Consumer Perceptions of Organic Foods in Romania: A Qualitative Approach

ALEXANDRA POPA*
CARMEN HUBBARD
MATTHEW GORTON
NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY, UK
DAN PETROVICI
KENT BUSINESS SCHOOL, UK

FAO/IAMA WORKSHOP
BUDAPEST, 21ST JUNE 2009

*Corresponding author: alexandra.popa@ncl.ac.uk
Outline

- Why this research?
- Objectives
- Keller’s Theory of Brand Equity
- Qualitative Method: Focus Groups
- Results
- Conclusions
Why this research?

- International growth & an increase demand for organic food
- Romanian growth in organic production but export driven
- A gap in the literature regarding Romanian consumer behaviour
- Need to understand the constraints of the domestic market, similar with other CEECs
- Wider lessons on consumer behaviour in CEECs organic markets
Objectives

- **General objective:**
  - To investigate attitudes and perceptions of Romanian consumers and their understanding of organic food

- **Specific objectives:**
  - What are the factors driving organic food consumption?
  - What are the barriers to organic consumption?
  - Who is the Romanian organic consumer?
  - What policies should be implemented to support this market?
Keller’s Theory of Brand Equity

- It provides the theoretical basis for the empirical research and informs the themes covered in the focus groups.

- Organic can be conceptualized as a premium brand that for successful market penetration requires brand awareness coupled with strong brand associations that are favourable and unique.

Source: adapted from Keller, 1993, p.7
Focus Groups

Exploratory piece of research ... allowing “the researcher to develop an understanding about why people feel the way they do”

1. General knowledge and awareness of organic food
2. Associations of organic produce
3. Major barriers to purchasing organic food, and
4. Sources of information and the role of various stakeholders in promoting organic food

4 focus groups, Bucharest, March 2009

25 participants: 2 groups of organic consumers and 2 groups of non-organic consumers

Selection criteria: food shoppers, living in the city

Content analysis
Results

- **Brand Awareness: general knowledge of organics**
- **Organic (O) and non-organic (NO) consumers defined it similarly**
- **...but they used different terms: ecologic, eco, biologic, bio, natural**

*Natural food means that it isn’t helped to grow, while *ecologic food is controlled to be natural.* Still natural isn’t necessarily bio [NO/F, 18-24]

- **Link with traditional low input farming = the ‘unintentional’ organic foods**

*I am aware that there are *bio foods without any certification*, in open markets, for instance [O/M, 18-24]*

*Why should we pay a premium for ... a product that we can get cheaper from the countryside?* [NO/M, 25-34]
Results

- Associations of Organic Food

[Diagram showing associations of organic food, including healthy lifestyle and diet, less ingredients, physical defects, natural food, freshness, taste, direct, local known sources, international certification, tradition, high premium prices, processed foods, multinational companies, and national certification.]
Results

- Barriers to purchasing organic food
  - Premium price
    *They will always be luxury goods for a small segment of the population who can afford them* [O/F, 45-54]
  - Accessibility and convenience
    *Hard to find...you should be lucky to find any* [O/M, 35-44]
  - Diversity of products
    *There aren’t any labelled fruit or vegetables on the market* [O/F, 25-34]
  - Lack of trust in the organic label
    *I’m not sure if I can trust all the eco labelled products on the market to comply with all these standards* [NO/F, 18-24]
Results

• Sources of information and the role of various stakeholders in promoting organic food
  • Mass media
    We need an education campaign, solid, through television because it has the greatest impact [NO/F, 45-54]
  • Internet
    I started to look around [...] on the Internet, as the first source [O/M, 18-24]
  • Large grocery retailers
    labelled products ... in supermarkets and I tend to trust them [O/F, 45-55]
  • Need for better information, linked to the lack of trust in organics
    There are a lot of rich people in Bucharest, but [...] They aren’t informed [O/F, 35-44]
    I think we aren’t informed well enough about their benefits, about the method of production [NO/P3]
Results

- Greater involvement of the Romanian Government ... or not?

Even though there should be a government interest to have a healthy population, we don’t have it [O/M, 18-24]

I’m not sure that the ecologic standards are applied in our country [O/F, 55+]

Public authorities should do more to promote organics vs.

Public authorities are not trusted as messengers
Results

- The profile of Romanian organic food consumers

The urban consumer:
- Informed person with clear knowledge about organics
- With an income above the average and no time constraints
- ...and selfish

You go and buy ecologic food from supermarkets because you are educated enough and you know it’s better for you [O/F, 45-54]

With money, but informed [NO/F, 25-34]

The ecologic consumer has time, first of all, because usually ecologic foods have short use-by-dates [NO/F, 18-24]

The ecologic consumer is a little bit selfish [NO/F, 18-24]
Results

- **The profile of Romanian organic food consumers**

  But...

  *There are clearly two types of ecologic consumers.* Most of them are in rural areas and they consume eco food because they produce themselves only for their own consumption [NO/M, 35-44]

  **The rural ‘unintentional organic’ consumer:**
  - Produces for own consumption
Conclusions

- **2 distinct types of organic foods:**
  - certified, labelled products
  - ‘unintentional organic’ food from the countryside or open markets

- **...associated with 2 types of organic consumers:**
  - the urban consumer
  - the rural ‘unintentional organic’ consumer
Conclusions

- Prefer ‘unintentional’ organics
- Physical defects are good!
- Processed foods jarred with the spirit of ‘organic’
- Ecologic = Natural & niche products
- Selfish motivations, no ethics!
Conclusions

- Exploratory, qualitative research
- Localized character of results
- Further research needed
- We welcome suggestions!
Thank you for your attention!