

Article

The Anthropological Analysis of the Key Determinants on the Purchase Decision Taken by the Romanian Consumers Regarding the Ecological Agroalimentary Products

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Abstract: Should you attend to the relevant published literature on perceptions belonging consumers of ecological products, it can be easily noticed that, as a rule, the interpretation insists heavily on the analysis of an error: the consumer’s confusion about the ecological product. The official concept of an ecological product does not overlap with the idea of an ecological product at the mental level of the consumer. Most studies, if not all of them, tax this confusion and analyze it as a deviant phenomenon. The starting point for this study was based on this very confusion: If there is so much confusion, it most likely means we are dealing with a symbolic projection at a social level. We found intriguing the idea of trying to understand what exactly are the mechanisms behind the ideological forming of this symbolic projection and their impact upon the decision of purchasing ecological agroalimentary products. The study was based on a nationwide questionnaire conducted in Romania in 2016. The collected data were employed in an anthropological analysis of phenomenological approach to further understand the concept of ecological agroalimentary products as it appears in the mentality of the contemporary Romanian consumer.

Keywords: ecological agroalimentary products; consumer; purchase decision; agroalimentary market; supermarket; Romania

1. Introduction

One of the most menacing threats regarding health and quality of life, at least nowadays, comes from the alimentary zone.

Whether it is a paradox or not, the mentality of a contemporary person harbors the idea that they are sitting with the enemy at the table on a daily basis. The conventional agriculture and food industries provide plenty of reasons to unsettle oneself regarding their health or their family’s as well. Or this is, in part, the message received and frequently passed on within their own community.

Food, regarded as a resource, is symbolized as a risk factor at the moment. A contemporary person from Europe is not under any increasing pressure to urgently procure food. Currently, from a social and economic point of view, a person’s concern is a different one: one needs to choose what he/she eats, for the socioeconomic environment provides an abundance of food which can easily mislead one

into making the wrong purchase decisions regarding the products which feed them. Thus, it can also provide food for which one pays with their own health.

Fast-food, slow-food, conventional, ecological, food additives, and genetic modifications are the terms of a new life philosophy related to the manners in which we feed ourselves. They are complemented with an extra concern towards our own health. This new problem arises from what we eat.

In other words, the fact of eating has spread out beyond the normative zone regulated by good manners, as it was previously contained during the Victorian era and lasted, at least, until mid 20th century. It outstretches the behavioral technologies of recovery as formulated by the medical philosophies of the alimentary diet after the mid 20th century. The fact of feeding oneself falls under a zone of prophylaxis strategy nowadays. It is included in the individual or group strategies of health administration and it is gradually obtaining a moral emphasis. One can notice that, from an allegedly long history, it is shifting from a perspective of the good manners of having a meal to food ethics. This shift will be formulated under the concept of health preservation by the decision taken regarding the alimentary products we choose to consume.

As it is noticeable, this phenomenon has a socioeconomic side and an ideological dimension as well. Thus, in the context of rising interests manifested by the consumer towards a healthier alimentation, the development of ecological agriculture is a viable alternative for meeting the desire for buying certain food products, which contributes to the idea of health management through both individual or group (as family) consumption. This is the outlet gap, at an ideological level, attempted by the ecological agroalimentary products at the moment.

However, to further comprehend this phenomenon, we should first analyze the context of the production system belonging to the ecological agriculture.

Discursive Coordinates of the Ecological Agriculture

Among the definitions of great synthesis of ecological agriculture, the definition provided by IFOAM stands out. The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) defines organic agriculture as [1]:

“A production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.”

The definition of IFOAM greatly explains the conceptual framework where the policies, strategies, and juridical accepted meanings (which are typical of ecological agriculture) blend together, at least, inside the European Union. Thus, in what concerns the production and labeling of ecological products, the Regulation (EU) 2018/848 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30th May 2018 on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007 states the following [2]:

“For the purposes of this Regulation, a product shall be regarded as bearing terms referring to organic production where, in the labelling, advertising material or commercial documents, such a product, its ingredients or feed materials used for its production are described in terms suggesting to the purchaser that the product, ingredients or feed materials have been produced in accordance with this Regulation. In particular, the terms listed in Annex IV and their derivatives and diminutives, such as ‘bio’ and ‘eco’, whether alone or in combination, may be used throughout the Union and in any language listed in that Annex for the labelling and advertising of products referred to in Article 2(1) which comply with this Regulation.”

These aspects have been previously specified by the Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007 from 28th June 2007 (Article 23) [3].

The most meaningful feature noticeable in this regulation is the grouping of the concept of ecological alimentary product in the relation among the production done on organic basis, certification, and labeling. This is largely the symbolic universe where the concept of ecological alimentary product works within the European Union.

For instance, in Romania, the Government Decision No. 131 of 27 March 2013 for establishing the necessary measures and sanctions for the purpose of compliance with the Council Regulation (CE) No. 834/2007 follows this line of conceptual delimitation which is quite visible in the area of the sanctions provided [4]:

“The fraudulent use of the terms ecologic, biologic, organic or of their abbreviations such as bio, eco, as registered trademarks or practices employed in the production, processing, packaging, transport, storage and distribution of products, including the product label, advertising materials and commercial documents which can mislead the consumer and are not obtained in accordance with the regulations of ecological production [...] are punishable by fine from 20,000 lei to 30,000 lei and administrative measure of temporary cessation on commercializing the products concerned until rectification of the weaknesses identified.”

Further, “the organic certification confirms the fact that a set of standards has been maintained which consequently draws the quality image of the certified alimentary products by comparison with the alimentary products which are traditionally developed” [5].

In this regard, an ecological product develops itself on two discursive levels which do not often overlap: this concept is reinforced by the regulatory European or national discourse and is a concept that is born from the social and mental perspective of consumers. This is the significant difference we aimed to assess in the present study.

Thus, we attempted to prove the fact that the purchase decision of ecological agroalimentary products presents an area of social negotiation between a defined regulatory concept and one constituted at a mental level through a symbolic projection.

Having this in mind, we decided to employ a methodology focused on a phenomenological analysis of the data. In other words, we considered the data provided in their social functionality and not reported to a validation system adjusted by either correctness or incorrectness of the perception at a behavioral level. Hence, the purchase decision was analyzed in the context of a dataset which functioned at a psycho-social level and could not be invalidated by strictly behavioral approaches when analyzing the purchase decisions.

However, before moving ahead, we believe that it is necessary to remind the reader of a few global data concerning the economy of ecological alimentation.

Therefore, from an economic point of view, the system of ecological agriculture has registered constant global growth over the last ten years. According to the latest international statistical data published by IFOAM and FiBL (Forschungsinstitut für biologischen Landbau) in “The World of Organic Agriculture 2019”, in 2017 more than 69.8 million ha were managed in agreement with the regulations and principles of ecological agriculture worldwide [6], as compared to the year 2007, when there were approximately 31 million ha cultivated using the same system [7].

Within EU, in the same year of 2017, there were approximately 12.8 million ha ecologically managed by 310,000 producers [6].

Although there are differences in dynamics, implementation, and tendencies as well, Romania—as a European country—has complied with the tendency to develop an ecological alimentary culture. Consequently, in Romania the ecological agricultural system is managed by 8434 operators, while the area farmed is 258,470 ha [8].

On another note, the farmers’ market for ecological products sums up to 34.3 billion euros in the EU. Germany ranks first among the countries with the largest farmers’ markets (10 billion euros), followed by France (7.9 billion euros) and Italy (3.1 billion euros). In Romania, the farmers’ market for the ecological products is poorly developed, yet registering substantial growth from 10 million euros registered in 2009 to 40.65 million euros in 2016 [6].

Regarding per capita consumption, it varied from 278 euros (Denmark) to 1 euro (Slovakia) in EU, in the year of 2017. In Romania, in the same year, per capita consumption increased to 2 euros by comparison to 0.48 euro, as it was recorded in 2009 [9].

There is also high interest regarding the number of great merchants certified for the distribution of ecological alimentary products. Thus, in Romania there are 248 merchants certified to sell ecological alimentary products of which 12 are importers. In Figure 1, their distribution in the retail network can be observed. The graphic was built by processing the data available on the official site of the Ministry of Agriculture and Development of Romania [10].

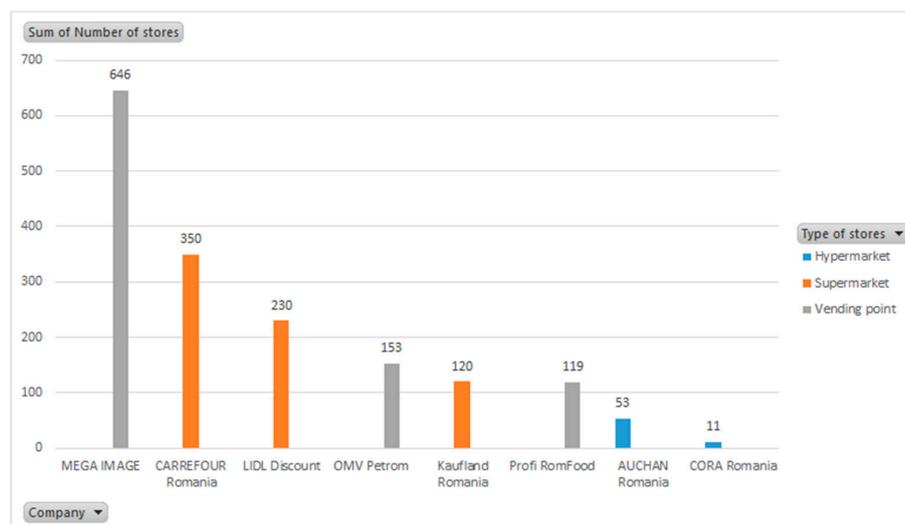


Figure 1. The distribution of the authorized vending points for distribution of ecological agroalimentary products depending on the great companies in Romania.

2. Materials and Methods

The questionnaire, namely, Ecological agroalimentary products, was applied during May–September 2016. The questionnaire was structured according to 2 sections: social and demographic data and behavioral data. It was composed of multiple choices questions, however only one choice was allowed.

This questionnaire was designed at the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the Romanian Academy, Iași Branch. The main aspect flagged was the following: the questions in the questionnaire allowed for the choice of a single answer. We kept the alternative of closed questions with one variant answer to force the respondents to provide the strongest opinion. In other words, we were primarily interested in the answers with the highest ideological degree.

The questionnaire was made as a website built in Drupal Content Management System (version 8) [11], which provided the advantage of real-time data monitoring. The answers were collected starting May 2016 until September of the same year, and they were provided by 1792 respondents across Romania. The respondents were contacted through the social media networking (mainly Facebook since it is the most accessed social media in Romania), by phone or email. Out of 1792 answers received, 1613 were validated.

2.1. Legend of Figures

- For a better visualization of data, some answers and questions were shortened.
- Buying EFP—Do you buy ecologic food products?
- Main reason—Main reason you buy ecologic food products.
- Where do you buy—Where do you usually buy ecologic food products?

- Most important criterion—Which is the most important criterion which guides you when identifying ecological food products at the moment of purchase?
- Meaning of EFP—What does “ecologic food product” mean?
- Your trust in EFP—Your trust in the ecologic food.

2.2. Demographic Data About Respondents

Out of 1613 validated answers, 1074 belonged to women and 539 to men. Most persons (1342) lived in an urban area, while only 271 reported living in rural locations. Their distribution depending on age, gender, and living environment is presented in Figure 2.

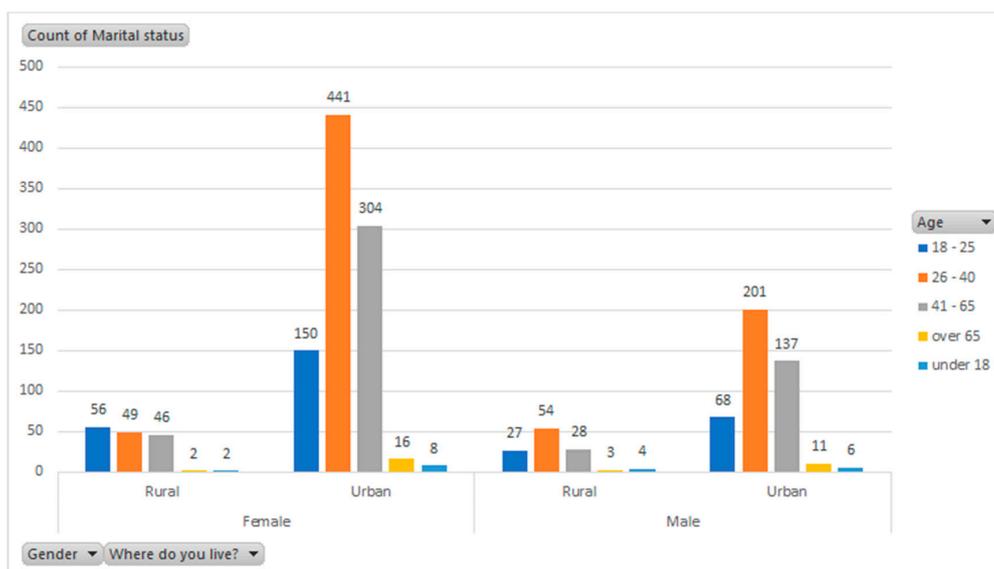


Figure 2. The respondents’ distribution depending on age, gender, and living environment.

The income distribution on family among respondents, showed that most of the respondents have an income over 2500 lei (556 Euro) (Figure 3).

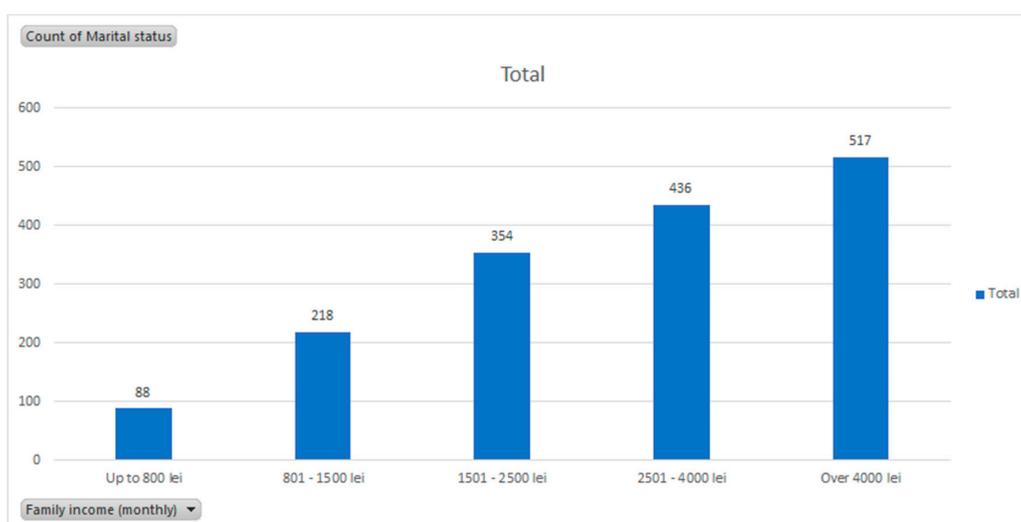


Figure 3. Respondents’ distribution depending on family income.

To better understand the budget of a Romanian family (in 2016), the effect of the monthly income on the family life standard in Romania is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The budget effect on the family life standard in Romania in 2016.

Monthly Income for Family in Lei	Monthly Income for Family in Euros	Level of Family Budget Regarding the Living Standards in Romania	Number of Respondents
Up to 800 Lei	Up to 178 Euros	Very low	88
Between 801 and 1500 Lei	Between 178 and 334 Euros	Low	218
Between 1501 and 2500 Lei	Between 334 and 556 Euros	Medium	354
Between 2501 and 4000 Lei	Between 556 and 890 Euro	Above medium	436
Over 4000 Lei	Over 890 Euro	High	517

Concerning levels of education, from the total of our respondents, 10 were secondary school graduates, 218 had a high school diploma, 780 graduated from college, and 605 had a postgraduate degree.

2.3. Methodology: Anthropological Analysis as a Starting Point for the Phenomenological Interpretation of the Data

Since this study involved a phenomenological analysis, we avoided considering some answers received that contributed to confusion or misinformation. The information provided was permanently regarded as data of maximum epistemic value and related to the concept of an ecological alimentary product that functions at the level of the respondents' community. This fact actually comprises the phenomenological nature of the analysis: the ecological agroalimentary product is not considered at the level of a correct or incorrect perception towards the conventional sense, but right in its core phenomenology: how does this function in the respondents' community. Since the ecological alimentary product does not merely function in the area delimited by the official definition and exceeds this delimitation, it also borrows values from the conceptual area with which it shares common symbolic data (natural product, from the countryside, traditional, bio, organic).

Is this about confusion? Should we relate to the official definition of the ecological alimentary product as a reference system? Then, yes, indeed it is so. However, this reference system makes us perceive the deviant features only, which, quite often, are not the most useful one for understanding the purchase decision. The extra interest of our research relies on the symbolic system where the social forming of the concept of an ecological agroalimentary product takes place. What is it and how does it work—this entity projected by the symbolic forming of the ecological agroalimentary product at the level of purchase decision?

Under the circumstances, the ecological agroalimentary product does not overlap the concept provided by its juridical definition, but it becomes a symbolic object containing data worth considering in the very ideological universe where it is formed. It is about a reductive analysis, a common feature to the projects of phenomenological interpretation. Moreover, the choice of this approach option is determined by the fact that the concept of ecological agroalimentary product functions from an anthropological point of view—in the society in its official sense and also under the umbrella of other concepts or at the crossroads of these: traditional products, local products, natural products, bio products, organic products, etc.

As observe next, the common factor that locates all these concepts in the ecological area which relate to the symbolic system of healthy alimentation.

We have chosen this particular methodology because, in what concerns the representation of the Romanian consumer, the ecological agroalimentary product constituted at a symbolic level is pertinent and relevant in the very data of its representation.

Even though it is about a product that does not coincide with the ecologically certified product, in the case of what the Romanian consumer feels, knows, and decides, there are fundamental data according to which the ecological agroalimentary product (the one constituted at the level of one's representation) is the only acceptable ecological alimentary product (at that particular time).

We can assert that it involves a clandestine mental object. Yet, its representation and functionality fit into a pertinence and relevance which does not makes it any less true.

2.4. Methodology: Starting Points

In this case study, 11 questions were chosen out of a total of 16 questions contained in the previously mentioned questionnaire. The questions were selected after repeated trials which involved 48 simulations of simple and multivariable correlations. The objectives addressed were the following:

- Identifying the strongest correlations with the phenomenological value for our analysis. These correlations were identified with the assistance of similarities and dissimilarities noticed by Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) using R [12–17];
- Identifying the most uncommon results which did not coincide with the canonical conclusions of the scientific research or common sense, and which were related to the purchase behavior of ecological products;
- Identifying the possible narrative which supported the discourse of the anthropological analysis we had in mind.

Starting from this particular case, in the present study, we aimed to track the data of the purchase decision as they emerged at a correlative level and in the context of the anthropology of the contemporary Romanian consumer. The phenomenological interpretation of these data were permanently centered on the question of: How often do you buy ecological agroalimentary products? The answers received formed the pivotal system for the data analysis and correlation which were inferred from the answers provided by the other questions.

Among the simulations made, as previously mentioned, the most interesting answer within the questionnaire was derived from the following question: “Which is the main reason for which you buy ecological agroalimentary products?”

It was expected that health would be an answer of high percentage [18]. However, the percentage of 63.31% (out of 1521 respondents who stated they buy such products) added with the identity of gender tendencies, constituted a good enough reason to regard this choice as one symbolically determined at the batch level. In other words, we are dealing with an answer which may represent a reality of the consumption, but it also registers an important ideological charge at the respondents’ level. This trend can be observed in Figure 4.

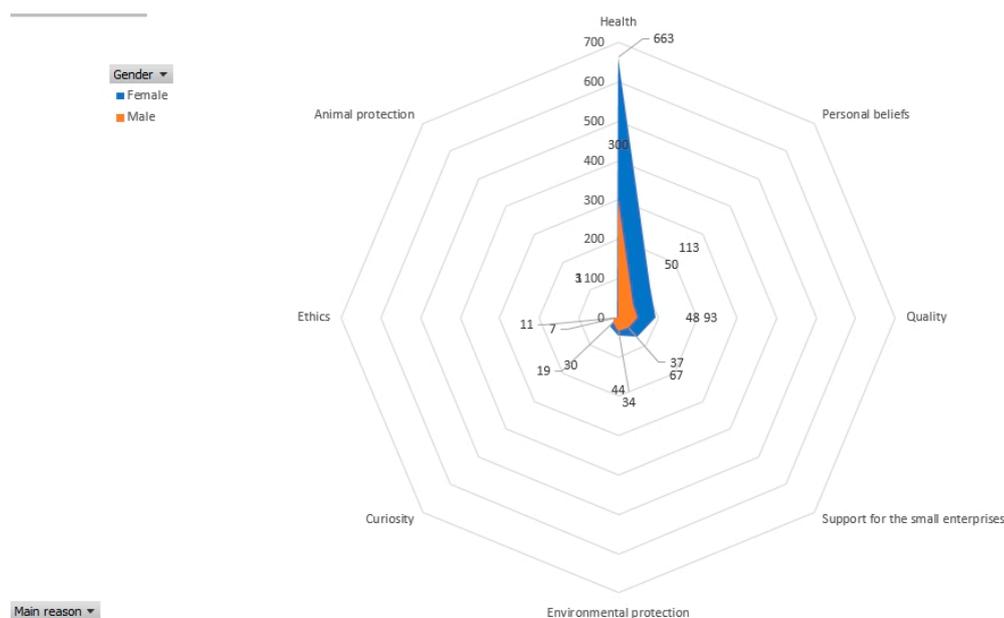


Figure 4. Radar-type plot with answer options for the question: Which is the main reason for which you buy ecological agroalimentary products?

As it can be seen in Figure 4, the answer tendencies show equal ponderosity for both male and female respondents. This phenomenon can be determined, at least, by the following situations:

- The purchase decision was taken in family and, under the circumstances, the key determinants were the cases of families with children;
- The perception regarding the purchase motive was uniformly determined regardless of gender, due to the education, knowledge/information, and marketing discourses.

At the same time, due to the higher percentage of female respondents, we cannot speak about a tendency of emancipated answer in what concerns gender discrimination. On the contrary, here certain data coming from traditional society get more visibility, such as the woman perceiving herself more of a manager of food and feeding issues than the man within a family.

Thus, the Romanian consumer of ecological agroalimentary products is mentally pre-formatted at a family level and tends to decide the purchase of ecological agroalimentary products for health preservation.

2.5. The Purchase Decision

In terms of the individual, the purchase decision was the result of an interpretative process with a decisional purpose. However, this does not necessarily mean that the purchase decision was a purely conscious and sensible process, i.e., the result of a disciplined will. As any other interpretative process, the purchase decision is the outcome of the relation between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge and is subjected to some determinants formed at the level of symbolic social systems.

On another note, socially, the purchase decision is not merely determined by the simple purpose of feeding. Here, the purchase decision takes the form of a social fact. To put it differently, it crystallizes into a system that can be analyzed in the convergence areas of the cultural, economic, behavioral, and even political data.

This is the configuration of the object which comprises our research: the purchase decision is partly a decisional process with conscious and unconscious data and partly it can constitute a social fact determined by symbolic social systems where the mentality of the individual functions.

3. Results and Discussion

As it has been previously mentioned, our analysis started from a series of simulations which provided data of high relevance or totally uncommon. Thus, the moment 1521 respondents, more precisely 63.31%, indicate that the main reason for purchasing ecological agroalimentary products is health, one feels compelled to quantify this particular answer in way or another.

Following this line of thought, we considered it worth analyzing the correlation between the level of incomes per family and the purchase frequency, as ecological alimentary products have a serious financial impact upon the budget of a family. The price of the daily basket (established by government emergency ordinance in Romania and calculated according to conventional products) may be, at least, double if the daily basket contains ecologically certified products only.

Concurrently, the level of income has a direct impact upon the alimentary habits of the Romanian consumers, at least, in the case of those who have a lower income and, consequently, are more inclined to consume less healthy food [19,20]. However, the answers provided do not cover this hypothesis. Thus, paradoxically, low- and medium-income families buy ecological agroalimentary products sometimes and even frequently. Under these categories of income there are few families that do not buy ecological agroalimentary products as shown in Figure 5.

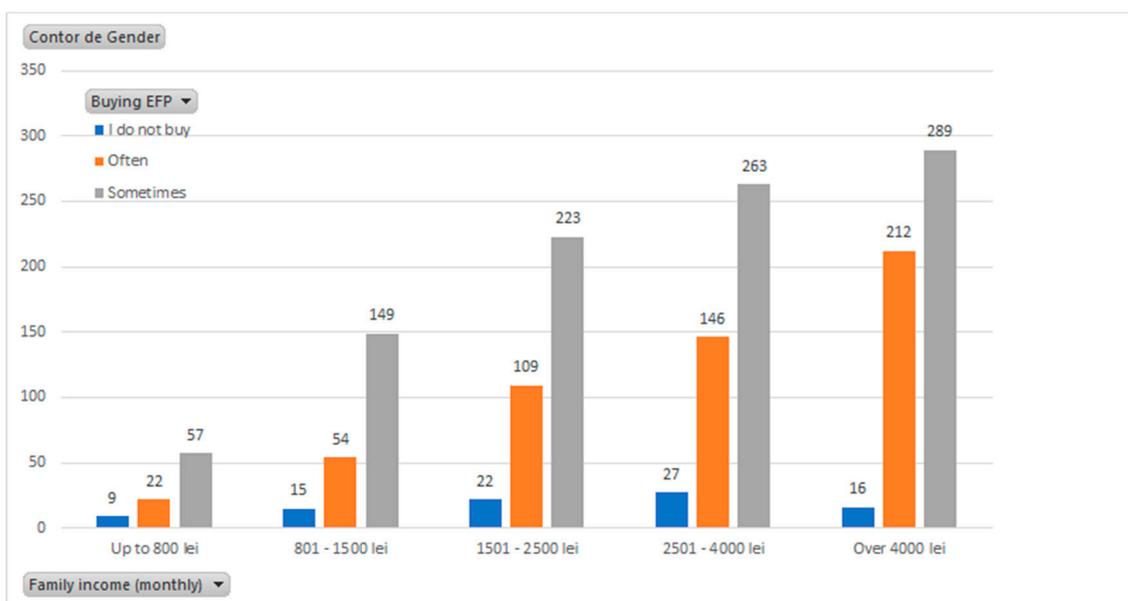


Figure 5. The purchase frequency depending on the income categories of the family.

It can be observed that there are no significant differences among the ponderosity ratio at the level of answer variants (I buy frequently, I buy sometimes, I do not buy). The groups that declared low, medium or above medium incomes had quite the same answer behavior in what concerns the purchase frequency.

Concurrently, as can be seen in Figure 6, most respondents state that they buy ecological agroalimentary products from the farmers’ market, supermarket, or directly from the producers, which is highly relevant to our further analysis.

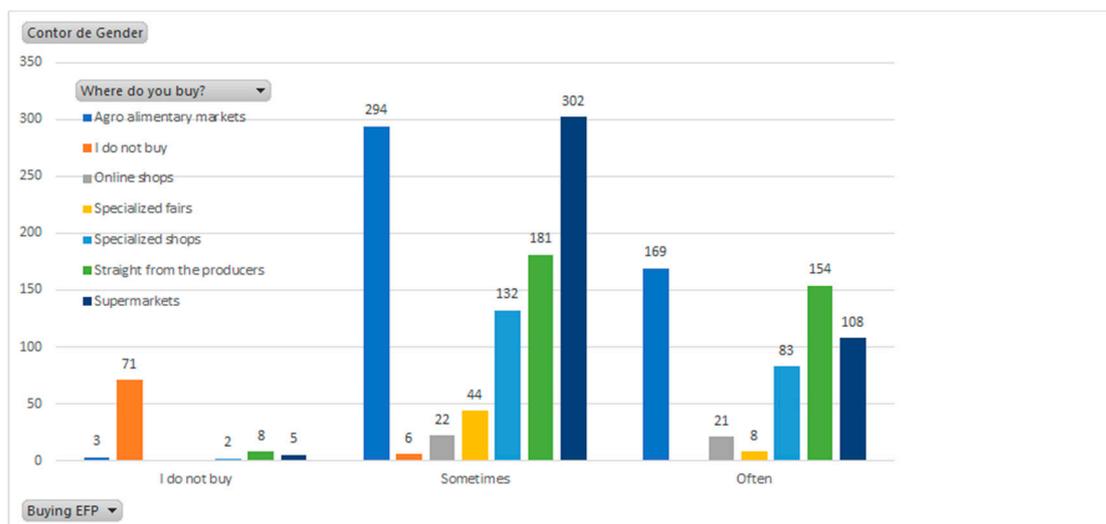


Figure 6. The distribution of purchase frequency depending on the purchase location.

Additionally, if we are to correlate these data with the incomes of those who buy on a frequent basis (33.7% of the respondents), we can notice that in the case of low and medium incomes, the supermarket is by far exceeded by the agroalimentary farmers’ market as a purchase location (Figure 7).

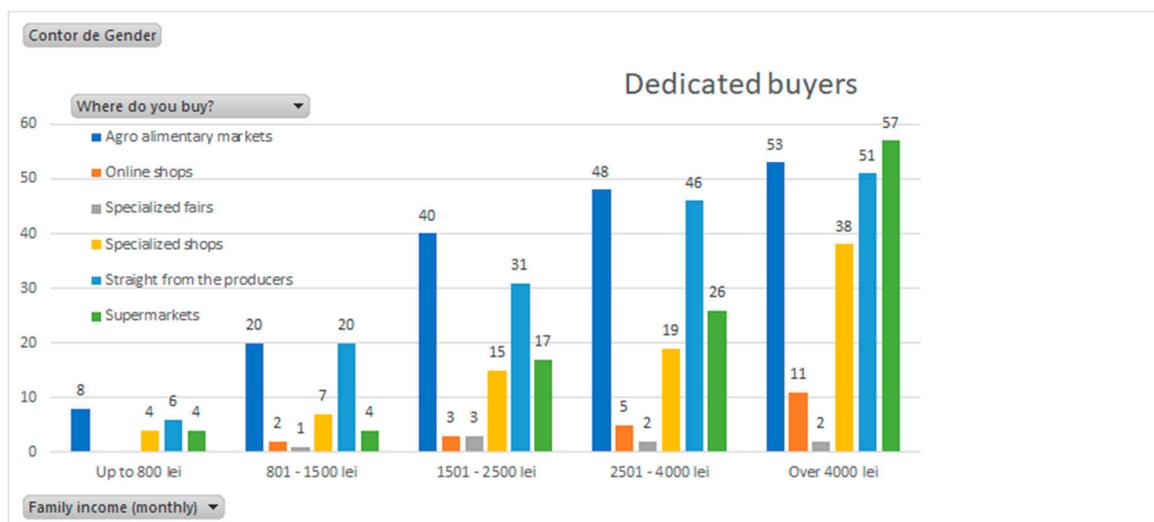


Figure 7. The distribution of purchase locations on family income among frequent or dedicated buyers.

Among the occasional buyers (60.8% of the respondents), the ponderosities of the agroalimentary farmers’ market and supermarket—as places of purchase—were close. It is possible that they were precisely the consumers who were fully aware of the great differences between the ecological products as certified products and other products (see Figure 8).

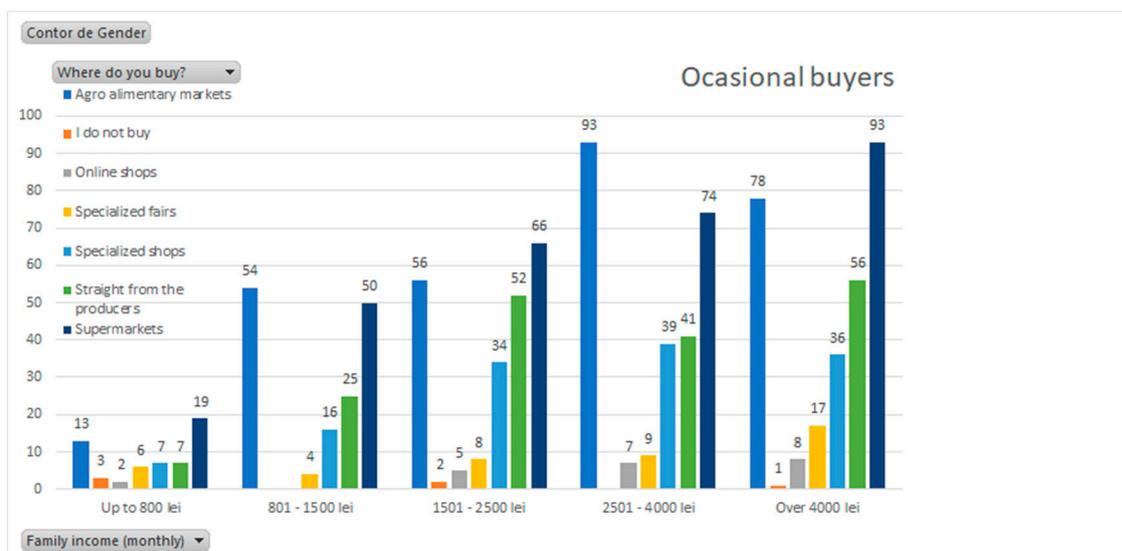


Figure 8. The distribution of the answers provided by the occasional buyers of ecological agroalimentary products depending on income and purchase location.

To further understand these data, it is necessary to digress and focus on the sociology of the agroalimentary farmers’ market and supermarket in Romania.

3.1. The Agroalimentary Farmers’ Market in Romania

The system of agroalimentary markets in Romania was formed during the communist regime (before 1989) on the approximate pattern of the peasant markets, fairs, and stockyards. As they were built in the Communist period, and they still preserve much of their original configuration, the Romanian markets share a lot of common features.

An agroalimentary farmers’ market in Romania is located in the middle of the city/town or neighborhood and it is open since early morning till sunset, from Monday till Sunday included. Since

it is addressed to distribution of fresh products, it is generally crowded, and the maximum operating period starts from spring and goes on until late autumn. It does not close in winter time, although the offer of agroalimentary products is rather low.

The highest ponderosity is given by the farmers' products provided by the small producers. The prices are low or very low as they are not aligned to the fair price. At the same time, this fact stops the small producers from investing too much in chemical treatments, as they prefer the natural, traditional ones. Generally, the small producers have a tradition of one generation, at least, and offer peasant products of high quality. The trust level of the Romanian consumer in the agroalimentary farmers' market is quite elevated. However, there is a certain degree of distrust which manifests towards some types of products, such as dairy and apiculture products. Yet, over time, there are born and created relationships of trust between consumers and certain producers. This type of behavior compels the producers to maintain a high standard for their products and, at the same time, keep the prices as low as possible.

The low price is determined by the high number of wholesale intermediaries who buy at low prices from the small farmers and enforce a low price on the market. These intermediaries are part of a real guilt (here they are called *samsari*, synonymous to middlemen). They create a formidable obstacle to the Romanian peasants' and small farmers' right to the farmers' market. Despite this, lately it has been noted that Romanian consumers are increasingly avoiding them, rather choosing products more costly which are offered by rural producers. Thus, as mentioned earlier, small partnerships based on trust are born and created.

This type of market has the following zones:

- A zone of open stands for the small producers of vegetables, fruit, and greens (see Figure 9); producers of honey and apicultural products; intermediaries who sell eggs and products with terms of validity close to the expiration date (these products are obtained through supermarkets);
- A zone for flowers and seedlings;
- A zone of kiosks or small shops for commercializing meat and meat preparations;
- A zone of kiosks or small shops for selling bakery products;
- An enclosed market house designed for the small producers of dairy products;
- A zone of kiosk for commercializing non-alimentary products, such as household items;
- In the case of border localities, a zone addressed to the sellers of alimentary and non-alimentary products brought from neighboring countries.



Figure 9. Romanian producers in Romanian farmers' market. City of Iași, June 2019. Photo credit: Codrin Dinu Vasiliu.

In the agroalimentary farmers' market in Romania, producers of ecologically certified products are missing almost entirely and the same happens with the specialized shops that sell ecologically certified products. Thus, in a Romanian agroalimentary farmers' market it comes close to impossible to purchase an ecologically certified product.

Under the circumstances, the respondents coming from families of low or medium income who state they purchase ecological agroalimentary products, such products are placed under peasant or farmers' products due to the certain common determinants. Thus, data on peasants'/farmers' products (taste, freshness, natural product, peasant-like look) strengthen a mental projection of the ecological product and have the tendency of equalizing the peasant product with the ecological product. These consumers have their own "ecological" product at the farmers' market for a very low price and present a high degree of satisfaction. For a more detailed analysis, one can observe see Figure 9, where the similarities and dissimilarities are presented through a multivariable analysis of the correlations among the following categories of data: family monthly income, what is an ecological agroalimentary product as understood by the respondents, gender, and frequency of purchase.

Thus, in the quadrature 2 (upper right) there are strong correlations between the medium incomes and the understanding of an ecological product as a countryside product. Concurrently, in quadrature 3 (lower right) there are correlations between the low and very low incomes and the understanding of the ecological product as a traditional product.

The quadrature 1 (top left) and 4 (bottom left) is analyzed later (see Figure 10). For the time being, we considered it interesting to merge a few of the age categories and meanings of ecological, which were produced at the level of the respondents' mental projections. Thus, we obtained a simple correlation among three age categories and three unified concepts for the meaning of an ecological product.

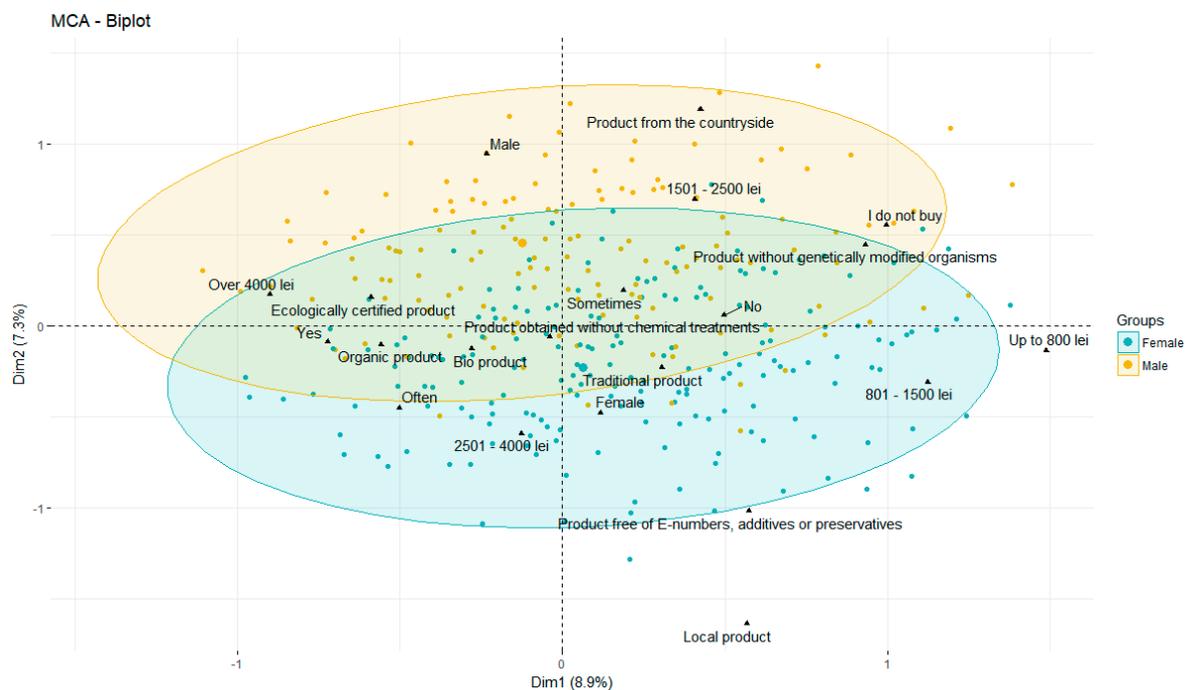


Figure 10. Plot with multivariable correlations depending on the monthly income of the family, what is an ecological agroalimentary product as understood by the respondents, gender, and frequency of purchase.

Along these lines, through conceptual unification, we obtained three categories for the meaning of an ecological agroalimentary product (see Figure 11):

- Ecological product (ecologically certified product, bio product, and organic product);
- Local and traditional product (local product, traditional product, countryside product);

- Non-artificial intervention product (non-GM product, food-additives-free product, chemical-free product).

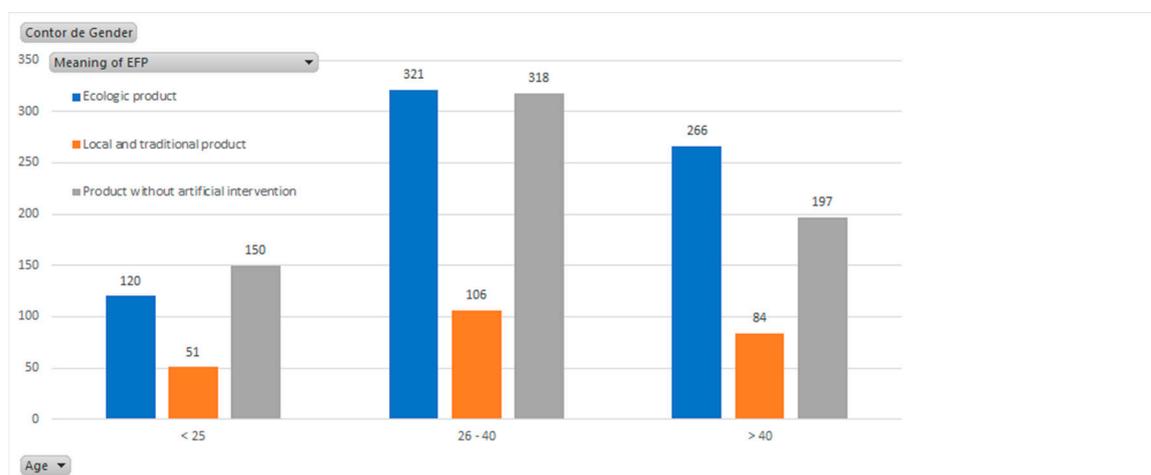


Figure 11. Mental projections of the ecological concept depending on age categories.

Respondents from the category of ecological product count on an educated answer based on certain data which they explicitly process at the interpretative and decision-making level. They are the most rational, displaying rather sensible reactions in the decisional process.

The other two types of categories belong to groups that offer emotional answers most likely derived from the tacit knowledge.

Thus, the most important group was represented by that of the respondents who selected an ecological concept as one comprised by the meaning of non-artificial intervention. This group had a high ponderosity at all age categories. Which leads us to the conclusion that the artificial intervention in alimentary products is one of the major fears governing the contemporary person. This seems directly related to his/her concern towards health when purchasing food. Furthermore, in the case of these respondents, the ecological agroalimentary product comprised the symbolic system given by the concept of natural and a return to nature.

In the case of the last group, the one that places the ecological product in the area of local and traditional product, there is a possible historical explanation. Most of them were over 26 years old, ranging between 25 and 40. Those who were over forty, were around 11 years old back in 1989—the fall of the communist regime—and they took part emotionally in a historical event from that period, thus, maximizing the possibility of their memories (from that period) being passed on to those belonging to the age group ranging between 26 and 40 years old (most likely represented by their children). To widen the perspective over that period, we should explain a few things first. Before 1989, there were few to almost no alimentary products in urban shops. The regime would export almost everything that was produced in Romania to pay the external debt of the Socialist Republic of Romania. Thereby, a mass phenomenon emerged: the urban inhabitant was forced to seek food from his/her countryside relatives, friends or acquaintances. In other words, in Romania, short food supply chains emerged and developed as a necessity for the urban dweller during the Communist period. One had to be creative and find solutions to procure the necessary food. The peasant or rural household registered some production surpluses and could still help and feed that part of the family which migrated to an urban area. Even now, this phenomenon has not completely vanished in Romania. Further, it is the foundation of development for small producers who deliver directly to their clients from urban areas (innovative short food supply chains).

These hypotheses are strengthened by the data displayed in Figure 12. In this figure, an almost perfect overlap between the options of those ranging between 26 and 40 and those between 40 and 65 years old can be seen.



Figure 12. The distribution of similarities and dissimilarities in the answers depending on age, children in care, reason behind purchasing ecological agroalimentary products, and the meaning of an ecological agroalimentary product.

At the same in Figure 12, it is also visible that the products purchased depending on taste, aspect or smell have similarities (in terms of answers) with the peasant meaning of the concept of ecological product. At the same time, the ecological, bio, or eco product was most frequently associated with the label or brand as signs of recognition. Then, what was it in this interpretative corridor of the respondents?

Firstly, according to Figure 13, the label was the most important criterion of purchase for those who had a medium and high degree of trust in ecological agroalimentary products.

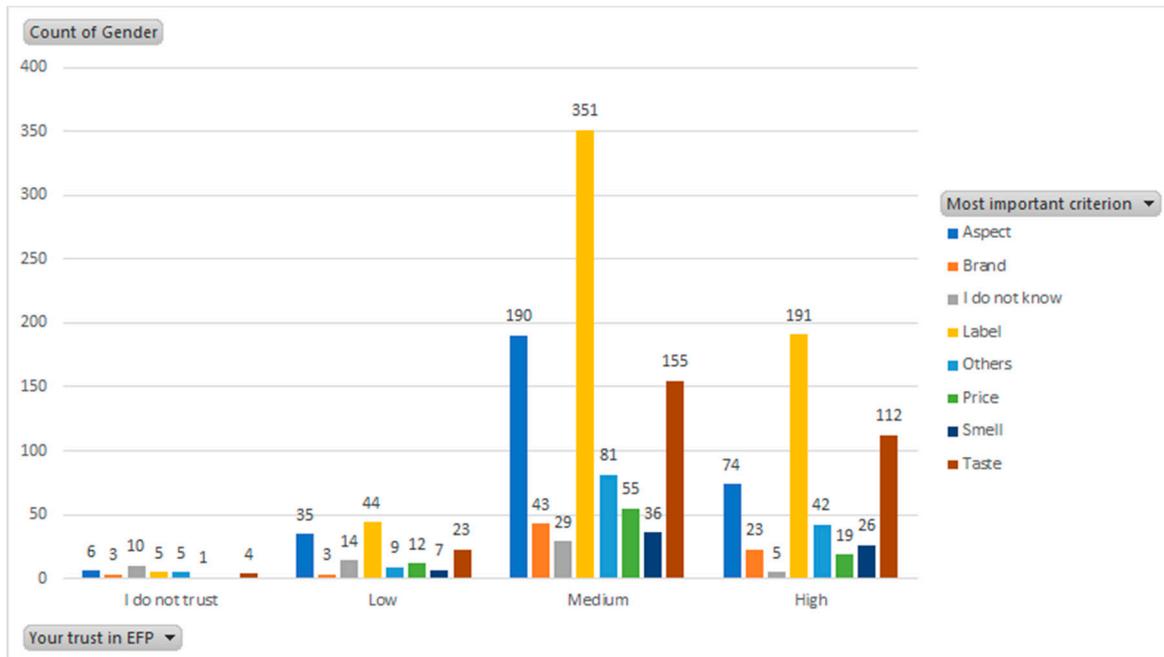


Figure 13. The distribution of answers depending on place and the most important criterion of purchase.

Where the respondents buy most frequently can be seen in Figure 14.

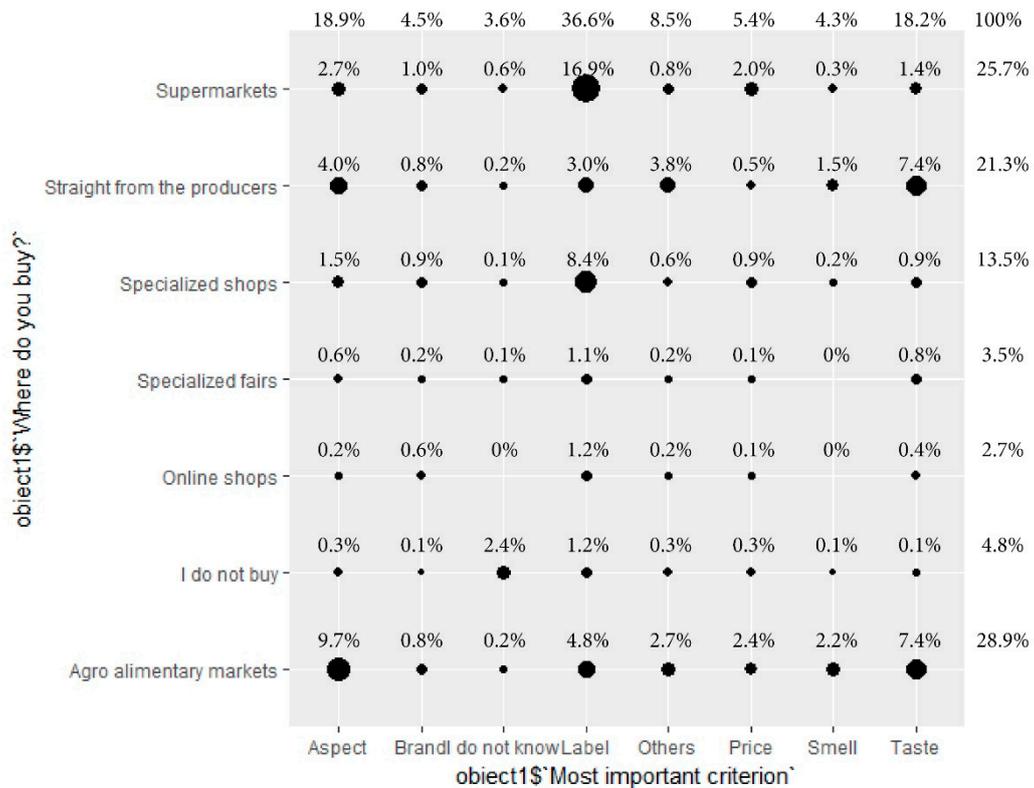


Figure 14. The distribution of answers depending on place and the most important criterion of purchase.

Thus, the supermarket appears once again as an important purchase place of ecological agroalimentary products. The quantitative data can be seen in Figure 15.

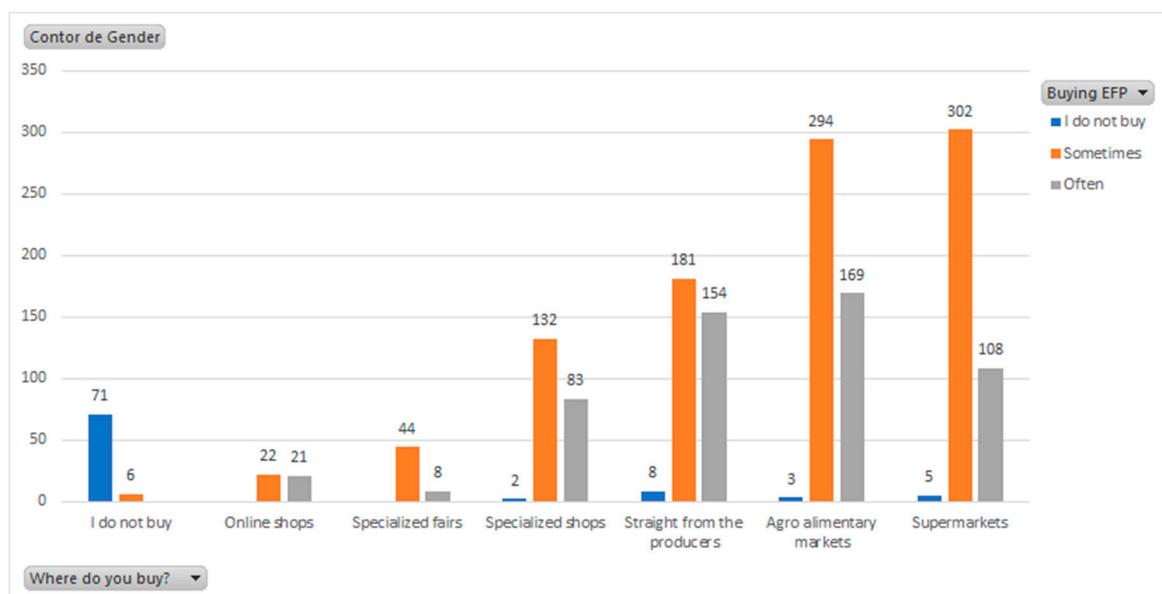


Figure 15. The distribution of answers depending on the purchase frequency of ecological agroalimentary products and place of purchase.

3.2. Supermarket

Having as a starting point the conclusions presented above, we cannot but wonder why supermarkets are such a primary locale for buying ecological agroalimentary products.

The food supermarket appeared after the fall of Communism and led to the almost complete extinction of the neighborhood food shop (also known as alimentary shops). Thus, as it emerged after the fall of the Communist system and was built by the great European retail companies, any Romanian supermarket closely resembles the Western European supermarket.

The significant differences reside only in the localization of the supermarket in the Romanian urban space. The lack of certain Romanian regulations aligned with the intelligent development of the urban environment has allowed the placement of supermarkets in areas of maximum urban concentration, simulating the behavior of the agroalimentary markets. Thus, the Romanian supermarket, with few exceptions, is a neighborhood shop located on consumers' return routes from work or in the immediate vicinity of the retired population. Similar to Western Europe, it serves all purposes of purchase and it is appealing due to the low prices. Financially speaking, the supermarket is everybody's market. The consumer can find everything he/she requires for current emergencies.

Additionally, every supermarket network builds its shops after a standard pattern which provides key landmarks to the consumer in what concerns the product sectors and purchase decisions. In every supermarket the Romanian consumer will be able to identify the product he/she needs, starting from the shop pattern located in his/her proximity. If one wanders through a shop of a retail network, he/she will be part of a formative workshop which enables him/her to find their way in any other shop of the same retail network. This is due to the fact that the supermarket (as it is already common knowledge) is organized according to the successful model of the old commercial lanes, or in other words, according to the model of commercial streets populated by merchant shops and which has been used in the European urban concentration from Medieval times up to the present day.

In this context, inside the supermarket, there is, at least, an aisle (or a so-called lane) addressed to the ecological agroalimentary products. Usually flagged by a light green or olive color and marked by panels on which the words BIO or ORGANIC often appear in capital letters accompanied by a plant-based symbol.

The place for ecological agroalimentary products is clearly defined in the geography of the supermarket. It is not invasive, although it has a larger aisle than others accommodating conventional

products. It is place of the healthy guaranteed products, which are almost septic, expensive, and of high-prestige value.

The area ponderosity of the shelves accommodating ecological products in Romania is rather low and it seems adjusted to marketing studies on Romanians' consumption of certified products. This area is surpassed by the area of shelves accommodating local products, for instance, as the Romanian consumer seems to place more trust in the ecology of the local product than the ecology of the certified product, as well as perhaps due to the fact that the presence of a clearly defined area for ecologically certified products in the supermarket casts these products in an area equally artificial to the products obtained through conventional methods.

On the other hand, after all, this is the place with the largest concentration of ecological alimentary products in the consumer economy from Romania. Except for small shops addressed to the distribution of ecologically certified products and the few buyers who have direct access on their commute from home to work (and vice versa), the supermarket is the only place where the ecologically certified product is well represented.

However, a lack of interest in advertising the ecologically certified products is quite visible. For instance, in 2018 one of the top networks of supermarkets in Romania reconsidered its entire brand. Therefore, the shops were redone and went from representation based on a blending of red and white and a high-tech configuration of the shelves to a presentation focused on hues of gray and brown (with highlights of white and red) and a shelf configuration based on wood or wood-like materials (at least, in the section of fruit and vegetables). Apparently, they did not invest anything in boosting the ecological products they sell. Yet, they chose to highlight the localization and traditional aspect of the products instead of visibly supporting the ecologically certified products. To some extent, they have sensed that tradition and local circumstances are the very ideologies on which the Romanian consumers take their purchase decisions and employed them to their advantage.

On another note, the supermarket is a distributor of high demands in what concerns the volume of goods which can be provided by the ecologically certified Romanian producers. In Romanian supermarkets, there are certain ecologically certified products such as milk and other dairy products, for instance. But, generally, the ecologically certified products are not of Romanian origin due to the fact that, here, there are few ecologically certified producers who can cover the volume of goods required by a supermarket. Hence, the supermarkets will most likely have ecologically certified products of foreign origin which are regarded with some reservations by the Romanian consumer.

3.3. Symbolic Spaces of Negotiation in the Purchase Decision

As we have already noted, the most important places where the Romanian consumer negotiates the qualification of the ecological alimentary product as the leading product of his/her purchase decision are the agroalimentary farmers' market and supermarket.

At the same time, the Romanian consumer does not consider his/her health and neither symbolically integrates the ecological product in the area of certification. Then, which is his/her symbolic area of ecological forming in the case of the agroalimentary product? As we can see in Figure 12, it has to do with a mental area where the consumer represents the health of his/her family. It is projected into the health horizon of the children they are looking after. In the Figure 12, the similarities lead to the idea that everything is associated with the notion of health is rather present in the area of families with children in care and appear especially in the age groups between 26 and 65 years old.

The concept of ecological agroalimentary products has become a symbolic system for validating health. In various surveys, personal health remains a strong motivating factor for the purchase of organic food [21]. For that precise reason, in Romania, the concept works based on data provided by other concepts, such as traditional products, countryside products, bio or organic products.

Concurrently, under the umbrella of this concept, other types of products existing on the market have taken shelter, products which barely share some specific data with the prime concept. Sometimes, this phenomenon is harnessed by misleading marketing actions and contributes to the increment of

distrust in ecological agroalimentary products. In Romania, the most notorious brands of ecological agroalimentary products speculate this feature to a greater or lesser extent.

The Romanian consumer should not be considered in relation with the consumer's behavior towards ecological products, but in connection to the symbolic constitution of the food product in the social space of the ecological coordinates.

The ecological alimentary product should be rather developed and advertised on the market through an education of the ecological data than through an ecological regulation.

Certification does not represent the fast way but promoting a product containing the same data with a certified product is indeed a fast way. The short chains of supply, local products, and traditional products may constitute local markets where the ecology of the product is a success rule on the market and not a governmental regulatory system, with no extra costs, among others.

3.4. The Conceptual Sphere of the Projection of the Ecological Agroalimentary Product

To configure the conceptual sphere of the projection of the ecological agroalimentary product, we have first translated the answers depending on three series of two exclusive and exhaustive values each:

- Choice mainly sensorially determined versus choice mainly rationally determined;
- Certified product versus non-certified product;
- Product obtained through the short chains of supply versus product obtained through the conventional chains of supply.

Visually, the following interpretation was obtained (Figure 16).

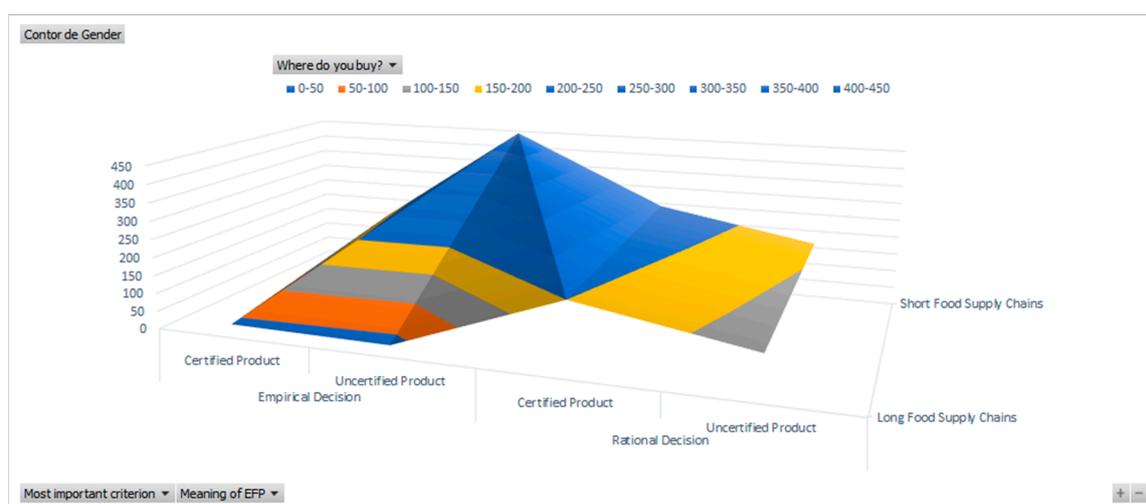


Figure 16. The 3D distribution of answers on the following axes: empirical–rational decision of purchase, the meaning assignment or non-assignment of certified product (for the ecological product), and understanding of the ecological product as being distributed or not via the short chains of supply.

Here in Figure 16, it can be noticed that the answers had the tendency to approach the convergence area between certified product and product obtained through the purchase decision which was mainly rationally determined. However, the conceptual sphere expanded to the convergence area between non-certified product and product obtained through the purchase decision which was mainly sensorially determined.

To complete the image obtained, we chose the following three poles:

- X: the axis of sensorial and rational choice (depending on the most important criterion of purchase);
- Y: the axis of the certified or non-certified nature of the alimentary product (depending on the meaning of ecological agroalimentary product according to the respondents' understanding);

- Z: the axis of distribution on short or medium chain (depending on the answers provided for the question related to the purchase place).

The answers “other” or “I do not know” were eliminated and also the answers left at the values of the poles previously mentioned were reduced. See Figure 17.

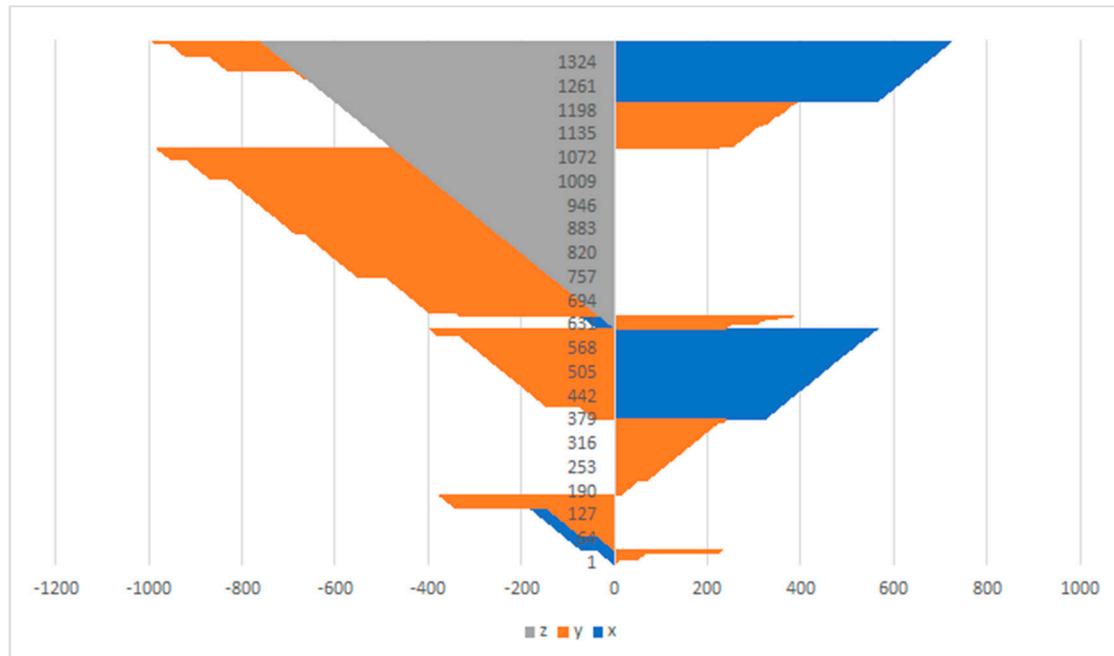


Figure 17. The 3D distribution (on the poles x, y, and z) of the decisions depending on the sensorial or rational nature, short or long chains of distribution, and on the ecological certification of the product.

Out of the 1324 answers used, the symbolization tendencies of the ecological agroalimentary product were the following:

- The widest distributions of the decisions were located in the area of a product distributed through short chains of supply, in which case the certification was no longer taken into account;
- At the same time, the distribution of the decisions (almost equally wide) located in the area of rational choice and decisions based on certification cannot be ignored.

These were the main competing phenomena located at the level of purchase decision.

At the same time, according to Figure 18, the empirical decision was associated with the lack of motivation to empower certification with a higher filter in the purchase process. Moreover, the rational purchase decision was more commonly associated with the filtering process of purchase depending on the certification of the product.

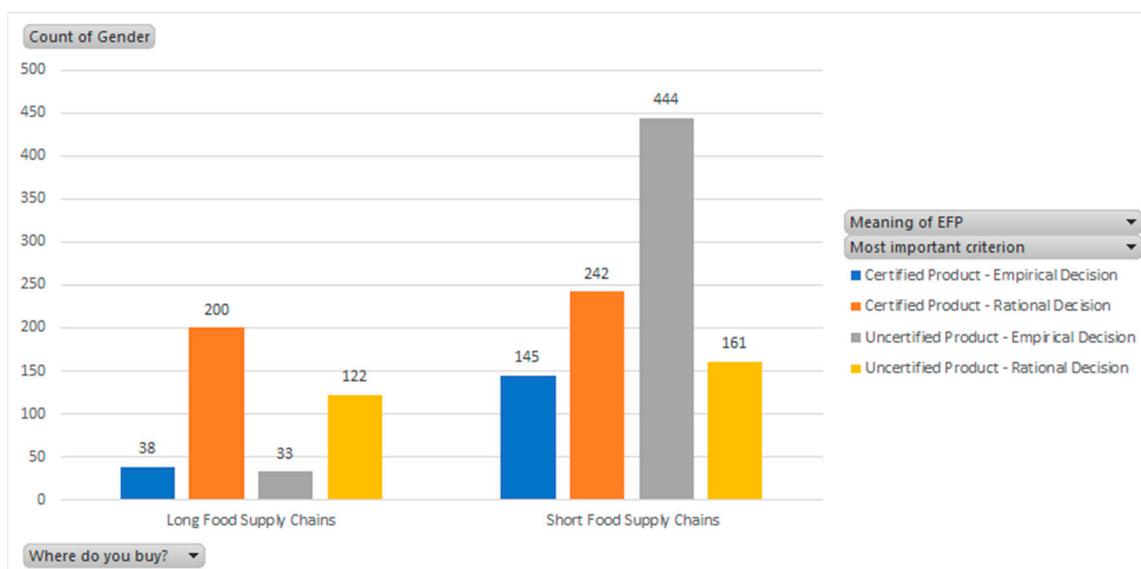


Figure 18. The representation of empirical and rational decisions along with the presence of ecological certification on the short and long chains of supply.

4. Conclusions

The results obtained from this research could very well become pillars for the fundamentals of decision making by public and government authorities concerning research financing in the domain of consumer behavior. Concurrently, these results could also become milestones for entrepreneurs from Romanian ecological agriculture; they can make decisions on production, branding, and marketing matters to best meet consumers' options and preferences.

Symbolically speaking, we noticed that Romanian consumers display critical behavior in what concerns purchase decisions. His or her choice is strongly determined by life experience, where not only culture and level of knowledge matter, but also the trials of history to which he/she has been subjected. For instance, although the Romanian consumer is afraid of chemical or genetic interventions of a visible nature, he/she relies quite heavily on senses when choosing a product which he/she labels as ecological through a personal critical process. Here, we have a void of authority on labeling and ecological certification. Personal history is the most relevant context where the purchase decision is being constituted and made. The Romanian consumer is more of a critical actor driven by his/her own personal beliefs, who often feels tricked and who would rather build a personal model of ecological nature in what concerns the alimentary product.

Thus, the ecological value, on the whole, functions more in the contact and symbolic contamination area. At the level of purchase decision, the ecological agroalimentary product is a projection determined by the knowledge level, culture, tradition, and emotional landscape of the consumer. The ecological agroalimentary product enlists into a broad symbolic sphere which surpasses the semiotic mark of the ecologically certified product. For buyers, the ecological agroalimentary product has an extra meaning compared to its legislative delimitation. Therefore, the ecological value, at the level of social mentality, functions more like a conceptual filter with both emotional and rational data than a technical concept used for identifying certified products.

In Romania, the ecologically certified product does not endorse the purchase decision. On the contrary, the Romanian consumer builds a social projection of the idea of ecological product, which he/she raises in his/her comfort zone. We could say that the ecological agroalimentary product, as it is represented by the Romanian consumer, enters that zone of social phenomena clearly explained by the theorem of Thomas [22]: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."

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