

FOOD AND SUSTAINABILITY – ROMANIANS' EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract

The production, processing and distribution of the food we buy and eat put a strain on the environment and the health of the planet. For this reason, by taking a closer look at our eating habits and reconsidering the food we consume, we can significantly reduce our environmental footprint. Using the data sets from the most recent Special Eurobarometer report, the main goal of this paper is to offer a fresh and updated perspective regarding the food shopping and consumption behaviour of Romanian citizens. To understand the attitudes of Romanians towards food and sustainability, this study aims to uncover what are the main factors that drive food purchases and examine what would help citizens adopt a healthy and sustainable diet. Data analysis revealed that when purchasing food, Romanians put taste, food security and price above sustainability matters. Furthermore, Romanians are more likely to adopt a healthy and sustainable diet for personal reasons (their own health), rather than the protection of the environment. Responses are compared between different socio-demographic groups and with other countries from the European Union. These findings can guide the development of national educational strategies that can limit environmental degradation in Romania and lead to real behavioural changes.

Keywords: Sustainability, food, healthy and sustainable diets.

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Introduction

Recent consumer studies have revealed that people's interest in sustainable food purchases is on the rise (Saraiva et al., 2021). Scientists have confirmed that consumers are becoming more aware of what they eat and their level of concern regarding what is on their plates has increased. At the same time, most of them have begun to understand that healthy eating choices are not only beneficial for the human body, but they can also limit the negative impact on the environment and the Earth's natural resources.

Sustainability is one term that has gained significant attention from both researchers and professionals, bringing important shifts in consumer attitudes and wants. When it comes to the food system, sustainability refers to the ability to produce sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that can support the harmonious existence of people and communities over several generations (FAO, 2020). Sustainability in food can be achieved through production processes that respect the natural environment, protect animal welfare and, at the same time, create fair working conditions. At the moment, the production, processing, and distribution of the food we buy and consume is having a major impact on the environment. Therefore, switching towards sustainable diets can fix various ecological, ethical, and public health concerns. For instance, according to Springmann et al. (2016), transitioning towards more plant-based diets that are in line with standard dietary guidelines could reduce global mortality by 6-10% and food-related greenhouse gas emissions by 29-70% until 2050 (p. 4146).

The global pandemic has further highlighted the need to understand food shopping and consumption behaviour in order to reduce this crisis and improve the management of supply chains. For a smooth transition towards a global sustainable food system, it is mandatory to understand people's current eating habits and dietary options. The scientific literature on the topic reflects the dominance of the studies dedicated to consumers in the United States and Western Europe, probably because organic food, viewed as a more sustainable alternative to conventional food, is considered to be a Western invention (Petrescu et al., 2017, p. 50). To compare, studies concerning Eastern countries are rather scarce, although organic markets have started to emerge in these nations. Thus, the main goal of this paper is to offer a fresh and updated perspective regarding the food shopping and consumption behaviour of Romanian citizens. The variables analysed are motivations influencing food purchases, frequency of healthy and sustainable eating, and key factors that would motivate consumers to switch towards a sustainable diet. A thorough understanding of people's motives to buy healthy food can be very helpful for local policy makers.

The study is organized in the following way. First of all, a literature review on the topic of food sustainability in Europe and Romania is provided. Second of all, the study methodology is presented. Next, main results are analysed and discussed. Finally, a conclusion highlighting key findings and recommendations is provided.

1. Literature review

Our food consumption behaviour directly affects the planet's resources, therefore immediate changes are required in the way food is approached and prepared. According to global statistics presented by Ritchie (2019), food production is responsible for one-quarter of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, also heavily impacting on tropical deforestation and biodiversity loss. Furthermore, while obesity affects one in three people and is the leading cause of death worldwide (Crabtree, 2017), around 821 million people in the world, or one in nine, do not have access to enough food (FAO, 2021).

At the consumer level, several studies have confirmed that the majority of people tend to have a positive attitude towards sustainable diets and organic food products. However, when it comes to actually purchasing or consuming them, the number is considerably much lower. Two explanations are offered for the low purchase rates: the high price of organic food and their limited availability (Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2005, p. 809). Petrescu et al. (2017) confirmed that while consumers are strongly oriented toward organic food (certified or uncertified) and driven by health concerns and taste, they are primarily deterred by price and lack of availability (p. 46). Earlier research has also revealed that there are country-specific differences both in marketing of sustainable diets and purchase frequencies of organic food (Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2005, p. 809). According to Dobrescu (2019), demand among Romanian consumers for organic products has trended upward in recent years and is poised to expand further due to a combination of factors, including Romania's growing economy, more focus among retailers on organic products, and consumer awareness (p. 6).

When looking solely at Romania, there are some alarming statistics regarding food production and organic farming. For example, although the agricultural industry in Romania represents a significant part of the national economic growth, agricultural practices have not been sufficiently modernized in the last three decades. Thus, Romania ranks last in the European Union (EU) in terms of area used for organic farming, according to 2019 data from Eurostat, the European Bureau of Statistics (Oprescu, 2021). The share of organic agriculture represents approximately 3% of the total area used for agriculture in the country. Therefore, the total organic area in Romania is among the smallest in Europe, almost three times lower than the European average (Nițu, 2021). At the other end of the scale, the country with the

largest organic area in the EU is Austria (25.3%), where the first organic farms were established in 1920 and has now reached over 23.500 organic farms, according to official data published by the Austrian authorities (Nițu, 2021).

However, the total organic area in Europe must continue to grow in the coming years to reach the European Commission's target of at least 25% of Europe's agricultural land under organic farming by 2030. According to latest data from Eurostat, Romania had 12.5 million hectares of agricultural land in 2016, which means that the European Commission wants more than 3 million hectares of Romania's agricultural area to be used for growing organic products (Iorgoveanu, 2020). Another goal of the Green Deal's Farm to Fork strategy is to reduce the use of chemical pesticides by 50% (European Commission, 2019). For Romania, this translates into eliminating around 5 million kilograms of pesticides from local agricultural practices, as Eurostat data showed that Romanian farmers ranked sixth in the EU in terms of pesticide use in 2018, with 10 million kilograms (Iorgoveanu, 2020).

Another food-related problem concerning Romania is waste. European Commission data revealed that the Romanian consumer spends around 40% of its income on food, while the European average is 10% (Food Waste Combat, 2020, p. 6). Although it seems that Romanians eat more, they eat poorly, wasting a lot of food. According to global statistics, Romanian consumers throw away a quarter of the food they buy (FAO, 2020). Together with experts in the field, local policy makers should try to identify the reasons why consumers waste food and the methods through which food waste could be prevented and solved.

2. Methodology

Using the data sets from the most recent Special Eurobarometer report "Making our food fit for the future – Citizens' expectations" (European Commission, 2021), the main goal of this paper is to offer a fresh and updated perspective regarding food shopping and consumption behaviour of Romanian citizens. The survey developed by the European Commission was distributed during summer 2020 (2 months, August and September) across all countries part of the European Union, resulting in a total of 27.237 interviews. The population in scope is represented by EU citizens aged 15 years or older. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the respondents' home and Romanian language. For Romania, a total of 1.103 respondents were recruited for the study. Responses are compared between different socio-demographic groups and with other countries from the European Union.

3. Results

3.1 What drives food purchases in Romania?

Firstly, respondents were asked to rate the top three most important characteristics when buying food from a list of ten items (taste, food safety, cost, geographical origin of aliments, nutritional value, expiration date, degree of food processing, personal ethics and beliefs, impact on the environment, convenience, other, don't know). Food safety (43%), taste (39%) and expiration date (38%) are the top three factors that drive food purchases in Romania. Food safety (how harmful is eating that product) represents the most mentioned factor in Romania, along with four other countries from South Europe (Italy, Greece, Cyprus, and Spain). Next, Romanian respondents rank taste as second most important factor when buying food. Interestingly, expiration date is not the most picked answer in any EU state, but it is in the top three most mentioned answers for Lithuanians (41%), Romanians (38%) and Croats (35%). At European level, taste, followed by food safety and cost, are the most mentioned factors influencing food purchases.

Data analysis revealed that around one in three mentions cost (36%) and nutritional value of aliments (29%) as factors influencing food purchases in Romania. People’s ethics and beliefs regarding sustainability and food equity (22%) and the geographical origin of food are less often considered (20%), followed by other response options, such as the food being minimally processed (16%) and environmental footprint (16%). The least mentioned answer is convenience (12%).

Next, some key demographic variations were observed regarding food purchases in Romania. First of all, women (44%) are more likely than men (42%) to mention food safety as the most important factor when buying food. The same trend can be observed at European level. As it can be observed in Figure 1 below, food safety is less important for younger respondents with less than 40% of participants aged 15-24 choosing this answer, as opposed to around 50% of those aged 55 and over. Moreover, it was revealed that education is another factor influencing food purchases in Romania. Food safety appears to be more important for Romanians who finished their education at 15 years old or under compared to those who finished education at 20 years old or over (47% vs. 42%).

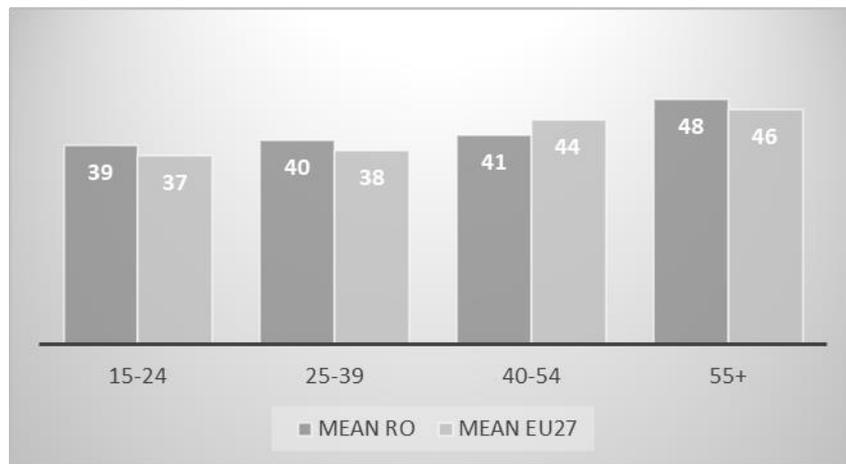


Figure 1. Importance of food safety for different age groups (Romania and Europe average)

Source: Author’s own calculations

3.2 How often do Romanians consume healthy and sustainable food?

Next, respondents were asked to mention how often they consume healthy and sustainable food on a 5-point scale: always, most of the time, from time to time, never, or don’t know. As observed in Figure 2 below, more than half of Romanian respondents (54%) say they consume healthy and sustainable food most of the time. At European level, results are similar, with around 56% of respondents taking this position. Around one in three Romanians mentions they consume healthy and sustainable food from time to time, while 12% of them declare they do it always and 4% never.

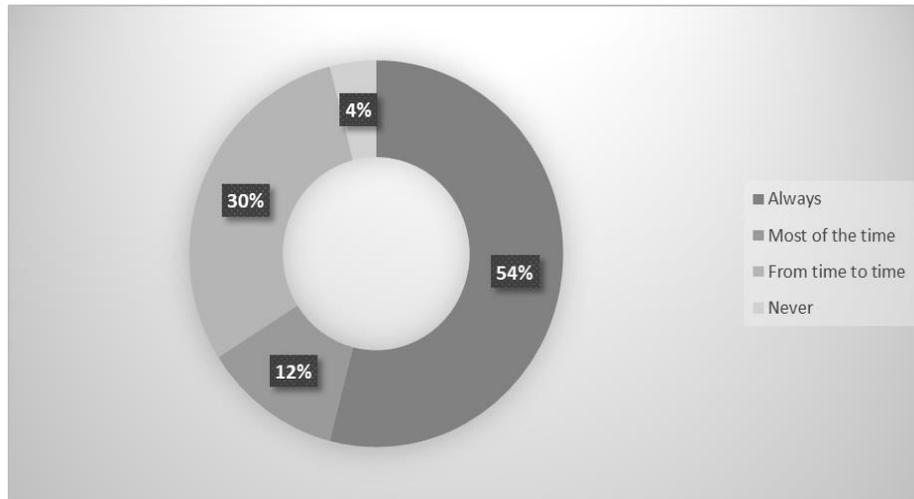


Figure 2. Frequency of healthy and sustainable food consumption among Romanians
Source: Author's own calculations

Regarding demographic differences, females are more likely than males to declare they consume healthy and sustainable food always (12% vs. 11%) or most of the time (53% vs. 49%). Furthermore, participants aged 55 and over mentioned they consume healthy and sustainable food always or most of the time more often than younger respondents aged 15-24 (11% vs. 13% and 47% vs. 50% respectively). Last but not least, education can also influence healthy and sustainable food consumption: respondents who finished education at 20 years old or over (13%) are two times more likely to say they consume healthy and sustainable food always compared with those who are still in education (6%).

3.3 What would help Romanians consume healthy and sustainable food more often?

Finally, respondents were asked to mention what would help them consume healthy and sustainable food more often. As highlighted in Figure 3 below, around one in three of participants mentions that affordability (36%) and availability (35%) would help them consume healthy and sustainable food more often. Earlier studies confirmed that promoting healthier and more sustainable choices must overcome two important obstacles: concerns regarding affordability and price of organic products. A similar pattern is observed in the results of Petrescu et al. (2017)'s survey: The main obstacles in the purchase of organic food or of a higher quantity of it are the higher prices compared to conventional products (mentioned by 83.6% of sample) and its low availability (mentioned by 52.9% of sample) (p. 64). The study also revealed that almost three quarters of consumers (70.3%) perceived certified organic food as more expensive than the conventional, confirming the nomination of the price as main obstacle to consumption (Petrescu et al., 2017, p. 58).

Education regarding food and sustainability is mentioned by 32% of respondents, being ranked the third most mentioned answer in Romania. Just over a third of respondents mention that they would be helped by fair labels detailing the product's environmental impact (31%). Fewer respondents say that product placement in-store (27%) and easy and quick preparation of food and meals (26%) would facilitate consumption of healthy and sustainable food. Interestingly, respondents who picked cost as the most important aspect of food purchases are also more likely to consider the financial aspects when shopping for food. For instance,

they are more likely to say that affordability would motivate them to consume healthy and sustainable food (50% vs. 44% for the Romanian average).

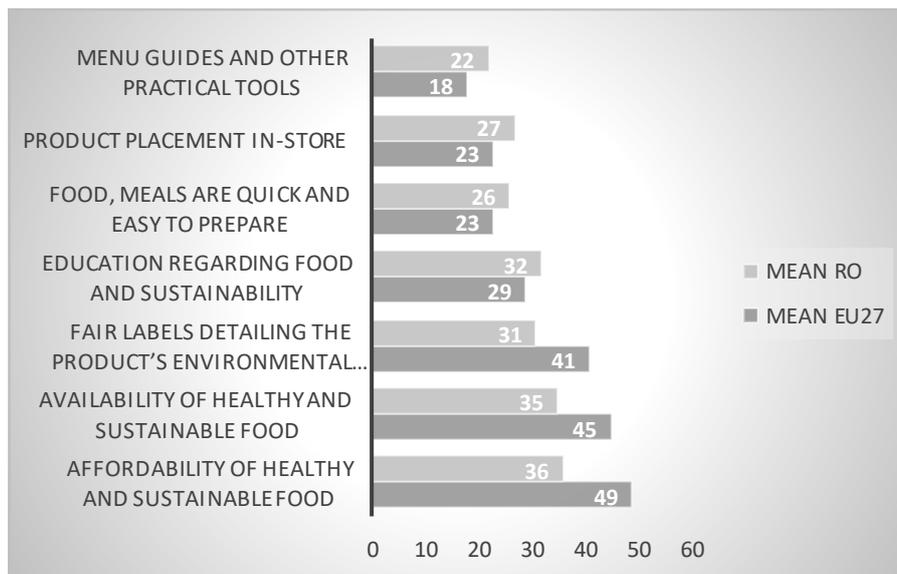


Figure 3. Factors that would motivate respondents to consume more healthy and sustainable food (Romania and Europe average)

Source: Author's own calculations

The socio-demographic analysis highlighted the following variations between categories: Romanians aged 55 and over (41%) are almost two times more likely to say that availability of healthy and sustainable food would help them consume healthy and sustainable food more often, compared to respondents between the ages of 15 and 24 years (21%). Second of all, men (38%) are more likely than women (34%) to say that availability of healthy and sustainable food would help them eat more healthy and sustainable food products. When it comes to education level, those who finished studying at the age of 20 or over (42%) are the most likely to mention affordability of healthy and sustainable food, while those still studying (24%) are the least likely to consider this factor.

Conclusions

Data analysis revealed that Romanians' food choices, just like the rest of Europe, are still dominated by the main classic criteria: taste, cost, and safety. When they decide to buy food, Romanians rely on personal factors, thus prioritizing taste, the safety of what they eat and its price over other factors related to sustainability, for example the geographical origin of aliments, animal well-being issues or the product's environmental impact. Therefore, it can be concluded that when it comes to food purchases, sustainability is more related to personal factors rather than environmental concerns for Romanian consumers. Interestingly, socio-demographic characteristics seem to influence food shopping and consumption behaviour of respondents. Younger Romanians are less worried about food safety or its geographical

origin than older participants and are more likely to be influenced by the environmental impact of the food they consume. Furthermore, men and women differ in terms of frequency when consuming healthy and sustainable food, with women consuming it more often than men.

The study also revealed that although most Romanians mention they consume healthy and sustainable food most of the time, main obstacles to sustainable food choices are availability, cost, and information. These are the most mentioned aspects that would motivate consumers to eat healthy and sustainable food more often. Thus, for a smooth transition towards a global and local sustainable food system, solutions need to be found for these three barriers. For example, sustainable and healthy products may be available, but if consumers are not aware of them, there will be no sustainable and healthy choices. Therefore, it should be mandatory that food labels contain information regarding sustainability, and healthy food should be more promoted by policy makers. Another recommendation would be the development of national campaigns on themes regarding nutrition and organic food products through all media channels, events, and institutions. When it comes to availability, organic food products should be diversified in order for consumers to have more alternatives to choose from.

Romanians need to be familiarized with the benefits of sustainable diets and encouraged to adopt such diets. Petrescu et al. (2017) recommend that marketers appeal to health benefits and taste of food in order to attract consumers to the organic products, should inform them about the selling points/variety and make their merchandise more visible (p. 63). As pointed out by Gracia and de Magistris (2008), the extent of the information and promotion campaigns should be as broad as possible, reaching not only non-organic food consumers but also existing consumers because greater knowledge of organic food products will not only induce new individuals to buy organic food products, but will also increase the level of consumption among existing consumers (p. 395). People need to be reminded that little drops of water make mighty ocean (Carney, 1845), as our individual eating choices, multiplied on a large scale, every day, can have a huge positive impact on the environment.

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