

Article

Consumer Choice for Milk and Dairy in Romania: Does Income Really Have an Influence?

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Abstract: Milk and dairy are basic food products and their importance in healthy human development is well known. However, this does not mean that the consumers' requests for these products are not evolving and fitting into the new context of sustainable development. By conducting a quantitative analysis on 847 answers regarding milk and dairy consumption offered by Romanian consumers, the objective of this study is to reveal what are the main factors of influence for respondents when choosing a milk or dairy product, and to see if these factors are evolving towards including sustainability-related aspects. The results point out that while price and store availability are still present as choice criteria, new aspects that might be related to a sustainable behavior, such as ecologic certification, country of origin or traditional products, are considered by the respondents when purchasing milk and dairy. However, this depends on the level of income; higher incomes allow respondents to consider new criteria.

Keywords: consumer behavior; milk and dairy choice; sustainable choice; influencing factors; income influence



Citation: Ilie, D.M.; Lădaru, G.-R.; Diaconeasa, M.C.; Stoian, M. Consumer Choice for Milk and Dairy in Romania: Does Income Really Have an Influence? *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 12204. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132112204>

Academic Editors:
Mariosaria Lombardi and
Giuseppe Todde

Received: 22 September 2021
Accepted: 3 November 2021
Published: 5 November 2021

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1. Introduction

The debate around milk and dairy consumption has become more important along with the increase of nutritional information [1,2], the consumers' need for ensuring balanced and healthy diets for themselves and their children [3], but also due to the possible environmental impact of animal farms [4], and even possible health risks determined by this type of products such as allergies or intolerance [5]. Increasingly, how the choices made by consumers affect the development of the planet, meaning sustainable choices [1,6], including food products, are getting to be more present in the regular choice patterns [7].

The international funds and grants for agriculture always aim a significant percentage of their support at farms for milk production as this product is considered a basic one [8]. Yet, a slight change in the agricultural policy and support schemes, such as the lift of milk quotas in the European Union (EU), has major impact for the producers, affecting them differently based on the market size and farm size, determining important progress for Danish farmers and the incapacity of being competitive for Greek farmers, therefore bringing major changes for the local markets [9].

The milk and dairy market potential of Romania, as a member of the EU since 2007, serves as a particular case for this study considering on one hand the tradition of consuming milk and dairy from a variety of species (cow, sheep, goat, buffalo and even donkey), the country being part of the Balkan region [10], and on the other hand considering the constant negative trade balance for milk and dairy, meaning that the local products are insufficient for satisfying the consumers' needs [11]. Additionally, the GDP per capita for the EU countries in 2020 placed Romania as the last but one among the 27 member states. The GDP

per capita in Romania was 8810 euro, compared to the EU27 average of 26,380 euro [12]. Meanwhile, the harmonized index of consumer prices in 2020 for the milk and dairy category shows a higher increase for Romania than for the EU 27 average, meaning that the prices for this type of product has raised faster than in the EU [13]. Moreover, Romania is in the last place considering the disposable income reported to the consumption expenditure in the EU, meaning that the people spend much of their income on satisfying their basic needs, such as providing food [14]. Therefore, the influence of income on the consumption choices that consumers make should be a key factor to look into for Romania and is considered as the main aspect of investigation for this study.

Several studies focus on determining the aspects that influence the consumer choice for specific food products, both positively and negatively. Therefore, they investigate consumer behavior [15]. Beginning with the obvious factors such as price or availability, which have been observed by marketers to have a high influence on the purchasing and consumption behavior, the new socio-economic and environmental context presents itself with new factors that change this behavior, such as the willingness to pay for more sustainable products [1]. In the case of milk and dairy, Nam et al. [16] has observed such a shift regarding the consumers' willingness to pay for mountain dairy produced in sustainable farms.

Understanding the factors that influence the consumer choice for milk and dairy, as important nutritional providers, and determining if there are any tendencies towards sustainable choices serve as the purposes of this study.

The paper should be of interest both to local and international producers in the milk industry, as they should be aware of the consumer expectations and purchasing power so to adjust their offer accordingly, but also to policy makers in documentation for future food policies intended at supporting and educating production and consumption in the milk and dairy sector.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Importance of Sustainable Food

Since the Brundtland Report [17], which proposed sustainable development as a solution for improving the quality of the environment and society in the long term, along with economic development, and also until the Sustainable Development Goals [18], the ways of production in domains such as agriculture [19,20], construction [21,22], industry [23] (including the dairy industry [24]), and, more recently, consumption of different products such as food [1,25] and fashion [26], or services such as tourism [27], have been questioned and solutions for making them more sustainable have been proposed.

The case of sustainable dairy is a sensitive one. On one hand, milk and dairy, along with meat and eggs, represent a prime source of superior protein, known for thousands of years, so it is natural to observe increasing trends in the consumption of these products while countries register economic and social development [16,28]; this also being the case of EU Central and Eastern countries, where GDP values increased compared to the EU average [29]. On the other hand, the intensive dairy farming industry is recognized by the high environmental impact and contribution to global warming, acidification, energy consumption and land occupation [30,31], which makes it unsustainable. Therefore, the alternative may reside in traditional farms with a small production of traditional products [32] or mountain products [30], which are increasing on the consumers preference list [16,33].

Regarding the notion of sustainable food, the FAO [34] envisions it as food that is nutritious and accessible for everyone, while natural resources are managed to support the current and future human needs. Otherwise, there are different accepted characteristics that can make a food product recognized as sustainable, such as plant-based [35] or insect-based [36], with a less meat-based composition [37], seasonal food [38,39], locally grown and produced food [39], and organic food [40]. Additionally, there are a series of accepted barriers to consuming sustainable food. For example, cultural barriers as

the reluctance to consume cultured meat or insects [39], financial barriers [41], or even habituality barriers [42].

2.2. Importance of Milk and Dairy in Diets

Around the world, milk and dairy have been known as food sources for a long time. Milk is acknowledged as a complete food, composed by all nutrient categories. Moreover, other dairy products such as yogurts are included in the category of functional foods, meaning products that are beneficial for the health and wellbeing of the consumer [2,43].

Several authors mention the importance of milk and dairy consumption especially for pregnant women, children, adolescents, and older people, due to the increased composition of mineral salts and vitamins, responsible for the proper development and maintenance of bones and muscles [3,44,45]. Adding on this, Givens [3] mentions that threats of increased cardiovascular disease due to milk and dairy consumption are disproved by clinical studies, while the correlation between yogurt consumption and type II diabetes needs to be further studied.

Regarding the regular consumption of milk and dairy, studies have determined an average of 2–3 servings per day, depending on the availability of these products and their presence in the culture of a country [46], being a regular presence in an extended part of the globe [47].

Since this type of product may contribute to ensuring food security through the nutritional values and its widespread, the level of income should not be a factor of influence in milk consumption. Nevertheless, studies show that lower incomes lead to poorer choices in milk quality [48,49]. Moreover, other research points out that the lower income groups have a higher sensitivity than medium and high-income groups to income and price fluctuations when choosing dairy products [50]. In addition, the income inequalities significantly influence the quality of life of people in developing countries, including their possibility of spending on high quality food products [51].

Demographic factors, such as gender, are known to influence the choice of diet. Women pay more attention to low fat diets and healthy diets than men [52]. Even more, there are studies claiming that men are less willing to pay for higher quality in food products [53] and read the labels superficially [54]. Nevertheless, the consumption of milk in men and women should not differ as it has lifelong benefits [55].

2.3. Sources of Milk and Dairy

While in general terms, milk refers to the product of the cows, they are not the only type of animal which produces edible milk. Park [43] observes that the general tendency is to skip the importance and nutritional value of milk coming from other animals, especially since cows have adapted so well in farms all over the world. However, the milk and dairy coming from other types of animals such as buffalos (mozzarella), sheep and goats (yogurt and cheeses) or even donkey (milk) puts renowned specialties on the market. For example, the Italian mozzarella is a certified product made especially from buffalo milk, which offers it a superior taste and texture [56]. Zicarelli [57] shows that buffalo milk has a higher nutrient content and a lower cholesterol level than cow's milk. However, the farming of such animals is more difficult, needing more water and space, and therefore being less suited for large farms [56]. The case of sheep and goats is also special, as the extensive methods of farming specific to the Mediterranean or Balkan region offer the dairy products particular sensorial qualities and place them among the traditional products sought especially by locals. However, whether they will be able to adapt to the standardized market of the developed countries or they will remain a hard-to-get traditional product is still not known [10,58]. Donkey milk is more known as a treatment for diverse types of affections, such as milk intolerance in infants, having a chemical composition remarkably close to human milk [59,60]. Moreover, using it in the treatment of lung disease, including lung cancer, has raised the interest of scholars [61]. Depending on the local culture and natural fauna, there are other species of animal that provide sources of milk, which are less

known or understood at the general level, such as camels, mares, or reindeers [43,62]. In addition, the innovation vector [63] has not jumped over the dairy sector. Research and development have presented alternative plant-based results for milk, such as soy milk, rice milk or almond milk [64].

Nevertheless, due to its high availability and recognizable taste, cow's milk is expected to be the preferred source for consumers [65].

2.4. Factors Influencing the Consumer Choice of Milk and Dairy

Determining the factors that trigger or suppress the purchasing and consumption decision for several types of products has been of interest to researchers and marketers for a long time [1,66]. The universality of these products has attracted attention from researchers in various geographical regions. For example, in Kosovo, a study [67] revealed that the factors that have a significant influence on the choice of dairy are consumer gender, trust in the products, perceived quality, origin, and price of the purchased product. The Slovak consumers consider that price, taste, and quality of the local dairy are strengths, being perceived as healthy, while the imported products excel in packaging and variety [68]. Other researchers [69] show that Chinese consumers are significantly influenced by the country-of-origin of milk and dairy products, trusting them more than the local products, while the preference for a specific country is guided by consumer familiarity and experience with the products, ethnocentrism, and animosity, and even some cultural value differences. For the Italian consumers, the low price and high availability in the supermarkets of cows' milk are main reasons for consumption, while the health benefits of the donkey milk are seen as superior, but the difficulty of finding it in the supermarkets proves to be a significant barrier [70].

The sensory properties of milk and dairy products, such as color, smell, taste, fat quantity or density are powerful indicators for consumers in choosing a particular product [2]. Others focus on factors that may be related to a sustainable choice, such as origin of the products, determining a preference for local and mountain products [13] or the certification of Good Agricultural Practice, in the case of Japanese consumers [71]. Other authors observe that basic factors such as availability of products, price and packaging significantly influence the consumers in making a choice for milk and dairy products [70,72].

Some newer factors indicate that not all consumers are open to trying organic products, but there are some for which ethical aspects and green consumerism are motives for purchasing organic products [40]. Other authors point out that in higher-income countries, green purchases have the role of bringing people closer to the environment. Therefore, sustainable food choice is becoming more pressing especially in these countries [73]. However, other studies [74] claim that emerging economies have a higher willingness to pay for environmentally certified food produce. Roman et al. [75] find that for people who give a higher importance to natural foods, the willingness to eat ecological or organic food increases, while other studies point out that consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable food products or food with sustainable characteristics. For example, Gao et al. [33] claim that the willingness to pay for sustainable dairy is 40% higher than for regular dairy in the case of Chinese consumers. Other authors [76] claim that Spanish consumers are willing to pay more for locally grown almonds, as opposed to long traveled almonds. Adding on this, other studies point out that some European consumers are willing to pay more for locally captured fish, due to the trustful standards and effective communication regarding the standards [77]. Other aspects considered by consumers as worthy of paying more are innovative packaging solutions in the case of milk and dairy [78], or the provenance from small farms, that actually diminishes the need for organic certification [79]. Due to these previous studies, we consider that the willingness to pay more for milk and dairy with sustainability related aspects from the Romanian consumers is of further interest. In this case, the hypotheses of the current research were based on the previous studies on the influencing factors of consumption of milk and dairy.

Given previous studies [51–54,68], we consider that the correlation between gender and the choice criteria for milk and dairy should be further investigated, and we expect that some considerable differences between respondent gender groups would be revealed. Hence, hypothesis one was formulated.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *There is a significant correlation between gender and the considered choice criteria for milk and dairy.*

Considering earlier information [12–14,48–51], we expect income to be significantly correlated with the availability of ecological products [16,33,40,75], given the fact that higher income groups would afford purchasing products with higher price [55,70,72]. Additionally, a significant correlation is expected between income and perceived quality of the products [67,68,77], given the fact that people expect to have the highest benefits from their purchases; and between income and traditional products, such as local products, especially coming from small producers [16,33,68,76,79]. The testing for these criteria has been considered through the willingness to pay for products that are certificated, traditional and have a high perceived quality, but also the declared expenditure for them is at least a medium one per week. Therefore, the second hypothesis for this study is the following:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *There is a significant correlation between the income of the respondents and the environmental-related criteria (availability of ecological products, perceived quality, or traditional products), expressed through their willingness to pay more for these products (H2a) and by having at least a medium weekly expenditure for them (H2b).*

Because several authors mention the country of origin in their research [67,69,76], this characteristic complying with both expectations for lower price [67,68,70] and contribution to supporting local production [76,79], we considered the correlation between income level and the country of origin in the third hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *There is a significant correlation between the income of the respondents and the country of origin for milk and dairy.*

Store availability is mentioned constantly in previous studies [70–72], meaning that the consumers would buy what is available if they come to the store with the purpose of buying milk, even if it may not satisfy their ethical or environmental expectations; therefore we expect income and store availability to be strongly correlated, as opposed to a lower correlation between possible health recommendations or long term health benefits of milk consumption and income [68,70].

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *There is a lower correlation between the health recommendations of milk and dairy consumption and income of the respondents than between large retail store availability of these products and income of the respondents.*

3. Materials and Methods

Considering that Romania has a negative trade balance regarding milk and dairy products, as it may be seen in Figure 1, especially regarding cheese and curd, but also for raw milk, as a total for all species that are traded, it presents a particular case for studying the factors that guide Romanian consumers in their choice of purchase and consumption for milk and dairy. Since the import of milk and dairy is at a high rate, how consumers take into consideration the country of origin for these products and their appreciation for the local produced ones is of interest and will be shown later in the study. Additionally, the low level of income and GDP per capita, compared to the steep increase in the harmonized index of consumer prices, earlier presented [12–14], support the choice of the case study considered in this research.

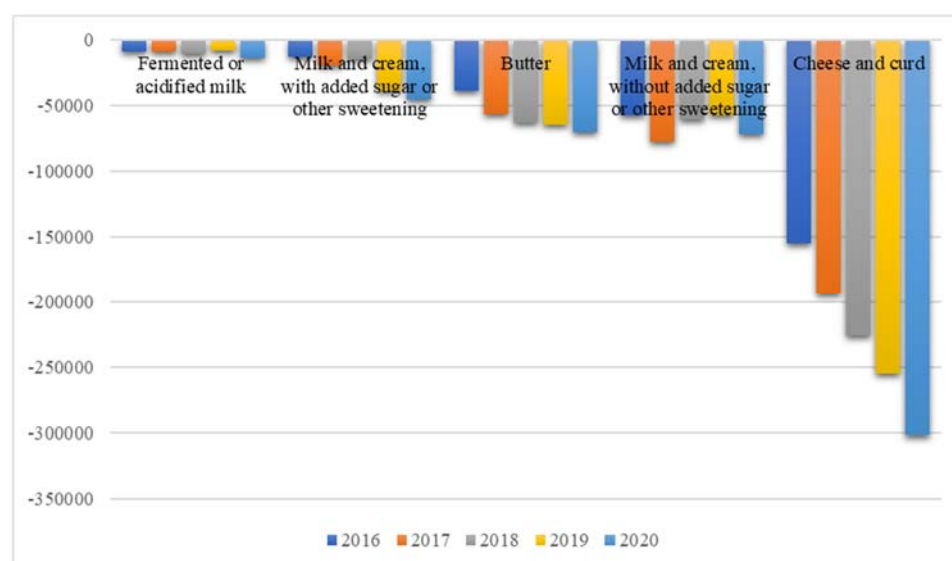


Figure 1. Romanian trade balance for milk and dairy between 2016–2020 (thousand US Dollars). Source: International Trade Center [11].

Regarding the method of gathering the information, the quantitative survey was considered, using the structured investigation technique through a self-administered questionnaire [80]. Convenience sampling using the “snowball” method was used as a sampling method [81].

In order to determine the sample size, the Taro Yamane method was used [82], according to which:

$$n = N / (1 + N * e^2), \quad (1)$$

where n is the sample size, N is the total population size, and e is the accepted error.

For a total population of 17,592,625 people over the age of 15 years old [83], the size of the determined sample is 847 people, using an error of 3.43%.

The questionnaire contained 29 questions, of which 26 were closed questions and three were open questions. Once developed, the questionnaire was tested on twenty people to gather feedback on understanding the questions and thus improve the quality of the research. Then it was released for the general public.

The variables used in the study of the milk and dairy choice are:

- dependent variables: consumer preferences for milk and dairy products; willingness to pay for sustainability characteristics (ecological and traditional products).
- independent variables: gender, age, and income.

The data were interpreted using a quantitative analysis software SPSS [84] and the semantical differential scale [85] in order to capture and present the main characteristics of the respondents. The answers to the open questions regarding suggestions from the respondents for the milk and dairy producers were interpreted using a map generating software, KH Coder, based on frequency and correlations of the words in the open answers [86].

4. Results and Discussion

From the total number of participants in this study (847 persons), 96.5% declare themselves as consumers of milk and dairy and 3.5% declare they do not consume these types of products. In order to see the structure of the respondents, in Table 1, the frequency of consumption by gender, age groups and income groups is presented.

Table 1. Milk and dairy consumption frequency.

	Distribution (Total %)	Frequency of Consumption (%)			
		Daily	2–3 Times/Week	Weekly	Occasional
Males	26.3	28.17	35.68	12.68	23.47
Females	73.7	34.05	28.60	15.87	21.49
<20 y.o.*	7.7	27.69	36.92	9.23	2.08
20–29 y.o.	58.4	30.64	33.19	16.81	19.36
30–39 y.o.	14.3	38.66	21.01	11.76	28.57
40–49 y.o.	12.4	37.50	29.81	11.54	21.15
>50 y.o.	7.2	31.67	21.67	20.00	26.67
<1000 lei **	22.9	27.03	29.19	20.54	23.24
1001–2000 lei	13.8	27.93	36.94	13.51	21.62
2001–3000 lei	16.7	33.09	40.44	14.71	11.76
3001–4000 lei	15	36.51	28.57	15.08	19.84
4001–5000 lei	11.2	35.16	24.18	16.48	24.18
5001–6000 lei	6.5	30.19	32.08	7.55	30.19
> 6000 lei	13.9	39.66	20.69	10.34	29.31

* y.o. = years old; ** lei = monthly income. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

Considering the distribution of the respondents by consumption frequency, we may see that, from the total number of respondents which consume milk and dairy (818), the majority has a frequent consumption. The percentages were obtained by reporting the number of respondents in a gender, age, or income frequency group to the total number of respondents in that category. The results are in line with previous studies [10,46]; Romania is a Balkan country, and therefore has a long-standing tradition of consuming milk and dairy.

There are some differences that may be observed between gender groups, with females having a higher percentage for daily consumption than men, who register the highest percentage in the 2–3 times/week category.

Considering the differences between age groups, the 30–39 years old category registers the highest percentage of respondents in the occasional frequency, followed by the above 50 years old category. Additionally, the 30–39 years old category has the highest percentage of respondents in the daily frequency group. An interesting observation emerges from the age groups distribution; the categories above 30 years old have the highest percentages in the daily and occasional frequency groups. This may be due to a better knowledge of the personal body and its tolerances and needs that come along with age.

Regarding the income groups, the above 6000 lei per month group registers the highest percentage of respondents in the daily frequency group, followed by the 3001–4000 lei/month income group. In addition, the higher income groups, above 3001 lei/month, register increasing percentages for the occasional frequency group.

Considering the preferred type of milk by animal species, the results of the study are presented in Figure 2.

The preferred source for milk and dairy is cows' milk, with more than 70% of the consumers participating in this study declaring they like it very much. The results are in line with previous studies [43,65]. The high preference for cows' milk is also supported by the higher availability in stores compared to milk and dairy from other species, as well as lower prices [65,70,87]. Additionally, the low national production of milk from other species [88] raises questions regarding the provenance of the products found in stores.

The goats' milk is the second most popular in the respondents' preference list, with more than 13% liking it much and very much [10]. The sheep and buffalos register less than 5% of the respondents who prefer it much or very much, while donkey milk registered insufficient answers to be taken into consideration in the analysis, supporting the idea that the lack of availability in stores is a prime barrier in consumption [65,70].

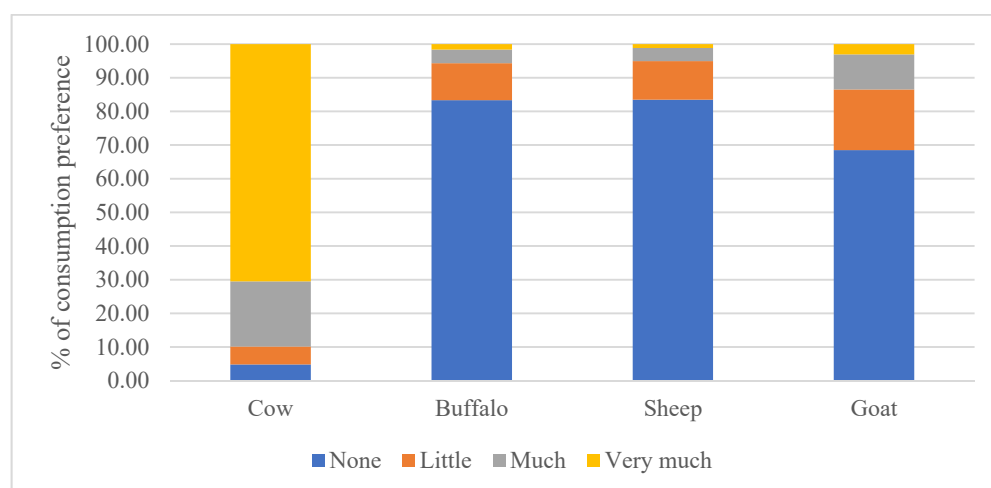


Figure 2. Preferred source for milk and dairy by animal species (%). Source: authors own interpretation of data.

The possible differences between men and women considering diverse selection criteria for milk and dairy products are presented in Figure 3.

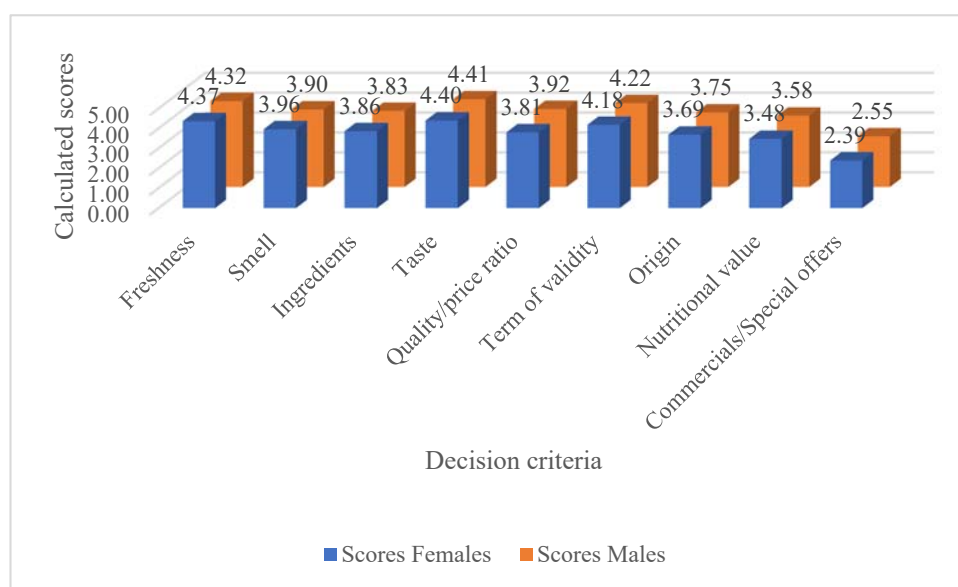


Figure 3. Selection criteria for milk and dairy. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

By using the five-point semantical differential scale [85], the general preference scores were calculated for the female and male respondents of this study.

By calculating the chi-squared test for the correlation of gender and the different choice criteria, with four degrees of freedom and a significance level of 9,49, we point out that there are significant differences between the calculated chi (spread from 0.647 to 9.52 for the different criteria) and the theoretical chi (9,49). Therefore, there is no significant correlation between gender and choice criteria, which refutes the first hypothesis of the study (H1) and presents different results than previous studies [51–53,67].

Considering the descriptive statistics, the most important selection criteria are taste, followed by freshness and term of validity, while the least important are commercials and store offers. The lowest score offers an important insight in the changes of consumer behavior, which is now less influenced by the price offers and pays a higher attention to other selection criteria, pointing to a more educated consumer.

While the freshness, smell, and ingredients have a slightly higher importance for women, the taste, quality/price ratio, term of validity, origin, nutritional value, and price offers are more important for men. The high importance given to the sensorial properties (taste, smell, fat percentage) are important pointers for the fact that consumers are accustomed with this type of product and are able to determine their quality through the sensorial properties, the results supporting previous studies [2].

The willingness to pay for milk and dairy products which present specific environmental or social benefits differentiated by income categories is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The willingness to pay for better milk and dairy (%).

	Have an Ecologic Certification	Have a Superior Quality	Are Traditional Products	Mixed Answer (Two Options)	All Three Options	Not Available to Pay
<1000 lei **	5.67	34.54	10.82	22.16	21.13	5.67
1000–2000 lei	7.69	28.21	12.82	26.50	19.66	5.13
2001–3000 lei	13.38	21.83	18.31	18.31	21.13	7.04
3001–4000 lei	7.87	22.83	14.96	29.13	21.26	3.94
4001–5000 lei	8.42	36.84	8.42	21.05	20.00	5.26
5001–6000 lei	5.45	25.45	12.73	23.64	25.45	7.27
>6000 lei	6.84	23.08	5.98	25.64	36.75	1.71

** monthly income. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

The willingness to pay higher prices for products that respond to new social or environmental criteria, therefore proving the respondents' involvement in supporting the community it lives in through traditional products, for example, or the care for the environment through ecologic certificated products, or just wanting a higher quality of the products for its own health, are becoming important aspects studied through consumer behavior changes [1,7].

It is important to notice that the non-willingness to pay has the smallest percentage of the respondents' categories of monthly income. Yet, for the 2001–3000 lei/month and 5001–6000 lei/month, these percentages are above 7%. From the three single options, the perceived superior quality is of the highest appeal to the respondents, meaning that the personal gain is more priced than the social or the environmental one, for all income groups. However, the cumulated answers and for two or all three options register more options than the single ones. More importantly, all three options register higher percentages with the higher income groups, which implies a higher income allows a person to consider the social and environmental implications of its purchasing options, the results being in line with previous studies [16,33,75].

There is a significant link between respondents' income and their willingness to buy milk and dairy products at higher prices, with a probability of 95%. The calculated chi-square has a value of 47.68, being higher than theoretical chi of 43.77 for a significance threshold of 0.05. Therefore, the first part of the second hypothesis is confirmed.

The average amount declared to be spent by the respondents for milk and dairy, by groups of prices and incomes, may be seen in Table 3.

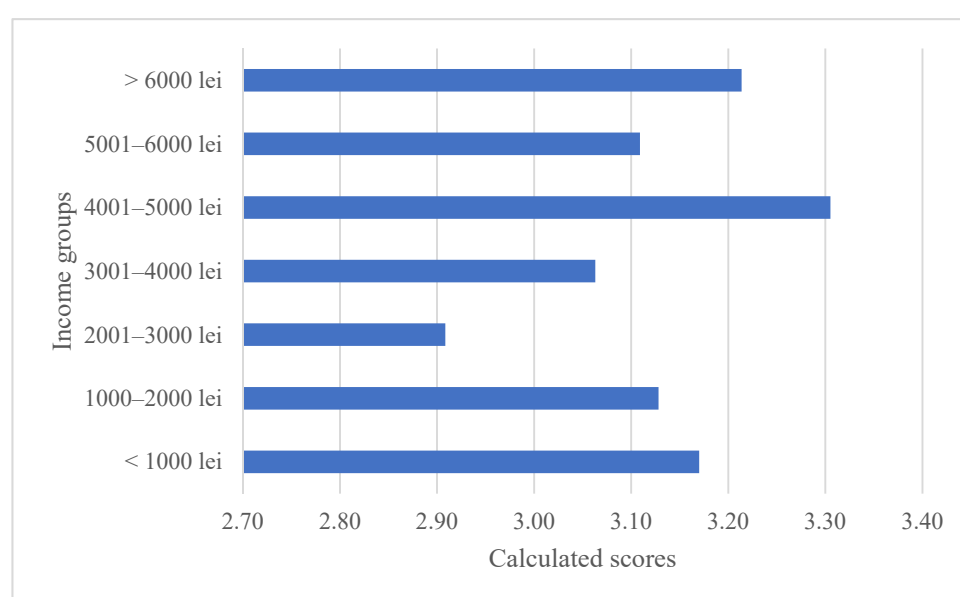
The average amount declared to be spent weekly on milk and dairy by the respondents of this study are medium, between 26 and 75 lei/week, being followed by the lesser amount, less than 25 lei/week. Only few respondents spend amounts higher than 75 lei/week for this type of product. Through the chi-square testing, it was found that the calculated chi of 15.56 is less than the theoretical chi of 21.03 for a significance threshold of 0.05, so there is no significant influence of the respondents' income on the amount allocated for the purchase of such products. Therefore, hypothesis H2b is rejected; there is no correlation between the level of income and the weekly expenditure for milk and dairy.

Table 3. Average amount declared to be spent by the respondents for milk and dairy (% of respondents).

	<25 lei	25–75 lei	>75 lei
<1000 lei **	37	52	11
1000–2000 lei	28	57	15
2001–3000 lei	37	54	9
3001–4000 lei	26	58	16
4001–5000 lei	32	55	14
5001–6000 lei	38	44	18
>6000 lei	32	62	7

** monthly income. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

The importance of the country of origin for milk and dairy by income categories, calculated through the semantic differential [85], is presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4.** Consideration of country of origin in milk and dairy purchasing by income categories. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

For all income groups the score is higher than 2.9, meaning that the majority take this criterion into consideration. Surprisingly, the lowest and highest income categories have the highest scores, and therefore the highest consideration for the country of origin for the purchased products—the national provenance being preferred by the majority of the respondents.

Considering the chi-squared testing, the calculated chi value of 36.57 is exceeding the theoretical chi value of 36.42 for the significance threshold of 0.05, calculated for 24 degrees of freedom. Income has a significant correlation with the importance that respondents attach to the country of origin of the products they purchase.

Therefore, the third hypothesis is confirmed by the results of the study.

It is observed that the income influences the decision to buy these products depending on the country of origin, with a probability of 95%. Additionally, the origin of the products (industrial farming, traditional farming, ecological farming, own production) presents a high importance for the respondents, being in line with previous studies [33,40,67]. However, it is more important for income categories higher than 4001 lei/month.

The importance of national production is also confirmed by the top ten brands mentioned by the respondents to this study as being their preferred ones. The results are presented in Figure 5. The results oppose that of Yang et al. [69], who presents a higher preference for imported milk and dairy than for the local production for Chinese consumers.

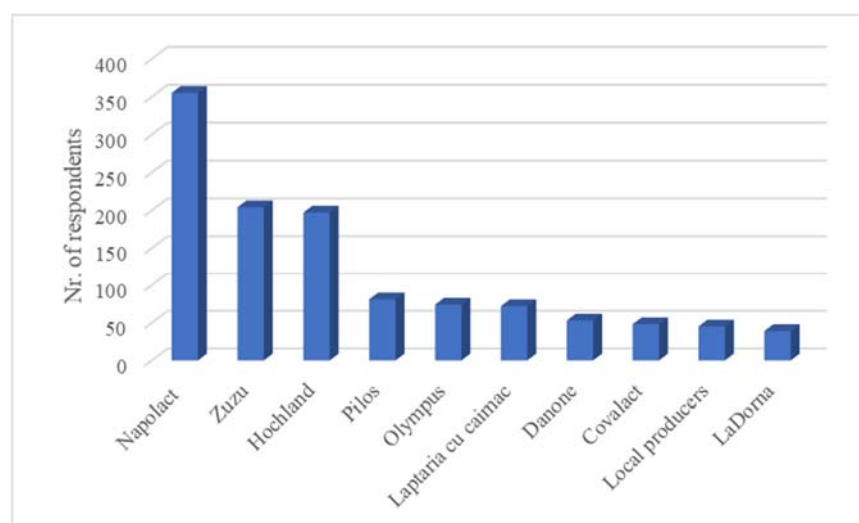


Figure 5. Top ten milk and dairy brands preferred by the respondents. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

All mentioned brands, except “local producers” which refers to small producers who sell their products without any brand, but are particularly present in local food markets, have factories spread on the Romanian territory, and therefore have a national understanding for the respondents. However, most of them are part of multinational chains which adapt their production to suite their different local markets and more, and the local origin of the fresh milk is not guaranteed by the factory location. The potential of local production may be extracted from the multiple mentions from the respondents of small local producers as the preferred sources for milk and dairy, being in line with previous studies [38,76].

The comparison of the importance between milk and dairy product availability in large stores and health recommendations (if any nutritional or health-related benefits of milk and dairy consumption coming from clinical physicians are taken into consideration in the choice of products) for them is presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. The importance of products availability in large stores (%).

	Not Important	Low Importance	Neutral	Important	High Importance
<1000 lei **	12.37	3.09	9.28	27.84	47.42
1000–2000 lei	5.98	5.98	10.26	25.64	52.14
2001–3000 lei	4.23	4.93	11.27	19.01	60.56
3001–4000 lei	11.81	7.09	7.09	22.05	51.97
4001–5000 lei	6.32	6.32	8.42	33.68	45.26
5001–6000 lei	3.64	7.27	18.18	23.64	47.27
>6000 lei	11.11	4.27	10.26	23.08	51.28

** monthly income. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

Considering the descriptive statistics, the highest percentages of respondents in each income category considers that the availability of milk and dairy in large stores, such as supermarkets and hypermarkets is very important. Therefore, the unavailability in large stores of a specific product does not mean the customer would not buy anything at all, but it would adapt to the store offer, being in line with previous research [70].

By comparison, the importance of the health-related recommendations in choosing milk and dairy products is much lower. Around a quarter of the respondents consider this criterion to be of some importance in their choice, no matter the income category. While we would expect that the importance of these recommendations would grow along with the increase of income, this appears not to be the case. What is noticeable is the high

percentage of neutral respondents, meaning those who have not given this criterion any thought before participating in this study.

Table 5. The importance of health recommendations in milk and dairy consumption (%).

	Not Important	Low Importance	Neutral	Important	High Importance
<1000 lei **	18.04	15.46	23.20	25.26	18.04
1000–2000 lei	17.09	12.82	25.64	20.51	23.93
2001–3000 lei	23.24	14.79	21.83	24.65	15.49
3001–4000 lei	20.47	9.45	29.92	18.11	22.05
4001–5000 lei	21.05	10.53	29.47	23.16	15.79
5001–6000 lei	21.82	18.18	20.00	25.45	14.55
>6000 lei	17.09	13.68	23.93	25.64	19.66

** monthly income. Source: authors own interpretation of data.

When assessing the two sides of the fourth hypothesis using the chi-squared test, we observed that for the income influence on large stores availability, the calculated chi value of 30.73 is less than the theoretical chi value of 36.42 for the significance threshold of 0.05, calculated for 24 degrees of freedom. We found that there is no significant correlation between the income of the respondents and the supermarket or hypermarket availability of milk and dairy products.

When considering the second part of the fourth hypothesis, the correlation between income and taking into consideration the health-related recommendations for milk and dairy consumption, the calculated chi value of 16.48 is lower than the theoretical chi value of 36.42 for the significance threshold of 0.05, calculated for 24 degrees of freedom. It is found that there is no association between the respondents' income and the importance given to the health recommendations in the decision to buy milk and dairy products.

Therefore, there is no significant correlation between the respondents' income and the store availability or between income and health-related recommendations, and the fourth hypothesis is infirmed. By seeing the descriptive statistics, the Romanian consumers who participated in this study seem to consider store availability as more important than health-related recommendations when choosing a milk or dairy product. However, more research in this area needs to be done before providing a clear correlation.

Regarding the recommendation expressed by the respondents through an open answered question, the main results were grouped by type of suggestion in Figure 6.

Adding to the quantitative results, the recommendation map shows some similar ideas from the respondents. First, in green, the idea relates to the possibility of increasing the market power of local producers, so they may have contracts with restaurants, hotels, or school cafeterias, through diversification of the product line and an increase of promotion activity. These are pointers to the fact that the local production has considerable development potential if it can keep up with the new tastes and needs of the respondents to this study, being in line with previous studies [76,79]. The second recommendation, in yellow, is a general one, referring to the quality of the raw material used in production. The respondents request that the producers keep the quality of the natural milk and not diminish it through industrial practices or enhance it with artificial additives. In blue, the recommendation goes to small farmers. The respondents suggest that these farmers should cooperate so to have a higher market influence and to sell their products directly to the consumers, not through collectors or industrial dairy factories, being in line with other studies [8,9,79]. The suggestion in red is an environment-related one; the respondents ask for increased attention to recyclable or reusable packaging like glass, as new criteria for sustainable product choice [1,6,7,72,78]. Additionally, one of the preferred local brands stands out especially through their glass packaging. The recommendation in purple is an economic-related one; the respondents suggest fair prices, related to the quality of the products [68], and more care in advertising rather than the aggressive marketing methods that are sometimes used. Another general recommendation is related to the care for the

consumers' health that is expected from the producers, the general feeling of the respondents being that this natural care is missing, with the products put on the market being sometimes perceived as low quality or unhealthy.

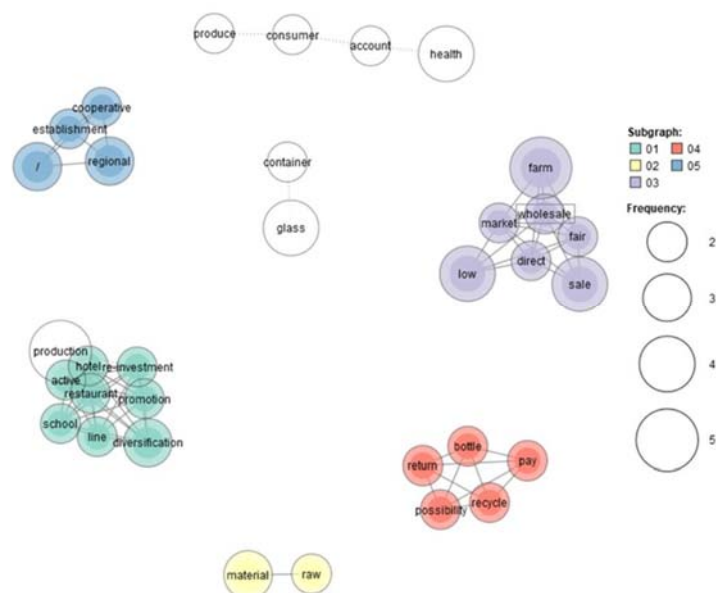


Figure 6. Respondents' recommendations for milk and dairy producers. Source: authors own interpretation with KH Coder [83].

5. Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

The results of the current study point out the market potential of the local Romanian milk and dairy products, with particular attention on the traditional and ecological products, which turn out to be especially important for the Romanian respondents, even for the categories with lower monthly incomes.

The importance given to the sensorial properties of the milk and dairy products is proven by the results and the respondents' recommendations regarding the preservation of the natural qualities of raw milk, pointing out that they have the capacity to recognize products with additives, and therefore such practices might lead to a loss in the market share. Even more, some recommendations refer to products with respect to the consumers' health, raising some signals regarding threats to food safety, which should be looked into carefully by responsible authorities and also producers. Moreover, the food policies aimed at alleviating the income inequalities [51] should include serious considerations on ensuring quality basic food products for the people.

The modifications in consumer behavior are present in the results, with the level of income significantly influencing the willingness to pay for products with higher perceived quality, traditional characteristics, or ecologic certified products. In addition, reusable or recyclable packaging raises particular attention, since the consumers are tending to become more aware of their personal impact over the environment, and therefore tending to engage in making sustainable food choices.

Nevertheless, income has a low correlation with milk and dairy store availability, health-related recommendations for consuming milk and dairy, or the price of the products. Furthermore, gender has no correlation with the proposed selection criteria for milk and dairy. Therefore, income has a lesser influence than we assumed for these basic products, and gender does not differentiate the respondents' selection criteria.

Some limitations for this study come from the choice of a single studied country, as well as the study of a particular moment in time instead of longitudinal research. However, these are future paths for developing the research which we also invite fellow scholars to pursue.

The significance of this study resides in the considerable number of respondents, their answers serving well in forming research hypotheses for a larger, statistically significant study, both in number of respondents and in structure of the respondents. Nevertheless, the results should be of particular interest to marketers and producers in the milk and dairy industry, as knowing the needs and expectations and the purchasing power of the consumers is important in their activity. Therefore, offering a variety of qualitative milk and dairy products of national origin at fair prices and available in large stores should be a priority for the market players in this field. Other actors who should be interested in the results of this study are the public authorities, especially in the food sector. Knowing the fears or uncertainties regarding the food safety of the people is particularly important, as are the practical solutions of providing support for low-income people to have access to quality food products.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, G.-R.L., M.S. and M.C.D.; methodology, M.C.D., G.-R.L. and D.M.I.; software, D.M.I. and M.C.D.; validation, D.M.I. and M.C.D.; formal analysis, G.-R.L. and D.M.I.; investigation, G.-R.L., D.M.I. and M.C.D.; resources, G.-R.L. and D.M.I.; writing—original draft preparation, M.C.D.; writing—review and editing, M.C.D., G.-R.L., M.S. and D.M.I. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by ADER 24.1.1 project: “Research on development of studies and analyzes, for the substantiation of public decisions and policies, for the marketing of agri-food products in order to ensure the food security and safety for the population”.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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