

Consumers Behavior Features Upon the Organic Products in Romania

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Although the market for organic products is constantly growing worldwide, underlining that, at least for some product categories, is no longer just a niche, in Romania there is a limited amount of research on this subject. This paper aims to provide concrete information on buying behavior and consumption of organic products in Romania. The conclusions are based on the results of two separate researches: a quantitative research among consumers, representative for urban areas at a national level and a qualitative research among consumers, conducted through focus group method. Compared to some existing research, we insisted rather on deepening and understanding of the responses received, than a mere quantification of information provided by respondents. This approach provides an overview and interesting information about the awareness of the respondents, their perception of organic products or the level of trust that respondents have in organic products. Also, we could identify the main factors influencing the buying / not purchasing of organic products, and the motivations behind buying behavior and consumption of organic products. The conclusions showed unequivocally that there are significant features among Romanian consumers of organic products compared with consumers in more developed markets with a longer tradition in organic farming, such as the Western Europe or USA. Among these, the most important seem to be self-consumption, consumption of uncertified products, but perceived as organic and low levels of trust in the authenticity of organic products.

Key words: organic products, consumer behavior, awareness, Romanian market

JEL classification: M31, Q57.

1. Introduction

The organic market known globally, rapid and continuous growth. According to the latest data provided by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, the largest organization in the world, organic food market doubles practically both in volume and value in an interval of 7-8 years (FiBL-IFOAM, 2015). However, consumption of organic products is still low, compared to the conventional food. In most developed countries in terms of consumption of organic products, such as Denmark and Austria, the share of organic products in total food market in value stands only around 6-7%, the European average being much lower, below the United States, 4% (FiBL-IFOAM, 2013).

Under these conditions, the market for organic products, in many cases still in the niche segment, is in constant transformation. Also, bear in mind that there are significant differences in terms of market specifics. These differences are caused by geographical factors, cultural, economic or by ecological farming tradition from a certain area and refers both to consumers and to the offer of existing products (Pearson & Henryks, 2008). The organic market in the US is significantly different from that of the EU, including in terms of legislation (Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013) (Klein & Winickoff, 2011), but there is substantial variation between national markets in the EU and even between different regions within the same state (Zanoli, et al., 2012) (Wier et al., 2008).

In Romania, the organic products are still in the first phase of its development, in the early stage. Although the first organic producers were registered with more than 15 years ago, only in the last few years the market began to experience a rapid development, based mainly on imports. In fact, at present, there is no official reporting from government authorities on total market value of organic products in Romania, exports or imports. According to an estimate IFOAM (2015), in 2011 the Romanian market value of organic products stood at 80 million, but in the report to which I referred to, there is no information about the way in which such an estimate was made.

In addition, the volume of research aimed for to the ecological field in Romania is, so far, limited.

In this context, we intend to achieve a profile of Romanian consumer of organic products, specifically highlighting the peculiarities by which it is different from consumers in developed markets in terms of organic products, as it is in some European countries or the USA.

2. Research Methodology

The study results are based on data obtained using two distinct research: a quantitative research among consumers and a qualitative research among consumers.

The quantitative research was conducted in April-June 2014 and was intended to provide an overview of the Romanian market for organic products. This covered a sample of 1,000 people, nationwide representative for urban areas. It took into account a sampling stratified according to gender, age and type of place of residence. As a method of data collection was used questionnaire administered by telephone. In the absence of previous research representative for Romanian market, we decided to use a large number of open questions. This has facilitated obtain highly accurate information, as well as a brief assessment of the level of knowledge, of consumer perception and attitudes about organic products.

For a thorough understanding of the results obtained from quantitative research, in November-December 2014 was conducted a qualitative research among consumers. This one targeted the objective assessment of the level of knowledge of Romanian consumer about organic products, and also identifying sources of confusion that many consumers make between organic and natural products. There were held three focus groups, each bringing together participants from a certain age group (18-25 years, 18-40 years, respectively over 40 years). In preliminary testing of individual knowledge and perceptions, the participants answered to self-addressed questionnaires containing six open questions.

3. The Characteristics of organic Market in Romania

Given the fact that researches among consumers focused only respondents from urban areas, it is necessary to clarify this issue. One of the demographic peculiarities in Romania is the very large share of residents in rural areas, compared with the European average. According to the National Institute of Statistics, 46% of the Romanian population lives in rural areas (INS Romania, 2011). Although it represents almost half of the total population, it is very unlikely that rural residents will purchase organic products. These features of rural consumers were identified and analyzed by several authors in the literature (Stoian, 2003) (Dinu et al., 2014) and refers to low purchasing power or limited awareness. The most important feature is, however, in terms of buying organic products, self-consumption. The vast majority of rural residents provide their food requirements from own production in semi-subsistence farms, limiting themselves to buy only what they can not produce themselves. Given these issues, they are not in question for a research that has as main objective buying habits of organic products.

3.1. The availability of organic products on the market

In stores from urban areas, however, reaches only a part (difficult to estimate) of local organic production. According to producers, many of them prefer to export their products, and others, because of low economic power, limit themselves to sell at the farm gate or locally. In supermarkets, in particular, is available on a relatively small range of organic products, mostly imported or from the few bigger Romanian producers.

Most manufacturers surveyed mentioned major difficulties to add value to their goods and particularly the difficulties encountered when trying to break into supermarket chains. Less than a third of respondents say they fail to capitalize their production in the "modern trade". Because of this, fresh organic plant products, highly appreciated by consumers, are almost impossible to be found in big stores.

3.2. The level of Romanian consumer information on organic products

In Romania, the majority of the urban population consider that they know what organic products are (over 83% of respondents say they know what organic products are, while only 13% say they do not know and 3% say they are not sure).

Regarding the awareness degree about organic products, the respondents have self-assessed their knowledge on a scale of 10 steps. Arithmetic average of the scores given by respondents is 6.75 and the median and modal group are set to 7, corresponding to an average level of information. Basically, depending on the level of awareness, we could identify three categories of respondents, to which is added the group of those who do not know what organic products are (Fig. 1)

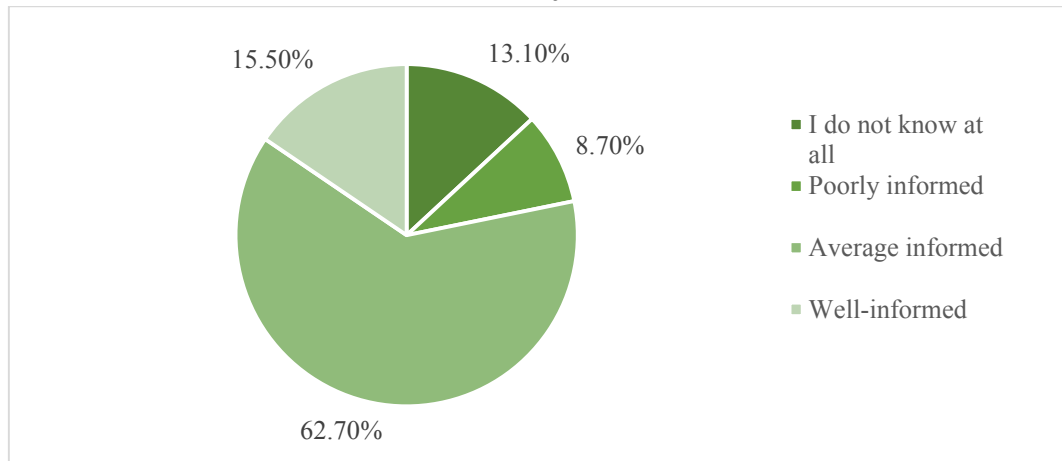


Figure 1: How informed about organic products Romanian consumers considers themselves

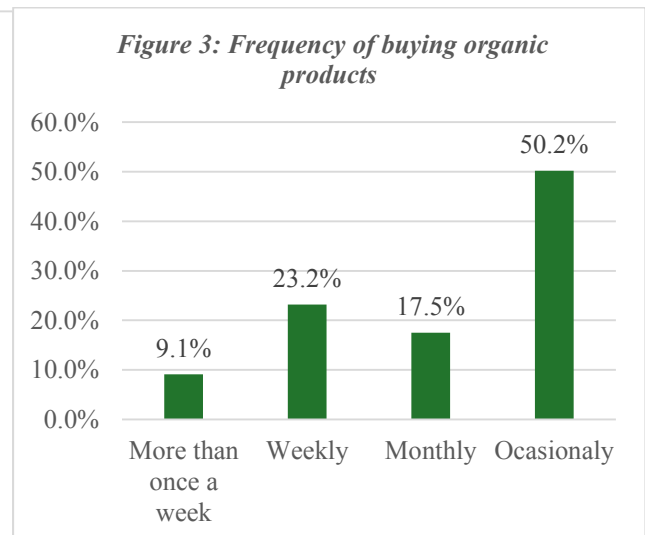
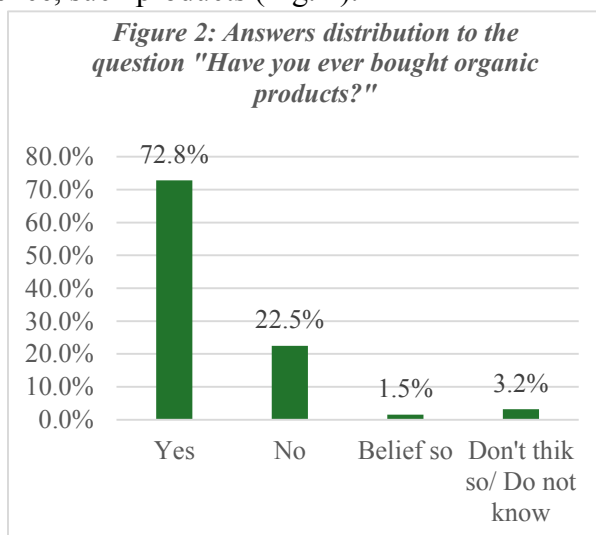
These results are largely confirmed in the qualitative research, where the knowledge of respondents was assessed objectively. The share of those who can sufficiently clearly define organic products is about 15%. Instead, it seems more significant the percentage of those who have only a vague idea about organic products, but this will be detailed in the next sections.

There is a statistically significant link between the level of information considered on an ordinal scale with 4 steps and the level of education of respondents. As the level of education is higher, respondents consider themselves more informed about organic products.

There is also a correlation between the age group from which the respondents belong and their level of information regarding the organic products. Thus, young people declare the least informed, while the elderly are the group that is considered the most well informed. Self respondents assesment was confirmed by the results of the qualitative research. It can be said that the younger the respondents are, they know less things about organic products.

3.3. The frequency of organic products purchase among Romanian consumers

Almost three quarters of the respondents who know what organic products are, said that they bought at least once, such products (Fig. 2).



At the same time, most buyers purchase organic products occasionally. However, it may seem large the proportion of those who say they buy such products weekly or more often (32%). This fact, as well as the lack of any correlation between purchase frequency and the level of education, place of residence, age group or sex of respondents could be explained by the confusion that some respondents are doing, between certified organic products and similar conventional products, which they believe to be organic. The extent of this confusion can not be estimated in the current state of research.

3.4. Buying habits of organic products

Most of Romanian consumers buy organic products from the supermarket (Tab. 1)

	<i>From where do you usually buy organic products?</i>	<i>Respondents percentage</i>
1	Supermarket; Hypermarket	39,6
2	Marketplace	36,9
3	Directly from producer	17,5
4	Organic/natural products specialized stores	14,2
5	Natural herbal stores	6,4
6	Organic products producers fairs. Sale expositions.	3,5
7	Online stores; from the internet	2,1

Table 1: Main places where Romanian consumers buy organic products

It also stands out that a very high percentage of buyers say they buy organic produce from the marketplace. In food markets in Romania, certified organic products are quasi-inexistent. At the same time, the percentage of those who say that they use to buy from specialized shops is quite high, according to the increase in recent years in the number of this type of commercial units, practically reflecting the trend of market expansion. It should be mentioned that the questions asked to the respondents was an open one, with the possibility to provide multiple answers. Also during an open question, the respondents mentioned the organic products they buy most frequently (Tab. 2)

	<i>Which are the organic products that you buy most often?</i>	<i>Organic buyers percentage</i>
1	Fresh vegetables	36,8
2	Fresh fruits	30,1
3	Milk; Milk products	29,5
4	Eggs	17,5
5	Meat	13,6
6	Cosmetics, personal hygiene	4,7
7	Processed meat products, cold cuts	4
8	Bread, bakery products	4
9	Honey	4

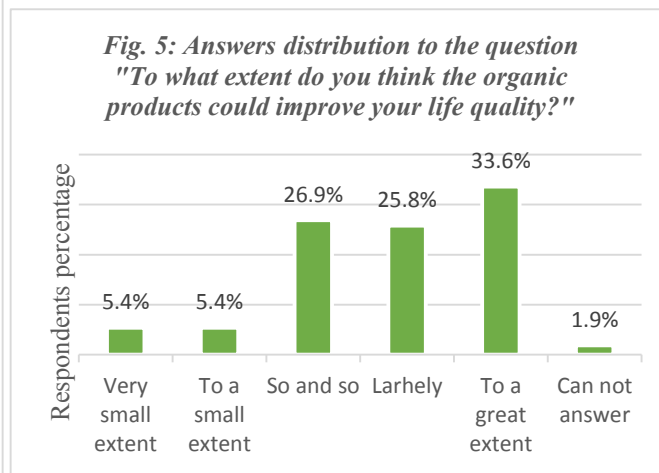
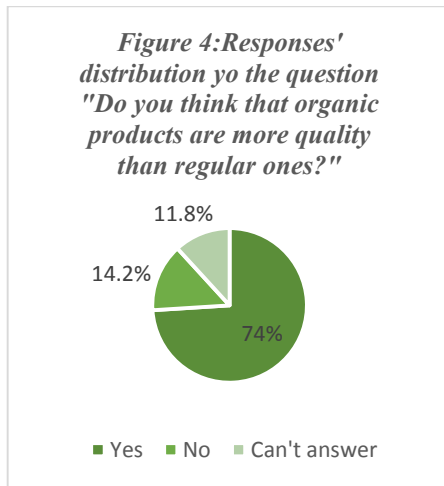
Table 2: Most often purchased organic products

The hierarchy of responses to this question is another indicator of the size of confusion that Romanian consumers make between products certified organic and conventional products presented as organic. It is highly unlikely that such large percentages of consumers declare that frequently buy organic products which are found rarely and at high prices on Romanian market (such as meat or sausage). This feature I thoroughly highlighted in the qualitative research and we will be detailed in the organic products definition section.

It can be seen that a significant number of respondents mentioned cosmetics, among the most frequently purchased organic products. In a separate question, 40% of the buyers of organic products said they also buy non-food organic products. The most frequently mentioned are cosmetics (by 38% of the latter), detergents / cleaning products (25%) and clothing / textiles (23%). With a significant proportion were also mentioned other categories of non-food products such as herbal pharmaceuticals, bags / other packing or lighting tools.

4. Romanian consumer perception upon organic products

The overwhelming majority of the population from urban areas who knows what the organic products are, has a positive image about them. Both buyers and non-buyers of these products are able to identify a number of benefits which, in their view, the consumption of organic products can bring. Among non-buyers, 74% consider that organic products have better quality than conventional ones. (Fig. 4)



Analyzing the same subsample of the non-buyers, it is noted that about 55% of them believe that organic products could improve their quality of life in a large or very large extent (Fig. 5), while less than 11% respond that in a small or very small extent. In addition, among those who have not yet bought organic products, about 55% said they would like in the future, to try and buy such products.

4.1. The main reasons for not purchasing organic products.

In this context, it becomes even more interesting to understand why some categories of respondents did not buy organic products so far. The main factors that have restricted buying organic products, we could identify also with the help of an open question, with the possibility of multiple answer (Tab. 3).

	<i>What are the main reasons why you have not bought organic products so far?</i>	<i>Respondents Percentage</i>
1	Own production. Family has a farm at the countryside	33,1
2	The lake of confidence in conformity of the organic products	28,9
3	The price is high	23,2
4	Organic products are not available. They are hard to find	9,9
5	Not interested in organic products. Do not need such products	8,5
6	Lack of information about organic products	4,2
7	Low income	2,8

Table 3: Main reasons for not buying organic products

The most common reason for not purchasing organic products is represented by its own production. This is one of significant particularities of the Romanian market, and is manifested, in an important measure also to the population in urban areas. The appearance itself can not be seen as negative, the production in its own household, for family consumption, being closer to the standards of organic farming than conventional intensive agriculture. For producers that sell organic products, this becomes a problem, especially in spring-summer season, when the sales of certain categories of products, such as eggs, drop dramatically (Bozga, 2013).

On second place, as number of mentions, we find the lack of consumer confidence. This will be treated separately in a following chapter.

The price, who is identified in specialized literature usually as the main reason for non-buying (Marian, et al., 2014) (Stolz et al., 2011), is found only on third place, less than a quarter of non-buyers mentioning this factor. Apparently, at least for respondents who did not have the opportunity to produce their own or within the family food, the lack of confidence in conformity of organic products is a reason for non-buying more frequently reported than high prices.

4.2. The main factors that determine buying organic products among Romanian consumers

Asked directly and unassisted what determines them to pay extra for organic products compared to conventional ones, organic products buyers offered the following responses (Tab. 4)

	<i>What would cause you to pay more for organic products than the usual ones?</i>	<i>Respondents percentage</i>
1	Reasons concerning the health	62,6
2	Superior quality; Better taste	22,8
3	Do not contain chemicals/hormons/antibiotics/GMO	7,8
4	Product safety; Quality guarantee	4,1
5	Care for the environment	2,1
6	Concern for the welfare of children	1,8
7	Does not pay extra	4,3

Table 4: Reasons that motivates consumers to pay more for organic products

The most frequently mentioned were health-related reasons (62.6%). In this category there were included responses such as "are healthier," which refers rather to the product and the effects that it has upon health, as well as responses such as "health problems", "I am allergic to the other" " a healthy lifestyle ", " I want to live longer "or" health ", which refers to the health and lifestyle of the respondent. It is obvious that organic products are associated by Romanian consumers with health and a healthy lifestyle, with a better quality of life. This aspect is not surprising at all, since it is common to consumers of organic products on the entire planet.

Also, high quality organic products and their better taste are mentioned in large number by both Romanian consumers and the ones from more developed markets. A series of studies conducted in recent years, especially in the US market, reveals that the option for organic products is an act utilitarian and hedonic (Lee & Yun, 2015). Thus, taste, appearance or health concerns are the main motivating factors in choosing organic products.

However, both the US market and on the European one, the concern for the environment is still one of the major reasons why consumers choose to pay extra for organic products. In the US, for a long time, the concern for the environment has been considered the main motivating factor in choosing such products (Nie & Zepeda, 2011). Currently, according to recent researches, is considered to be second after health. Lee & Yun (2015), citing studies nationally representative, say that over a third of US respondents confessed that they would be willing to pay more for environmentally-safe or ethical products compared to conventional ones.

In Romania, only 2% of respondents are motivated by the concern for the environment to pay extra for organic products. The percentage may seem surprisingly low, but it is real, and the major difference from other similar researches results, could be explained by the nature of the question (it is an open question, with unassisted response, the respondent not being in any way influenced to adopt socially desirable behavior). In fact, this result was confirmed in focus group research type, where more than half of the participants do not realize the benefits of organic agriculture brings to the environment and those who realized this fact, did not seem willing to pay extra.

Another significant difference compared to other studies, including some conducted on the Romanian market (Stanciu, 2008) (Dettmann & Dimitri, 2009) is represented by the extremely low percentage of those who said that one of the reasons for buying organic products is the concern for the welfare of the children (1.8%). In literature, especially in economically powerful countries, is frequently resumed the idea that families with children in care are more concerned with healthy eating and often buy organic products. This issue is not confirmed on Romanian market. After analyzing the quantitative data, it resulted that there is no statistical connection between the intention or frequency of buying organic products and the fact that the respondents have minors in care or not.

4.3. Romanian consumer confidence in organic products

Low level of trust in organic products can be considered another feature of the Romanian consumer. Although it has a favorable image about organic products and trusts, as a rule, in their qualities, the Romanian consumer doubts the authenticity of organic products, that they strictly fulfill the specific legal rules. The lack of confidence in conformity of organic products is mentioned frequently, in the context of open questions, among the main reasons that restrict or limit the purchase of such products.

When asked directly how much confidence they have that organic products strictly fulfill the rules for certification, the Romanian consumers are rather skeptical (Fig. 6)

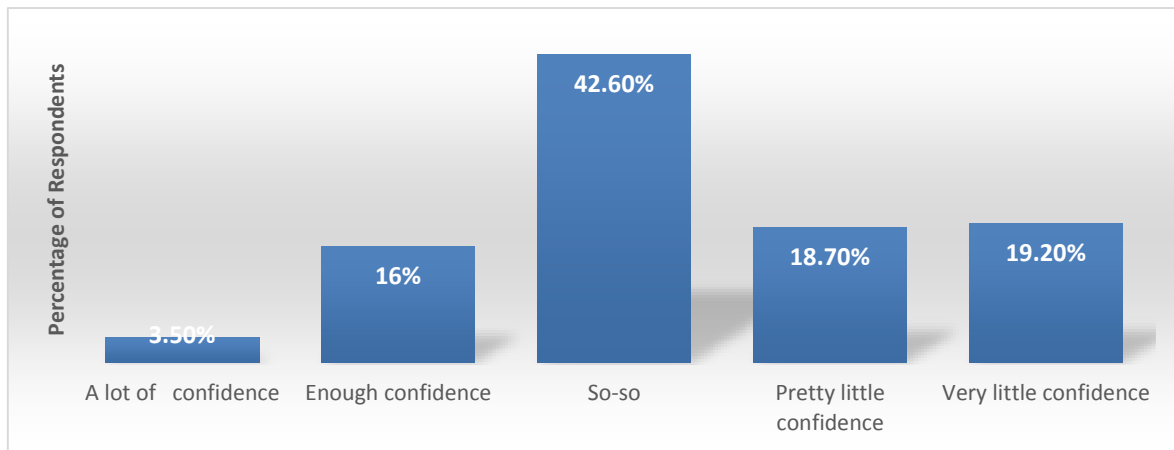


Figure 6: The respondents' level of confidence regarding organic products

It may be noted that a satisfactory level of confidence (a lot of confidence or enough confidence) was expressed by 19.5% of respondents, while 38% of them said they had pretty little or very little confidence that organic products observe the certification standards.

A special discussion may exist in the case of more than 42% of the respondents who were placed in the middle of the scale.

In the present case, the answer "so so", we consider that rather denotes a lack of trust in the authenticity of organic products. It can be assumed, however, that, among of those who gave this response, there is a percentage of undecided and a number of respondents who simply are not interested of the field, but whose percentages can not be determined in this research (Bozga, 2015).

The problems regarding the lack of confidence in the authenticity of organic products were also reported by other authors, including on markets such as Germany (Janssen & Hamm, 2011). But a level below 20%, compared with the European average, according to the statements of the President of the European office of ecological certification, it is around 70%, seems worryingly low. In addition, a more detailed research among manufacturers and governmental authorities leads to the conclusion that consumer suspicions about the authenticity of organic products could be justified, even when we are talking about products certified by authorized institutions (Bozga, 2015).

5. Conclusions

Following research, we could identify, in good measure, the main factors influencing the buying / not purchasing organic products, and also the motivations that influences the buying and consumption behavior towards organic products consumers. We have also obtained concrete information on the respondents' awareness, their perception of organic products and the level of trust that respondents have in organic products.

As a result of primary data analysis, were highlighted a number of peculiarities of the Romanian consumer, compared to consumers from more developed European markets or United States. We consider that the most significant of these is the lake of trust in organic products. Although they have a good image among consumers, there is a high degree of skepticism regarding the organic products' compliance with the European organic agriculture regulations. Very low level of confidence (less than 20% of respondents say they have enough or very much confidence in organic products) can be correlated with low level of awareness of a significant part of consumers. More specifically, we are referring in this case to the confusion that some consumers make between products certified organic and conventional products, in some cases perceived as natural, bought directly from the manufacturers, but which do not feature any guarantee in this regard. On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest that at least a part of consumers' concerns may be entitled, meaning that some certified organic products on the market do not strictly comply with European legal regulations.

Another important feature of Romanian consumers is the high level of consumption from own production, which is also manifested in urban areas. More than a third of non-buyers of organic products say they do not need to buy such products, because they or family members own a country household and

produce themselves. This situation could have a positive influence on the Romanian consumer, meaning that producing for own consumption it is possible to achieve healthier and more environmentally friendly products. At the same time, it represents a major problem for producers, especially for organic farmers, faced with large seasonal swings in demand.

Also, several other peculiarities of Romania organic product consumer could be identified. Compared to the results of many previous research conducted on various markets, it may seem surprising that, in Romania, children do not in any way influence buying behavior of organic products. There is no difference between adults who have children in care and those who do not, in terms of intention or frequency of organic products purchase. Also reported to the results of research conducted on developed markets, it is interesting that only a small percentage of Romanian consumers (under 2%) are willing to pay more for green products out of concern for the environment.

One of the most important findings of the study is that there are a significant number of consumers who fail to distinguish between organic certified products and conventional ones. Some respondents declared they do not know how can recognize when buying organic products. A significant group of respondents (whose percentage I could not quantify yet), although they declare that they are buyers of organic products, cannot say how they differentiate the later from the conventional ones in the moment of buying, or they offer inconclusive answers. In this context, we believe that the most important limitation of the study is represented by the fact that part of research findings are still working and some important conclusions could not have been formulated at this time.

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