



Article

Consumer Behaviour Regarding Food Waste in Romania, Rural versus Urban

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Abstract: Reducing food waste is an important objective in order to raise awareness of the negative effects it produces. The lack of information regarding the efficient use of food will affect the environment and the health of each of us. The objective of the paper is to present the behaviour of Romanian consumers regarding food waste. By means of a semi-structured questionnaire administered to 267 consumers, the following aspects were investigated: the place where they serve meals, the preparation of meals at home, purchase preferences, the motivation for food waste, and selective collection. Consumption typologies identify a higher share of food waste in urban areas and a better use of food in rural areas. The people from rural areas ate more than 50% of their meals at home. The preferred location for procuring food was, by far, the supermarket or hypermarket in both urban and rural environments. Young people throw away more waste than older food consumers. Awareness about food waste is more accentuated in young adults, without a significant correlation to the area of origin.

Keywords: food waste; consumers; retailers; behaviour; rural; urban



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1. Introduction

Food waste is one of the most important problems of our times [1]. The waste of food produced for human consumption has been connected to issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, water loss, soil degradation, and hunger [2,3].

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) uses the term “food waste” in reference to only the last stages of retail and consumption, and it can be distinguished according to the destination, the edible part, and the nutritional value of the food lost or wasted [4]. Within the FAO’s terminological framework, food waste “refers to the discard of edible foods at the retail and consumer levels, mostly in developed countries” [5,6]. According to the FAO, one-third of all food produced worldwide is lost or wasted [7,8]. The FAO showed that, along the food chain, the greatest waste of products occurs in the consumption phase, but it also occurs in the process of making them and in the infrastructure due to insufficient recovery and management practices [9].

There is also a European-produced definition of food waste. According to the research project “Fusions”, food waste “refers to any food and non-edible parts of food that are removed from the food chain for recovery or disposal (including composting, fallow/unharvested crops, anaerobic degradation, bioenergy production, cogeneration, incineration, discharge into the sewage system, landfills or back into the sea)” [10]. So, food waste includes waste that can be avoided (food that can still be consumed) and waste that cannot be avoided (inedible leftovers), Figure 1.

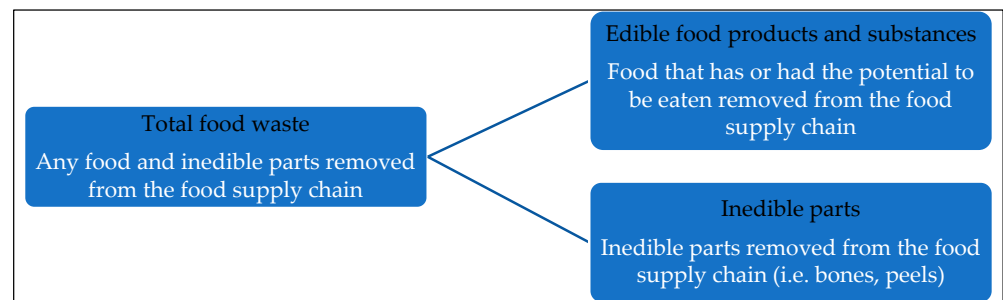


Figure 1. Division of food waste into edible and inedible food [11].

Food waste is also a global ethical issue. In rich countries, food waste is not a problem of low cost and an abundance of food [12,13]. Food waste can also be a consequence of consumption habits, such as throwing away edible parts of vegetables or fruits [14]. For the year 2020, the highest amount of food waste was in Western Asia, with an amount of 110 kg per person per year. In the EU, in 2020, around 127 kg of food waste per inhabitant was generated. Households generated 55% of food waste, accounting for 70 kg per inhabitant. The remaining 45% was waste generated upwards in the food supply chain [15,16]. Those in the south of Europe produce approximately 90 kg of food waste every year. In comparison, those in Western Europe produce an average of 65 kg per capita annually [17].

According to the information available online on the Food Sustainability Index platform [18], Romania's food sustainability index (in 2018), which was calculated based on an average of the scores of the three types of indicators (food loss and waste, sustainable agriculture, and nutritional challenges) was 64.40, which represents an average score (Figure 2).

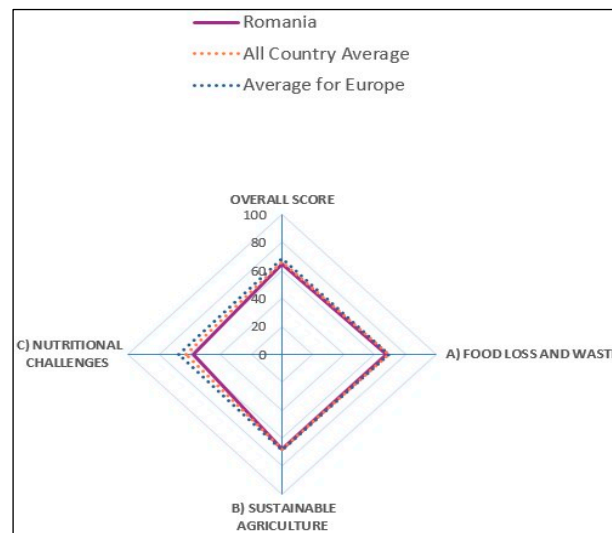


Figure 2. Romania's food sustainability index, 2018 [18].

A local-based project in 2019, "Romania against food waste" (România împotriva risipei de hrană) by the MaiMultVerde Association, also provided some important elements regarding food waste in Romania. Statistics indicate that 5 million tons of food is wasted annually, representing between a third and a half of the total amount of food intended for human consumption produced in a year, i.e., approx. 250 kg/inhabitant, compared to 179 kg/inhabitant, the European average. Currently, approximately 25% of the country's population (4.74 million people) live on the poverty line and encounter difficulties in procuring daily food. Countries such as Belgium, Greece, and Cyprus also fall into this category. A higher score (maximum 76.1—France) means that a country is on the right track towards a sustainable food and nutrition system. Romania is positioned in the middle of

the European ranking based on the food sustainability index, after countries such as France and Luxembourg, but before others such as Malta (61.5) or Bulgaria (54.5) [18].

A series of measures have to be taken at the global, European, and national levels. One of these measures is the third target under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12 (Target 12.3) on Responsible Production and Consumption, the aim of which is to halve food waste by 2030 at retail and consumer levels, considering that more than half of its quantity is generated by final consumers, both internally and externally [19].

Reducing food waste generates savings for consumers and operators, and the recovery and redistribution of surplus food that would otherwise be wasted has an important social dimension [20]. At the same time, food waste has a substantial economic impact [21–23] if we consider all the losses suffered by all those involved in this process (consumers, producers, and retailers). Food waste is generated in all stages of the supply chain, with different features and motivations [24].

At the level of the European Union, the Farm to Fork Strategy brings to the attention of all the actors involved clear objectives to reduce food waste. The Farm to Fork strategy is an important part of the European Green Pact, and the objectives to be fulfilled for the next period are very well defined. Reducing food waste is one of the objectives of the Farm to Fork Strategy, which will also contribute to achieving a circular economy and bringing savings to consumers and operators [14,25].

For Romania, the legislation on food waste has its origins in the EU legislation (e.g., Law 217/2016 regarding the reduction of food waste by focusing on the economic operators as key actors) [26,27].

The specialized literature identifies and sheds light on the links between the different types of policies launched, the main areas of interventions addressed, and the different actors intervening in urban and rural food waste management [6,28,29].

Real efforts are being made to promote recycling programs; they are growing in popularity in urban areas but are also being suggested for more rural regions as well [30]. However, the characteristics and driving factors of household food waste generation, particularly in rural areas, remain less understood [31].

Depending on the most preferable solutions when it comes to the protection and sustainability of the environment, the pyramid shown in Figure 3 exemplifies the activities that can be undertaken regarding how to treat food that has arrived and is included in the area of food waste [32,33].

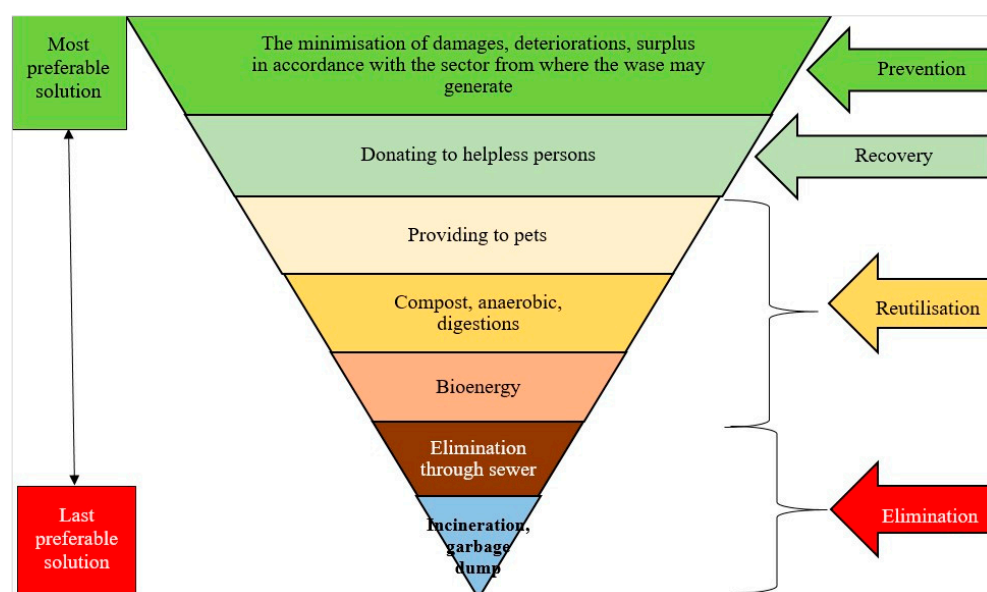


Figure 3. Food waste scale, adapted after [32,33].

According to the above-mentioned information, the situation of food waste and its reduction in Romania are reflective of an average/mean position of the European food waste problem. There is a real difference between rural and urban environments regarding food waste [28,34], but there is a lack of research regarding the involved factors that determine this difference. So, the purpose of the article is to highlight consumers' behaviour regarding food waste, comparing the urban to rural environments. The analytical purpose of this study was to examine things in detail in order to discover more about food waste in rural and urban environments and discuss the main actions for reducing this social-economic problem. Our results are intended to be a reliable foundation for future measures aimed to reduce food waste by applying them according to the specific circumstances.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

The present research was based on an observational analytical study. To analyse the behaviour of consumers, we used the sociological analysis method, which involved obtaining information in a standardised manner from a large group of people using a semi-structured questionnaire [35]. This method allowed for verbal exchanges with the people, with the goal of eliciting information by asking questions.

The questionnaire included 33 questions, of which 4 were optional. The main items the questionnaire focused on were the following:

- Demographic indicators (age, gender, housing environment, last educational institution attended);
- Purchase preferences;
- Motivation for food waste;
- Attitude towards consumption.

The information provided by the questionnaire was divided into four sections, which in turn were segmented into subcategories, as shown in Figure 4. The sections are presented in detail in this study, the first three representing the basis of the analysis of the attitude and behaviour of consumers towards food waste:

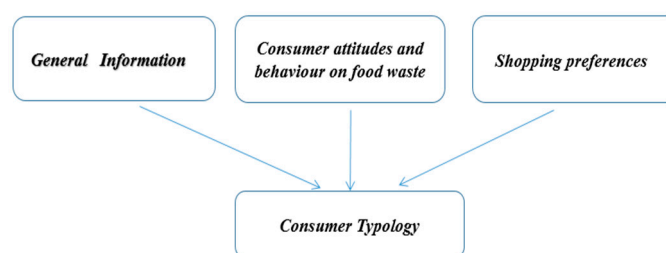


Figure 4. Questionnaire sections, own representation.

The period in which the questionnaire was created and applied was March–April 2022.

2.2. Participants

The study included 267 respondents from the Bucharest–Ilfov and South Muntenia Development Regions (Figure 5), from both the urban and rural areas to capture how food waste is perceived in the two different environments. Bucharest was chosen because it represents the main urban and economic area of Romania and has a high and diverse consumption of food and, indirectly, a great impact on food waste. Bucharest–Ilfov is also the most developed region in Romania, regarding the GDP/inhabitant. It brings together some high-level end consumers with various food preferences, most of them in tune with other global tendencies (e.g., vegan, and/or bio-/organic food consumers, etc. who have the financial and knowledge resources for that). The Bucharest–Ilfov area, in many aspects, is one of the Western-integrated regions of Romania that can be compared with similar areas in Western Europe. At the same time, in this area, different programs and ways

to rethink food waste have been implemented [36]. The South Muntenia Development Region includes the rural areas nearest to Bucharest. Thus, we had the opportunity to check and balance both a high-end sophisticated urban area and a rural region to help calibrate our research. This is important as Romania still has a large rural population, often relying on subsistence farming. Thus, including this urban–rural comparison in the research also helped improve the quality of the findings and allowed the authors to identify any specificities of consumer behaviour.



Figure 5. Romania's development regions [37].

From a demographic point of view, the main characteristics of the respondents are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Division by age categories, depending on gender, %.

Specification	Gender (%)	
	Female	Male
Age		
18–25 years	19.85	8.61
26–35 years	23.22	14.61
36–45 years	16.10	3.75
46–60 years	9.36	2.62
>60 years	1.12	0.75

Table 2. The distribution of completed level of education, depending on the housing environment, %.

Specification	Rural	Urban
Education Level	%	%
Lower secondary education (public school)	0.37	0.37
Higher secondary education (high school/professional/technical)	10.86	10.86
University education	10.49	40.45
Post-university education	3.75	19.10
Non-university tertiary education (post-secondary)	1.12	2.62

The respondents were grouped into five age categories (Table 1), to precisely highlight which age category is more responsible regarding food waste (all respondents were at least 18 years old; the age interval was 18–74 years).

Two other important categories in the General Information section were those related to the housing environment and the last educational institution attended (Table 2). Out of the total number of respondents, 187 (70%) were from an urban environment and the remaining 80 respondents (30%) were from a rural environment.

All respondents were assured of compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

The IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics for Windows was used for the analysis of the results. Using ordinal logistic regression, it was possible to evaluate the behaviour of households and to identify ways of dealing with the negative externalities of food waste. The measurement data with a normal distribution were expressed as the mean $\pm$ standard deviation, median, and percentage (%). The distribution of the prevalence rates and mean scores of the data were calculated based on the one-way analysis of variance (unpaired *t*-test) [38]. For statistical relevance, the *p*-value was calculated; a result of less than 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

Direct verbal communication with those who responded to the questionnaire allowed us to gain information on all variables of interest. Therefore, there was no use for imputation methods, and we only analysed complete cases.

For a clearer and summary rendering of the results obtained, they were presented in the form of tables.

3. Results

The consumer has a role in everything that involves the loss and waste of food, which is due to their purchase behaviour and their consumption habits.

3.1. Analysing Consumer Behaviour

Research shows that a dramatic contribution to food waste is produced in developed countries [39,40]. The consumer's behaviour is influenced by the information they have regarding the correct management of food resources.

- ❖ Consumer typology—The consumers are classified according to the following considerations: their habit of eating at a restaurant or at home, the way they plan their purchases, and the estimation of the expenses incurred to purchase food from the total income.

Regarding the distribution of consumers' preferences for the place where they have their meals, the following can be observed (Table 3):

Table 3. Consumer preferences to dine at home or at a restaurant (%), depending on the residential environment.

Options for Serving the Meal		Home— Rural	Home— Urban	Restaurant— Rural	Restaurant— Urban
Home, %	Restaurant, %				
15	85	0	0.15	0	2.43
25	75	0	1.14	0	9.63
50	50	2.54	10.16	7.13	28.53
75	25	8.76	24	8.2	22.47
85	15	12.52	31.08	6.21	15.41
100	0	4.57	5.08	0	0
Total		28.39	71.61	21.54	78.47
Mean		4.73	11.93	3.59	13.07
SD		5.02	12.78	3.98	11.21
SEM		2.05	5.22	1.62	4.57
95% CI		−0.54 to 10.01	−1.48 to 25.35	−0.58 to 7.76	1.31 to 24.84
Minimum/Maximum		0/12.52	0.15/31.08	0/8.2	0/28.53
Median		3.55	7.62	3.10	12.52

SD—standard deviation, SEM—standard error of the mean, N—sample size, CI—confidence interval.

According to our results, we calculated that people that tended to eat more frequently at home than in a restaurant (more than 50% of their meals) came from the rural area; 23 people from the rural area ate at home and 17 people from the same area chose to eat in a restaurant. Meanwhile, in the city, 124 ate out, and 123 ate at home. Using these data, we calculated the two-tailed p -value, $p = 0.0009$. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be extremely statistically significant. Confidence interval: the mean of the urban minus the rural equals 103.50; the 95% confidence interval of this difference is from 90.41 to 116.59. Intermediate values used in calculations: $t = 34.03$, $df = 2$, standard error of difference = 3.04. Our data may be similar to the information presented by Mattar et al., which shows that in rural households, the amount of food waste was lower compared to urban households [41]. The greatest waste of food was recorded in the urban environment; while rural communities use traditional methods of recycling household food waste, in the urban environment, over 95% of municipal waste ends up in the landfill, thus making it impossible to recycle food waste of any kind, both food and non-food [42].

Regarding the choice of restaurants for meals, it has been found in several studies that one of the major components of food waste in the service sector is consumers' leftovers in restaurants and cafés [43,44]. When a consumer chooses to dine in a restaurant, they must pay attention to the size of the respective portions and the possibility of ordering leftovers to avoid turning them into waste.

Another characteristic defining the typology of the consumer was outlined by how purchases are planned or not. Machová R et al. considered that food choices are determined by a complex decision-making process, which is not necessarily a conscious process due to the attitudes that are developed. It often involves knowledge and beliefs. Thus, motivations to consume food may differ among consumers [45]. According to Mark Boulet et al. [46], some behaviours lead to relatively higher amounts of waste (such as exclusively shopping in supermarkets), while others lead to lower amounts (such as the use of meal plans and shopping lists). It is relevant to present the studies conducted by Stefan et al. and Schanes et al. [47,48], which have highlighted planning and shopping routines as additional factors in the model. These studies have shown that the intention not to waste food does not have a significant effect on reported food waste. In addition, gaining a comprehensive understanding of consumer food waste behaviour in restaurants can help in the mitigation of food waste [49].

The last characteristic analysed, which captures the different types of consumers, is related to the expenses for the purchase of food products, and more precisely, what percentage of the total monthly income it comprises. The income situation of households also affects consumer behaviour. Higher-income households waste more than low-income ones [50]. A study demonstrated that feelings of guilt because of personal concerns, such as financial loss, perceived behavioural control, and negative attitudes, may predict the intention to reduce food waste [51].

- ❖ Shopping preferences—This section breaks down consumer preferences based on where they get their food, how often they buy food, what an average shopping basket contains, and the percentage of the food they buy in excess for different reasons.

The preferred location of consumers from both urban and rural areas, in terms of procuring food, is, by far, the supermarket or hypermarket, with proportions of around 63% and 21%, respectively.

As shown in Table 4, the preference among urban consumers was the agro-food market, and from the rural environment, it was the neighbourhood store in the village. The results show differences that are considered to be not statistically significant between rural and urban shopping preferences.

Table 4. Consumers’ preferred place to buy food, according to residential environment, %.

Specification	Super/ Hypermarket	Agro-Food Market	Neighbourhood Stores	Own Household
Urban	62.92	6.37	3.75	0.37
Rural	20.60	1.50	2.62	1.87
Mean	41.76	3.93	3.18	1.12
SD	29.92	3.44	0.79	1.06
SEM	21.16	2.43	0.56	0.75
N	2	2	2	2
95% CI	−227.10 to 310.62	−27.00 to 34.87	−3.99 to 10.36	−8.40 to 10.64
Minimum	20.6	1.5	2.62	0.37
Median	41.76	3.93	3.18	1.12
Maximum	62.92	6.37	3.75	1.87
<i>p</i> value	0.45	0.14	0.13	0.13

SD—standard deviation, SEM—standard error of the mean, N—sample size, CI—confidence interval.

When asked if they were tempted to buy food products on sale (either they have a lower price than usual or they are on a 1 + 1 free sale), even if they did not need them, 45.3% of the consumers answered as being tempted to do so.

- ❖ Consumer attitude and behaviour towards food waste—This shows consumers’ attitude towards food waste, possible reasons for doing so, intention or disinterest in making a change, and general behaviour towards selective waste disposal.

Table 5 classifies responses according to the housing environment and age, these being considered of great importance in highlighting the age of the people who throw away the largest amount of food and the environment they come from.

Table 5. The amount of food thrown away weekly, depending on the housing environment and age, %.

Specification	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
	%		%		%		%		%	
	18–25 Years		26–35 Years		36–45 Years		46–60 Years		>60 Years	
Other	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.50	0.00	1.12	0.00	0.75	0.00	0.00
Between 1 and 3 kg	3.75	5.99	1.12	8.24	0.75	4.49	1.50	1.12	0.00	0.37
More than 3 Kg	0.75	0.00	0.37	0.37	0.00	0.37	0.00	0.37	0.00	0.00
Under 1 kg	7.12	10.86	4.49	21.72	2.25	10.86	4.12	4.12	0.37	1.12

From a statistical point of view, a younger age (18–25 years) is correlated to throwing away 1 to 3 kg of food waste every week more frequently than those a bit older (26–35 years). The two-tailed *p*-value equals 0.0376. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be statistically significant. Confidence interval: the mean difference between the two groups equals 83.00, and the 95% confidence interval of this difference is from 11.71 to 154.29. Intermediate values used in calculations: *t* = 5.0096, *df* = 2, standard error of difference = 16.568. There were no statistically significant differences among other age groups.

Regarding less than 1 kg of food waste/week, the 26–35 group was more involved in reducing waste than the younger group; the two-tailed *p*-value equals 0.05. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be statistically significant. Confidence interval: the mean of the 26–35 group minus the 18–25 group equals 70.00, and the 95% confidence interval of this difference is from −1.29 to 141.29. Intermediate values used in calculations: *t* = 4.2250, *df* = 2, standard error of difference = 16.568.

Comparing the rural and urban areas, the differences were considered to be not statistically significant regarding the amount of food waste per week.

When asked what they tended to do with leftover food after cooking or ordering in, 70% of the respondents answered that they keep the remaining food for the next day or to be consumed later the same day.

In an average shopping basket, there are main categories into which food is divided and a percentage of each category that is thrown away (Table 6). Food products include foods such as oil, flour, butter, and canned goods; fresh produce includes meat, fish, and eggs; “other” represents any food that cannot be included in the categories already mentioned.

Table 6. Percentage of products purchased and discarded, by category.

Specification	Bread and Bakery Products, %	Dairy Products, %	Sausages and Cheeses, %	Vegetables, %	Fruits, %	Grocery Products, %	Fresh Products, %	Others, %
Wasted products	14.46	9.42	11.54	17.12	13.95	5.39	9.68	18.45
Purchased products	8.46	12.04	12.77	18.41	14.19	9.18	15.58	9.36

Another question that shapes consumer behaviour brings into discussion the methods they use concerning food products that are about to expire. A total of 59% of respondents said they usually eat food before it expires. There is a lot of confusion about the interpretation of the expiration date, so consumers can throw away food that is still fit for consumption. Regarding the recovery of food that can no longer be eaten, 20% of the rural respondents said that they give it to the animals in the household, and 7% throw it in the trash. A total of 52% of urban respondents said they throw it in the trash and 20% of them said they give it to pets.

One of the most significant questions was whether or not the respondents had a real interest in food waste. Table 7 shows their interest based on their age. Those most interested in this topic were those aged 26–35 years old, and those who showed no real interest at all were those aged 18–25 years old. From a statistical point of view, age was positively correlated to having an interest in food waste, $p = 0.0317$. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be statistically significant. Confidence interval: the mean of the 36–45 group minus the 18–25 group equals -48.50 , and the 95% confidence interval of this difference is from -86.56 to -10.44 . Intermediate values used in the calculations: $t = 5.4828$, $df = 2$, standard error of difference = 8.846 . This result was sustained by the comparison between the answers of the youngest and the oldest respondents ($p = 0.0448$).

Table 7. Interest in food waste by age, %.

Specification	18–25 Years	26–35 Years	36–45 Years	46–60 Years	>60 Years	Mean	SD	SEM	N	95 CI	Min	Median	Max
Yes	50	89	40	30	4	42.60	31.08	13.90	5	4.01 to 81.19	4	40	89
%	18.73	33.33	14.98	11.24	1.50	15.95	11.63	5.20	5	1.50 to 30.40	1.5	14.98	33.33
No	26	12	13	2	1	10.80	10.13	4.53	5	−1.78 to 23.38	1	12	26
%	9.74	4.49	4.87	0.75	0.37	4.04	3.79	1.69	5	−0.67 to 8.75	0.37	4.49	9.74

SD—standard deviation, SEM—standard error of the mean, N—sample size, CI—confidence interval.

Summarizing all the measures taken by the respondents, we present the ones that were mentioned the most often: recycling food as much as possible; reducing the amount of food purchased, depending on needs; valorisation of food (freezing, reuse in other dishes, etc.);

cooking in smaller quantities compared to the past; effective menu planning, especially by making shopping lists; better household food planning; checking and prioritizing food about to expire; appropriate food storage; giving food to pets or people in need.

When asked if the sanitation operator in their area has a separate waste collection system for food (separate from recyclables), 78% of the respondents stated that they do not have such a system.

When asked if they were willing to minimise food waste or if they did not consider it an important topic, 91% of respondents said they had an interest in doing so. Table 8 divides their answers according to their age and housing environment.

Table 8. Consumers interested or not in food waste, depending on age and housing environment, %.

Specification	Yes	No	Yes	No
	Rural		Urban	
18–25 years	26	5	39	6
%	9.74	1.87	14.61	2.25
26–35 years	13	3	80	5
%	4.87	1.12	29.96	1.87
36–45 years	8	0	42	3
%	3.00	0.00	15.73	1.12
46–60 years	15	0	16	1
%	5.62	0.00	5.99	0.37
>60 years	1	0	4	0
%	0.37	0.00	1.50	0.00
Mean	12.60	1.60	36.20	3.00
SD	9.24	2.30	29.18	2.55
SEM	4.13	1.03	13.05	1.14
N	5	5	5	5
95% CI	1.13 to 24.07	1.26 to 4.46	−0.03 to 72.43	0.17 to 6.17
Minimum	1	0	4	0
Median	13	0	39	3
Maximum	26	5	80	6

SD—standard deviation, SEM—standard error of the mean, N—sample size, CI—confidence interval.

Those most willing to act in the sense of reducing food waste were those aged 26–35 years from the urban environment. In addition, those who showed disinterest in acting were those aged 46–60 years old, in the urban environment and those aged 26–35 years old in the rural environment.

Comparing the attitudes of all age groups based on their living environment, there was no statistical difference between the rural and urban environments ($p > 0.2$). In addition, comparing among age groups, it seems that those younger than 25 years of age from the rural area were not as interested in food waste as the young adults from the urban area ($p = 0.05$). Young people from the rural area were the ones who represented the category of those who throw away more than 3 kg of food. For the rest of the age groups, there was no statistically significant difference depending on their living environment.

3.2. Discussion Regarding Possible Ways to Minimise Food Waste

As it emerged from the questionnaire, 83.52% of the respondents bought their food from a supermarket or hypermarket. Thus, they had quite high expectations when it came to everything regarding the supermarket, from the supply side, with as large an assortment

of products as possible, to the configuration of a supermarket, the behaviour of employees, and even the various extra facilities offered, such as the possibility for home delivery of food products through a functional online application, different payment methods, etc. Starting from these considerations, the influence held by retailers can be observed from the perspective of the final consumers. The food supply chain is a related series of activities undertaken to produce, process, distribute, and consume food. It starts when the raw materials are ready to enter the technical food production system. It ends when the food is consumed or discarded/removed from the supply chain [52]. Thus, the decisions of consumers or retailers and food service providers can reduce food waste [27,53]. These two sectors (consumers and the food retail industry) can work together to help combat food waste. Even if the cooperation between them seems paradoxical, given the close relationship, due to the fundamental needs of each, major changes can be made in terms of consumer behaviour [54]. If we want to change habits, this must be communicated directly, transparently, and as comprehensively as possible to have the expected success in the actual implementation [55]. The most important action that can be taken by food retailers is to intensify the messages from the food waste awareness campaigns, which some of them have already implemented [56].

As the questionnaire showed, approx. 80% of respondents stated that they have a real interest in minimizing food waste, so their responsiveness will be high. An important action in this direction, which could have a significant impact, is the education of consumers in terms of making decisions regarding the purchase of products from the fruit/vegetable category, depending on the aesthetic aspect. As the results of the questionnaire also showed, the most purchased but also discarded products were those from the fruit/vegetable category [57]. At the same time, we highlight the importance of the inclusion of all stakeholders in the prevention and reduction of food waste and the need to educate citizens about the notion of food waste and its causes, according to the studies carried out by Gheorghescu et al. and Bălan and Pocol [27,58]. Regarding education, studies by the European Commission, Secondi et al., and Di Talia et al. [12,59,60] have highlighted the association between the level of education of consumers and the amount of waste. In the urban environment, there was a significantly higher proportion of respondents with a university education compared to other types of institutions (40.45%), the next being postgraduate education (19.10%), and in the rural environment, higher secondary education was in first place (10.86%), immediately followed by university (10.49%).

Due to errors in the transport of these types of products (carriers do not respect the specific conditions for food arrangement, temperature, etc.), as well as their incorrect handling and storage, vegetables and fruits can suffer damage regarding their aesthetic appearance. They can be sorted, and those that have not undergone major changes and are perfectly saleable can be put up for sale. Those that have suffered major damage and can no longer be marketed can be redirected to social stores or fed to animals at shelters, zoos, etc. Paying attention to the importance of the taste (essence) of fruits and vegetables and not their aesthetic aspect (appearances) can bring major improvements to the buying behaviour of consumers regarding this type of product [61,62].

There is confusion regarding the interpretation of the expiration date of food products. Most people do not know the difference between “To be consumed preferably before/until the end of . . . ” and “Expires on . . . ”. According to Law 57/2002, foods for which it is specified “To be consumed, preferably, before/until the end of . . . ” can still be consumed after that date, which represents “the date established by the manufacturer until which a food it retains its specific characteristics under appropriate storage conditions” [63]. At the same time, Law 217/2016, which entered into force in February 2019, specifies that economic operators can offer food that is approaching its expiration date to associations, social enterprises, and foundations against a maximum value of 3% + VAT of the purchase price in the case of traders, and in the case of producers and processors, against a maximum amount of 3% + VAT of the purchase price. Thus, only foundations and associations can resell donated food [60,64].

There are some limitations of this study. The research could involve new techniques that allow for the evaluation of more people and also to create a profile of urban/rural society, which will subsequently make it possible to identify parameters that will help to determine the main factors involved in consumers' food waste. It is important to mention that society and social behaviour were still strongly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic when we initiated the study. In addition, the international literature is lacking regarding comparisons of food waste between rural and urban areas.

In the future, we would like to extend the research to a larger area of Romania and then, in collaboration with foreign colleagues, involve more countries in our research. We would like to create a pattern useful to economic entities and local administrations, and, through this collaboration, minimize food waste. In addition, in the future, we would like to integrate aspects regarding the urban–rural continuum into our studies. Nowhere are the interlinkages between rural areas and urban centres more apparent than when dealing with the food system. The livelihoods of rural populations often depend on their connection to peri-urban and urban food spaces, while cities depend on surrounding peri-urban and rural areas for food and ecosystem services [65].

4. Conclusions

The responsibility of reducing food waste belongs to each actor involved, whether they are a natural or legal person, as a result of the unconscious waste of the resources that are made available to us if they are not fully used or are used improperly.

Most of the time, people from rural areas prefer to eat at home, serving home-cooked meals, while people in cities go out to eat their meals. Eating in a restaurant may create more leftovers and increase food waste.

People like to do their food shopping at supermarkets independently of their areas of living.

About two-thirds of the respondents said that they try to reduce food waste by keeping any remaining food for the next day or to be consumed later the same day. Regarding the recovery of food that can no longer be eaten, 20% of the rural respondents said that they give it to the animals in the household, and 7% throw it in the trash. At the same time, people from the cities said they throw the food away in more than 50% of cases, while 20% of them give it to their pets.

The largest amount of food waste is produced by those 18–25 years of age and from the rural environment.

It is necessary to create, at the public level, a guide on the prevention, recovery, and reuse of food waste.

It is important to realise that each individual has a part in producing food waste and, also, in reducing it. Combating food waste is a collective effort in which a predominant role is played by the sum of individual decisions. According to our results, those most interested in this topic were those aged between 26 and 35 years old, and those who show no real interest at all were those aged between 18 and 25 years old (from a rural environment).

The authorities should also continuously inform consumers about the selective collection of waste and the involvement of organizations whose main object of activity is the different methods of reusing food waste.

The results highlighted in the paper can provide direction on how to act, with attention paid to the young generation that is not very involved in the problem (even if they produce a large amount of food waste per week). We stated a few measures that are as feasible as possible, and their effects will be felt in time, bringing benefits to people's health and the environment.

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