the results, the VIPs were taken and divided into grouping fields like gender and occupation.

From Figure 2, it is observable that most of the chosen VIPs are singers or actors, followed by chef, royalty and tennis players. The before mentioned occupations embody one of the most known and popular ones, meaning that the brand is known by the market.

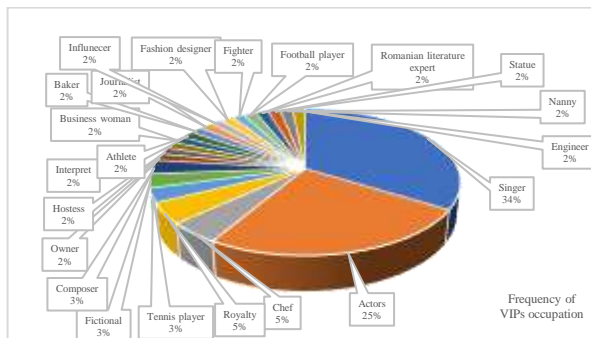


Fig. 2. The VIP’s occupation distribution for the brand Magazia Morăriței
 Source: Own computation in Excel.

By aligning with singers, the Magazia Morăriței brand is shaping its personality and identity. It may be conveying messages about creativity, passion, or enjoyment by associating with musicians, at the same time, singers often evoke strong emotions and connections with their audience through their music. By associating a brand of traditional products with singers, the brand aims to tap into these emotional connections, hoping that consumers will transfer their positive feelings for the singers onto the bread brand. Since celebrity endorsement is not the case here, an explanation for consumers choosing mostly actors could be that actors often have specific demographics or fan bases that align with certain consumer segments. By selecting actors who appeal to the target audience of the Magazia Morăriței brand, marketers can effectively reach and engage potential customers. For example, if the Magazia Morăriței brand targets families, using actors who are known for their family-oriented roles can resonate with parents and caregivers. The majority of actors are old Romanian actors, which highlights, once more, the Romanian heritage which, the brand wants to portray and deliver to each customer they have.

The majority of mentioned VIPs are women (73%), which can lead to two conclusions: firstly, the brand is perceived as being

feminine and secondly, the image of the owner, which is a woman, created a strong association in consumer's minds (Figure 3).

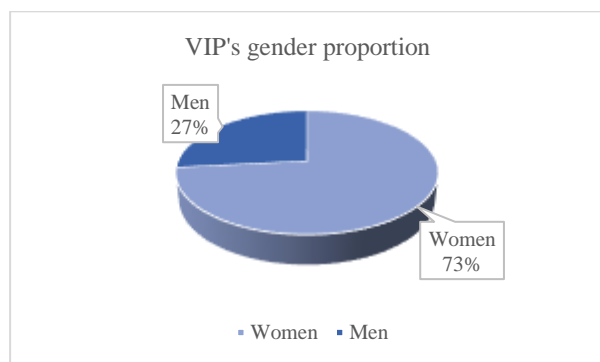


Fig. 3. The VIP's gender distribution for the brand Magazia Morăriței
 Source: Own computation in Excel.

When consumers predominantly associate a brand with female characters, it indicates that the brand has successfully positioned itself as a relevant and appealing choice for women, whether through its products, marketing efforts, or brand identity, however, for our brand, its owner is a strong figure, which might influence the perception of the brand. From Figure 4, it is noticeable the results for the second question asked, regarding consumers perceptions of the brand Magazia Morăriței.

The most mentioned colours are yellow, green and golden.

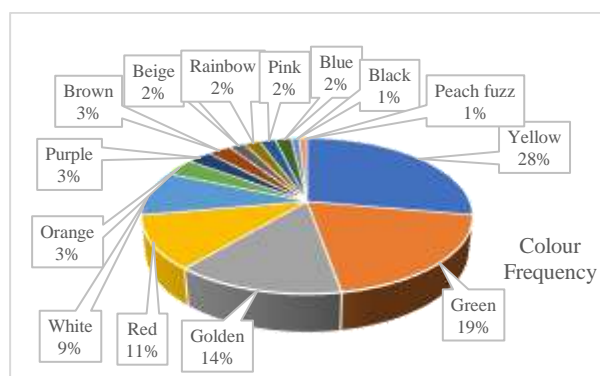


Fig. 4. The colour association distribution for the brand Magazia Morăriței
 Source: Own computation in Excel.

The associations with the colours yellow and golden are made, because, the consumers are thinking of the wheat ear and its colours. However, the colour yellow is also linked to creativity, innovation, and originality, which is what its young owner is trying to achieve.

The colour green can be associated with nature and environment, it could relate to health and wellness, while also maintaining trust.

Since the brand we investigate has ecological and traditional certifications, the colour green might be chosen because of ecological side of the business, while green is correlated with ecology and fresh products.

The first objective has been met, since consumers perceptions of the brand have been investigated. To conclude, the brand has a strong positioning in the consumers minds', and the owner of the business, is a strong figure, maybe the most important element which makes the consumers buy.

O2. To identify if social media engagement ends with a visit in the physical store.

The brand Magazia Morăriței is present in the online environment. They have a website, a Facebook account, an Instagram account and a TikTok account. Nowadays, it is an opportunity to be present online, since this is increasing the visibility and reachability of the brand.

Consistent and active presence on social media helps businesses build brand awareness and recognition.

By regularly sharing content that reflects their brand identity, values, businesses can establish a distinct personality and image in the minds of consumers, making them more memorable and recognizable.

At the time of creating this research, their online presence is highlighted in Table 1, by showing multiple information regarding the number of followers, how often they post and the number of likes and interactions for their last post.

Table 1. Social media analysis

Social media platform	Number of followers	How often they post	Number of likes for the last post	Number of comments for the last post
Facebook	7.8 k	Every two days	7	0
Instagram	1,026	Almost everyday	8	0
TikTok	266	Every six days	16	1

Source: Own processing in Word.

It is evident that even though the brand has an online presence, their customers are not really engaged to reply to posts or like them.

From the questionnaire, we found out that 76% (meaning 82) of respondents follow the brand in the online, while 24% (meaning 26) do not follow the brand in the online environment. From these answers, we wanted to get a more in-depth response, asking them on which social media account they follow the most. From the consumers which responded with yes, we further asked them on which social media platforms they follow the brand the most. In Figure 5, it is visible that most of the people are following the brand on Facebook, followed by Instagram and TikTok. Only one respondent mentioned that they follow the brand on all of the three social media platforms.

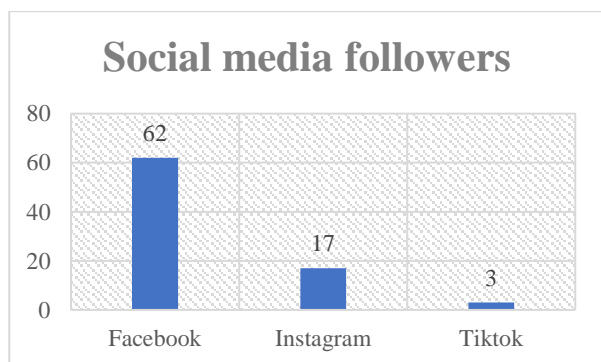


Fig. 5. Social media distribution of followers for the brand Magazia Morăriței
 Source: Own computation in Excel.

From those 82 people which responded affirmative to following the brand in the online, 63 also made a visit to the physical store, after seeing a post on the social media. Respectively, 19 of them, did not proceed with a visit to the physical store.

03. To identify the neural networks formed in consumer minds' when faced with the brand Magazia Morăriței.

In order to explore the neural networks formed in consumers minds' regarding the brand Magazia Morăriței, the quality of the sample size should be investigated. In table 2, it is observable that the majority of respondents are people working as researchers, in sales, as processors in different products, and as entrepreneurs. The coding for each respondent is done as following: R –

comes from respondent, the number after R shows the order of respondents and F or M shows the gender of the respondent.

Table 2. Table showing the quality of the sample size

Respondent no.	Age Category	Gender	Occupation
R1F	45-49	Female	Finance
R2F	35-39	Female	Entrepreneur
R3F	45-49	Female	Medicine
R4F	35-39	Female	Research
R5F	25-29	Female	Economist
R6F	40-44	Female	Art
R7F	40-44	Female	Health
R8F	35-39	Female	Education
R9F	45-49	Female	Research
R10F	40-44	Female	Research
R11F	40-44	Female	Research
R12F	40-44	Female	Research
R13F	40-44	Female	Industry
R14F	35-39	Female	Consultancy
R15F	40-44	Female	Sales
R16F	40-44	Female	Medicine
R17F	40-44	Female	Management
R18F	40-44	Female	Engineering
R19F	45-49	Female	Research
R20F	50-54	Female	Research
R1M	45-49	Male	Research
R2M	40-44	Male	Farmer
R3M	40-44	Male	Research
R4M	40-44	Male	Milk processor
R5M	45-49	Male	Research
R6M	55-59	Male	Research
R7M	35-39	Male	Zootechnics
R8M	50-54	Male	Salesmen
R9M	45-49	Male	Research
R10M	30-34	Male	Meat processor
R11M	30-34	Male	Entrepreneur
R12M	40-44	Male	Academia
R13M	35-39	Male	Economist
R14M	40-44	Male	Salesmen
R15M	45-49	Male	Teacher
R16M	50-54	Male	Agriculturist
R17M	45-49	Male	Economist
R18M	40-44	Male	Pharmacist
R19M	50-54	Male	Public sector
R20M	45-49	Male	Research

Source: Own computation in Excel.

It is observable from Figure 6, that most male respondents thought of quality, tradition, mill, yeast bread and the actual brand when asked about the first word that comes to their mind.

The yeast bread is one of their most known products, while mill and tradition refer to the name of the brand and its time on the market. The word quality shows that this brand is perceived as a very trustworthy one, bringing only high-quality products to their consumers. There were also words related to ecological

products, local products, artisanal and certified products, which shows that for the male consumers, the fact that Magazia Morăriței has ecological certifications and traditional certifications, is very important and might be a crucial factor in the buying decision process.

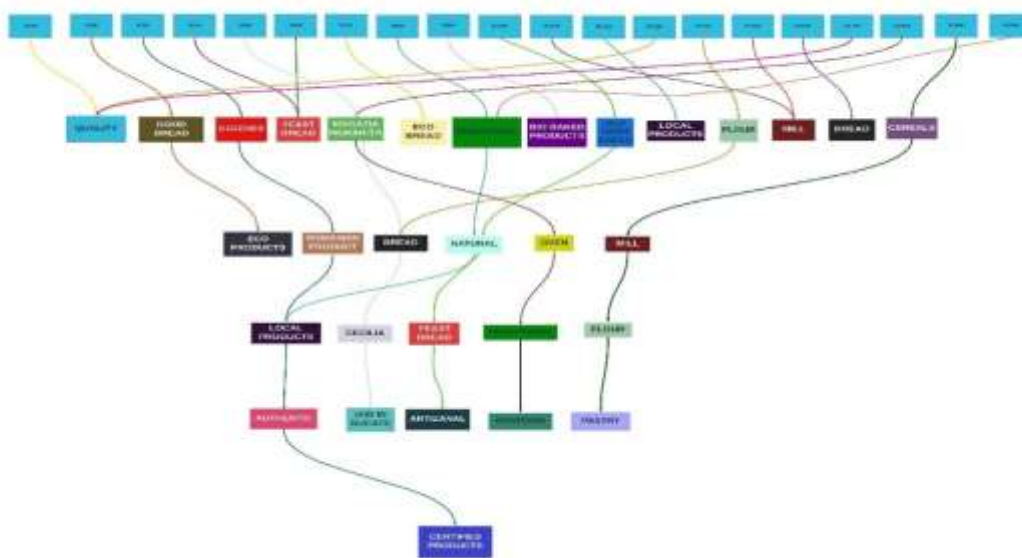


Fig. 6. Neural networks for the brand Magazia Morăriței, men responses
 Source: Own computation in Lucidchart.

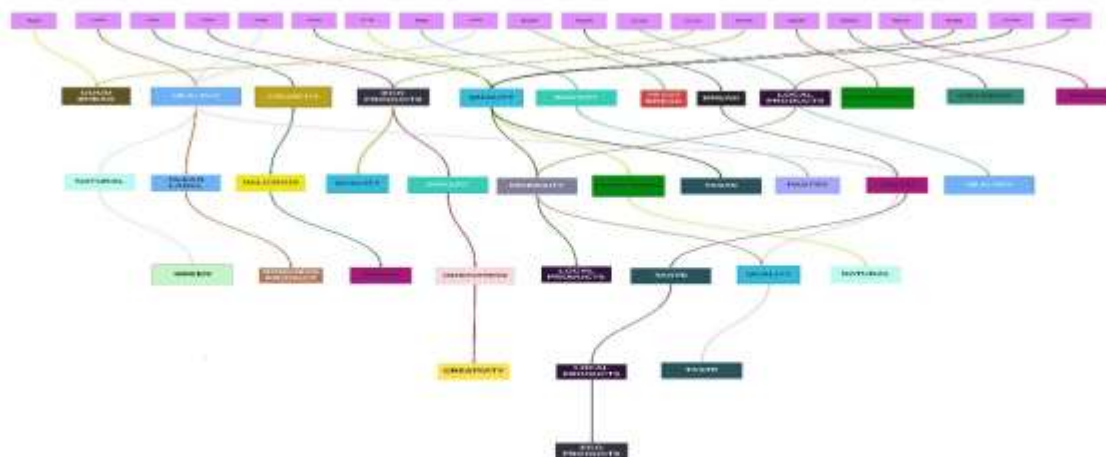


Fig. 7. Neural networks for the brand Magazia Morăriței, female responses
 Source: Own computation in Lucidchart

In Figure 7, the neural networks from women responses are highlighted through a visual. The first row of boxes represents the women respondents, this time they are pink. From each respondent, a neural path begins, for each respondent, the lines have a different

colour, signifying that each neural path is unique. However, there are some respondents which thought of the same words, like for example good bread, healthy, eco products, quality and local products. These are the strongest associations formed in the sphere of

consumers which are women. If we were to name the words which have the first position for both men and women, these are good bread, quality, traditional, and yeast bread. These associations happen, because the consumers think of the main products they buy from the brand Magazia Morăriței. The next section of findings will sustain this affirmation.

04. To identify consumers' buying behaviours for the brand Magazia Morăriței.

First of all, the respondents were asked which products they buy most frequently from Magazia Morăriței, and from table 3, it is observable that bread, and yeast bread are the on the top of the list.

Table 3. Table showing the most bought item from the store

Most bought item	Frequency
Bread	33
Yeast bread	27
Biscuits	6
Pie	5
Cookies	4
Grandma's bread	3
Crackers	3
Ecological flour	2

Source: Own computation in Excel.

From the associations made before, this step brings more light into the “grandma association”, because first we interpreted it as having a feeling that we would get when we visited our grandparents, but it turns out that this associations is made to a type of bread sold in the store, which is called grandma’s bread.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study addresses the lack of available information regarding the perception and effectiveness of marketing strategies employed by small producers in the market, focusing on the case of Magazia Morăriței. Through a comprehensive exploration of consumer mental connections and online presence analysis, the study aimed to achieve specific objectives, including identifying brand personality, assessing social media engagement, exploring neural networks

formed in consumers' minds, and understanding buying behaviours.

The findings shed light on several key insights. Firstly, the brand Magazia Morăriței is perceived positively by consumers, with strong associations made between the brand and important personalities, particularly the owner, Cecilia Țugulea, who is seen as a strong businesswoman. Moreover, consumers predominantly associate the brand with traditional values, quality, and ecological certifications, aligning with the brand's positioning as a provider of high-quality, environmentally friendly products.

Regarding social media engagement, while the brand maintains a presence across platforms, there is a disconnect between online interaction and physical store visits. While a significant portion of consumers follow the brand online, a smaller proportion translates this engagement into visiting the physical store. This suggests a potential area for improvement in bridging the gap between online engagement and offline actions.

The study also searches into the neural networks formed in consumers' minds when faced with the brand Magazia Morăriței. Both male and female respondents associate the brand with attributes such as good bread, quality, tradition, and yeast bread, reflecting the strong connection consumers have with the brand's core products. Additionally, the brand's ecological certifications and emphasis on local, artisanal products resonate with consumers and influence their buying behaviors.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of understanding consumer perceptions, leveraging online platforms effectively, and emphasizing brand values to drive consumer engagement and purchasing decisions. By addressing these insights, brands like Magazia Morăriței can further strengthen their position in the market and enhance their relationships with consumers. The digital strategy approached by the Magazia Morăriței can be an example of success for ecological and traditional certified producers, because consumers trust these certifications.

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