

FOOD MARKETING – A STRATEGIC OPTION FOR FOOD SAFETY IN ROMANIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades food consumption has intensified triggering an increase in demand for raw materials as well as a series of food crises. Against this background, uncertainty and distrust of consumers as to the quality of their diet were manifested. Thus, the food industry faces a new demand characteristic of the modern consumer: food safety, so healthier food. Food manufacturers are today facing increasing competition to meet the quality and health requirements of food, drawing on a number of innovative strategies that are trying to meet these needs. The European Union is one of the promoters of food safety, trying through its policies to provide healthy food throughout its territory, taking care of it from production processes to delivering the product to the final consumer. However, besides the EU's single market, the local food market also affects food safety. Taking these issues into consideration, the article aims to identify the perception of young consumers about healthy eating and to determine the degree of influence of international food producers, especially Europeans, towards the Romanian sector, taking into account the consumer's access to information and the confidence they have in existing companies on the market.

A quantitative research method has been chosen, with the questionnaire as a tool. The data was collected by applying the questionnaire using an online platform, and their processing was done using tools such as: Microsoft Excel and SPSS 20. The main results revealed a series of approaches to food safety at the level of Romania and the European Union as well as a series of consistent and clear recommendations for increasing food quality and improving the food behavior of young people through the use of food marketing.

KEYWORDS: *Competitiveness, Consumer, Food Marketing, Strategy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades the trends that have brought remarkable changes in the lifestyle of individuals as well as in their social and economic environments have been directly linked to their diet. Elements such as the lack of time caused by a busy work schedule, but also the variation in income of people together with other factors have led to the emergence of fast food restaurants and large chain stores. Also, primary food production has lost popularity in favor of purchasing food from major chain stores. This can be attributed to continued industrialization and urbanization that have resulted in increased consumption of processed foods. Currently, the consumer prefers appetizing foods placed on the shelves of food stores, these foods occupying most of the food market in most of the developed countries.

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Health has contributed innovating to global nutrition, eating healthy foods is seen as the driving force of promoting a healthy lifestyle. Thus, consumers are increasingly thinking about the quality and health of the foods they consume with an open attitude towards changing harmful dietary habits (Niva, 2007; Bogue et al., 2005). In this regard, efforts are made to ensure that marketed foods are as healthy as possible by adding ingredients that are considered healthy or eliminating ingredients known to be unhealthy (Bech-Larsen & Grunert, 2003; Bech-Larsen & Scholderer, 2007; Chrysochou, 2010). However, there is a question of credibility and transparency of information about how food is produced and the source from which it originates. In doing so, the state through its own policies and the European Union through its policies have felt the need to intervene to ensure that production firms comply with food safety requirements and standards and that their product information is provided in a transparent and correct way (van der Meulen et al., 2008; Alemanno, 2006). This is where food marketing is felt, which must ensure that, in addition to fulfilling its essential purpose of promoting food as much as possible in order to increase sales, it provides accurate information on how those products influences consumer health, which is not always the case.

State intervention and EU intervention to ensure food safety is absolutely necessary only if we consider that a high level of health for the population and the protection of consumers' interests is the goal of EU food policies (European Communities, 2002). As a matter of fact, consumer behavior has changed in a higher proportion over the last five decades compared to the last millennium. All these, combined with growing competition in the food field, both nationally and internationally, are just some of the arguments for our effort to reveal through this paper a number of interesting and useful aspects of food marketing as a strategic source of consumer information on food safety.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the emergence of marketing in the food industry, methods and tactics of selling food have experienced a continuous change. Marketing has been broadly defined since the early 1900s, which meant performing the activities necessary to distribute goods from the producer to the consumer (Baker & Hart, 2007). Since 1930, we have seen the development of the food market and increased competition to attract as many consumers as possible. This context favored the development of new ideas by food suppliers through which they tried to outperform competitors' sales. Thus, consumer behavior has been encouraged and stimulated to acquire products and services in increasing quantities, coupled with a gradual technological development that had the purpose of promoting food marketing campaigns.

Promotion has seen a fairly rapid development, initially constituting a means of attracting consumers' attention to marketed products and creating a better image of the company in front of the public. Along with the Second World War, food promotion knew a rather narrow target audience because the means of promotion were mainly newspaper and radio. Nowadays, the means of promotion are much more diversified and these include: advertising spots, billboards, the Internet etc.

The food industry and its marketing have tried to build on their abilities to identify consumers' needs and to create the necessary marketing strategies. Marketing strategies are the result of the work of some specialists in the field, and this cannot be blamed if promotion correctly informs consumers of unhealthy food. Depending on what they want to convey, these marketing specialists can influence positively or negatively food safety through the products they promote. Companies that produce unhealthy food can be successful in promoting such products for many reasons. One of these is the poor information of consumers of those products. Even the consumer who has more information in this respect does not take measures to consume healthier foods and adapt to the situation because the foods he is sure to know are healthy, such as organic, unprocessed, etc., are at

a price too high for the purchasing power of most consumers. In this context, food marketing plays a very important role in maintaining a high food safety.

Food marketing bases its work on the trends that consumers follow. Typically, these trends are marked by important events. The past century has been sprinkled with many such events impacting on the food industry. The discussion that arises here refers to the causes that have contributed to the current situation with regard to food safety.

American Professor Donald Worster said in 1979 that food production changed not only because of the great economic crisis at the beginning of the century but also because of the phenomenon which he called Dust Bowl - a phenomenon of desertification of the soil due to drought - the two phenomena taking place somewhat simultaneously. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, much of the American soils turned from productive soils into dust. This is one of the reasons that has led to the creation of pricing policies characterized by higher prices than those of the market (Worster, 2004).

World War I and World War II have stimulated the need for people to have new food habits by imposing changes that have manifested their influence throughout the entire food system. During these two major global conflicts, state governments encouraged the population to consume as much fresh food, fruits, vegetables, dairy as they were easily perishable and could not easily be carried on the battle front (Freidberg, 2009). Thus, the behavior of the population has changed in the long run. As more and more perishable food was being consumed, the sales of home appliances that helped keep fresh produce increased. This was another example of how to maintain a certain food safety (Malik et al., 2013). World War II has brought innovations in the food industry by creating new food for soldiers such as dehydrated potatoes then packaged in individual packages or powdered orange juice. Thus, after the conflict ended, the food industry was left out of the market for these types of products, having to look for a new market and a new segment of customers. These types of food have focused their attention on the average consumer without much initial success. However, the gains to the food industry have been manifested through the promotion of a new generation of products, namely: pre-packaged products and a new, more economical, simpler and more comfortable lifestyle. Taking this point in time, we identify the beginning of success for food marketing and the emergence of food safety issues. So, after 1950, more and more cases of overweight and obese people have been recorded, with studies showing that the main cause is the consumption of unhealthy food (Eurostat, 2017).

The food industry model in the United States has been the standard for Europe for a long time because it is a profitable model in all aspects that could be followed by any company interested in gaining success. However, Europe is trying to maintain a safer food system by creating policies, legislation and strategies that favor the sustainable development of agriculture.

Food marketing has the ability to effectively sell a product type if the market segment meets its needs by purchasing that product. As an example, many foods containing many fats will in principle be promoted to overweight people, believing that it is likely that these people will not worry too much about the fat contained in that product, compared to a teenager for example who, probably will not purchase such a product. Also, an energizing drink will target young consumers as they are more attracted to such products. Thus, we can realize that unhealthy habits adopted by consumers have prompted the food industry to promote commodities.

Food promotion is a vast subject and the food industry considers it particularly important. Several ways of communication are used to make a successful promotion. Promotion or advertising, in the view of specialists, is a series of processes: communication, marketing, public relations, information and persuasion, economic and social (Arens, 1996). Promotion is used to raise awareness of the potential consumer product or service promoted by passing certain information about the promoted object. Kotler (1988) is of the opinion that promotion is one of the main tools that companies have at their disposal to use them in their demographic target. According to the same author, the goal of

promotion is to increase the number of buyers and identify sources of differentiation of the products of an organization to the products and services of others

Several studies (Goodhope, 2013; Nayyar, 2012; Ladipo & Rahim, 2013) indicate that the brand and the ways of promotion most affect consumer behavior and food choices. According to them, the brand has a particularly important impact on the purchasing behavior of consumers. Mainly teenagers are attracted to the products of a notorious brand. The results also indicated that most of the study participants said they were influenced by the brand, packaging, label, and product promotion. Companies are aware of this, so brand marketing has become one of the most popular promotional tools. With regard to the food industry and food safety, the effects are not positive, given the fact that it is looking to make food production processes more efficient and invests heavily in promotion, quality being often left behind.

Health can be seen as an important dimension in food safety. Being a very broad concept, health can be approached from the perspective of many scientific perspectives, from a medical, social, nutritional or even psychological point of view. With regard to health, there is also a consumer perspective, and they tend to address issues such as nutrition quality as a defining aspect of their own health, but the consumer's perception of healthy nutrition may be different from that of a specialist. From a consumer perspective, health can be divided into two dimensions: a healthy diet and the avoidance of unhealthy products. Healthy eating is linked to diets, genetically unmodified foods, and nutritionally healthy nutrition. Avoiding unhealthy food is closely related to food safety, a topic that has been of great interest in our day because it addresses aspects such as: the nutritional value of food, its safety, the application and maintenance of food standards, and very good information on origin and content of foods by appropriate labeling. Consumers often do not have the information or knowledge to decide whether the purchased food is a healthy nutrition or not. The way in which the product is displayed and promoted is actually influencing the consumer's perception of how healthy it is. As regards to the food safety, a number of standards exist at European level, but compliance with the standard ensures short-term food safety without taking into account the fact that the product could affect consumers health in long-term.

According to recent studies by Euromonitor, launched in 2015, focusing on calories consumed, the global population consumes 1.5 trillion calories a day, which means that a single consumer purchases an average of 765 calories a day from carbonated beverages and processed foods. The coordinator of these studies, Lauren Bandy, warns that 40% of the world's population suffers from obesity or overweight and yet studies show that by 2019, the number of calories purchased daily will increase by 90. Also, the studies revealed that the main contribution to the increase in the total calories consumed in a country is affiliated to the brands of processed products such as carbonated beverages.

Fast-food restaurants, shop & go supermarkets and supermarkets have seen a very rapid development lately. Thousands and thousands of processed foods are available to consumers. Local food products have begun to be considered healthy, which has led to beliefs that the local food market would have positive effects on the nutrition of local communities to prevent and reduce obesity. Local food products can show their positive effects in two ways. Firstly, a local food market has to offer fresher, unprocessed products, all due to shorter distances from the producer to the consumer. Secondly, a well-developed local food market could increase the availability of healthier and therefore safer products within those communities, and consumers would be encouraged to feed more healthily (Morland et al., 2002).

If the local market means safe food, we will see what local food statistics in Romania say as compared to those imported from the European Union. Table 1 shows the ratio between the percentages of Romanian local food products and imported food products, which have gained more and more ground. The most affected by this phenomenon appear to be vegetables and fruits, which account for almost 80% of the imported consumed products.

Table 1. The ratio of Romanian food to imported food

Product	Share of Romanian products (%)	Share of Imported from EU (%)	Share of imported from outside EU (%)
Milk	63	36	1
Chicken eggs	88	12	0
Pork meat	83	17	0
Bird meat	84	16	0
Sunflower oil	63	34	3
Bread	84	14	2
Meats	82	17	1
Wine	75	21	4
Tomatoes	25	47	28
Potatoes	40	49	11
Apples	14	79	7
Grapes	15	51	34

Source: Own processing from OECD, 2016

Romania holds the first position in the European Union in terms of 28.1% of household budgets for food products (Figure 1), although in absolute terms Romania is in the last positions next to Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria (OECD, 2016).

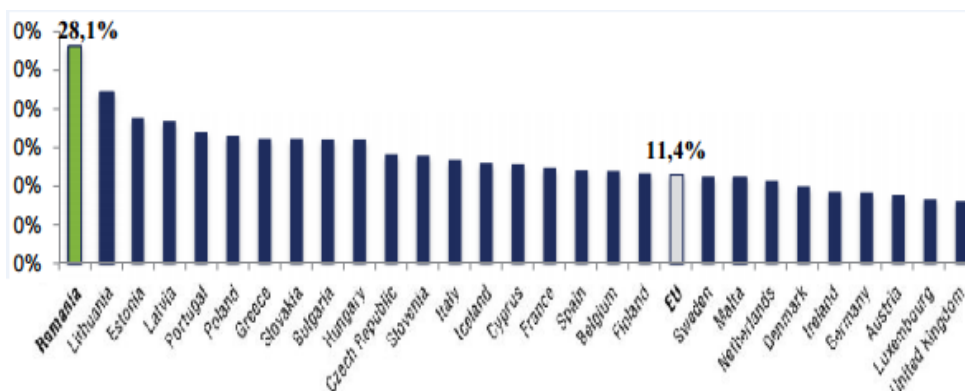


Figure 1. Percentage of total household food expenditure in the EU

Source: OECD, 2016

More than 287,000 companies are part of the EU food industry, bringing the EU economy roughly one billion euros a year, more than any other industry. In Romania, the legislation that applies in the food processing sector is mostly harmonized with EU legislation. The Codex Alimentarius sums up a collection of international food standards, together with good practice techniques to contribute substantially to the safety, quality and equity of international food trade. Standards contained in the Codex Alimentarius contain recommendations that are optional for members, but they are often the basis for national legislation, as in the case of Romania. The Codex has a significant impact on commercial litigation on food safety and its food safety standards cover 99% of the global population (Competition Council, 2016).

So, more recent studies and researches, as well as previous experiences of some EU Member States, raise the issue of food safety from a different perspective (Halkier & Holm, 2006; Ansell & Vogel, 2006; Vos & Wendler, 2006). In our opinion, food marketing has a particular influence on consumers' food behavior and represents a sustainable and viable strategic option for Romania and

the European Union. A broad research process was needed, with the main results outlined in the next section of the paper.

3. RESEARCH ON FOOD BEHAVIORS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN ROMANIA

As Dinu (2014) indicates, companies are responsible for consumers. Therefore, this study will identify and analyze the level of information provided for young consumers in Romania regarding the healthy nutrition of the individual, as well as the causes that lead them to have a certain purchasing behavior for certain foods.

3.1 Research methodology

The process of this research involved the extensive study of the specialized literature, being the main source of documentation for the elaboration of the theoretical framework of the work and the collection, systematization and analysis of the data. The data were collected from January 2017 to June 2017 and are representative for young people aged 18-25.

As a research tool, a quantitative tool was used, the specific methodology being based on an online questionnaire via the docs.google.com platform. The questionnaire contained 17 closed and open questions, which were structured in a number of 4 different sections, each built to systematize the information gathered. Respondents were 260, which provide a satisfactory degree of representativeness for the target group of this work. The collected data has been processed using the specific applications in Word and Excel, as well as through the SPSS 20 application.

3.1.1 Research goal and objectives

The purpose of this research was to analyze the purchasing behavior of Romanian youths for food and to develop viable solutions to reduce the consumption of unhealthy and unsafe foods.

The specific objectives of research were:

- Identifying the determinants that have an influence on young Romanian consumers in order to have a healthier diet;
- Identifying consumer opinions on the impact of the food industry on their health;
- Identifying key determinants for purchasing a particular type of food;
- Knowing the consumer's opinion about national programs for healthy eating.

3.1.2 Research hypotheses

The hypotheses on which the research was carried out were as follows:

- Hypothesis no. 1: Young consumers consider that they have a lifestyle influenced strongly by the food markets trends.
- Hypothesis no. 2: Consumer information on processed food ingredients should be improved.
- Hypothesis no. 3: Promoting local products and developing local food markets is a way to improve food choices for young consumers.
- Hypothesis no. 4: The marketing strategy of big stores is the reason for buying certain products.
- Hypothesis no. 5: National programs for healthy eating are good sources of information for consumers.

3.1.3 Sample setting and its characteristics

The sample was determined using random sampling method based on the following formula:

$$N = \frac{t^2 * p * (1 - p)}{e^2} \quad (1)$$

Where:

N – Sample size;

t – Confidence level, with a default value of 1.96 having a 95% probability of guaranteeing the obtained results;

p – The non-percentage weight of sample components characterized by a particular attribute;

e – Error margin, for our study, +-5%.

After the calculations, a sample of 260 young subjects aged 18-25 years was determined, our research being representative for this segment. In order to solve possible errors that might have occurred in completing forms, we completed the poll process when a total of 280 completed questionnaires was recorded. Finally, we used 260 valid forms.

4. FINDINGS

The results obtained with the first part of the applied questionnaire referred to the respondent identification data, therefore:

- The sample consisted of 169 women (65%) and 91 men (45%);
- As education, most respondents have higher education (80%), followed by those with medium studies (20%).

The research was continued by asking psychological questions, with reference to the behavior of respondents when it comes to cooking in their own homes and the consequences of visits to fast food restaurants.

Thus, Figure 2 indicates that more than half of young consumers have the habit of cooking in their own homes, accounting for 57%, the other respondents saying they sometimes choose to cook (20%) or never (23%). Also, the respondents were surveyed about the frequency with which they use home delivery services and how often they go out to eat. The results are also shown in Figure 2. Most of the consumers questioned, 53.61% admit that they use household food delivery services, often finding themselves in such circumstances, while 16.27% are not characterized by no predefined answer, which means that they are in fact those who choose to cook especially at home, having a healthier diet than other consumers who choose to eat at the restaurant.

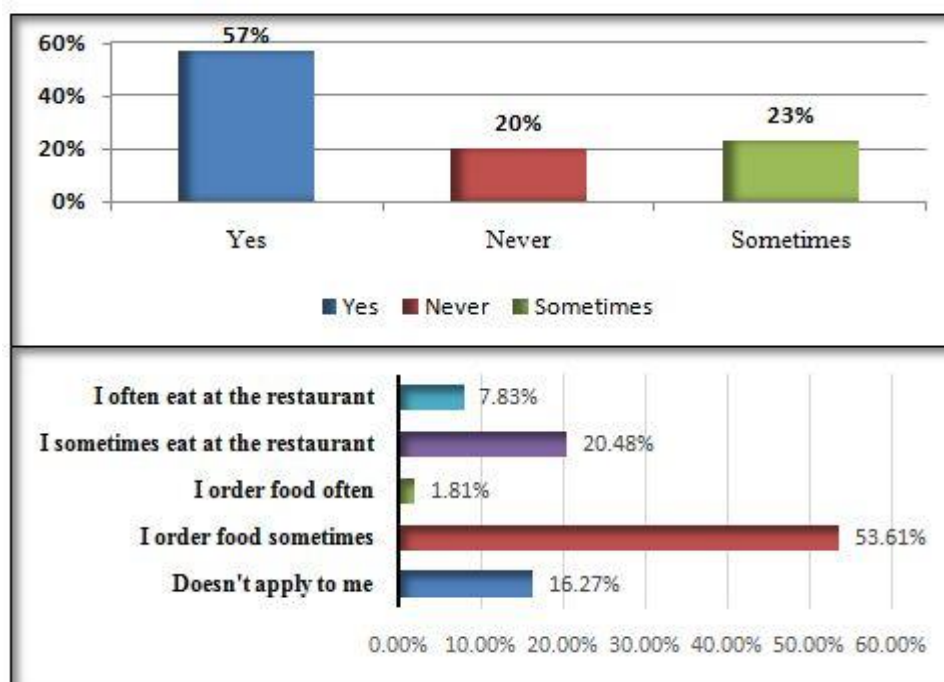


Figure 2. Consumer food habits

Source: Authors

Table 2 resulted from the attempt to identify the opinion of young consumers regarding fast food restaurants in Romania. We have selected a series of keywords that we found to be associated with some of the trends in response. These trends target both positive and negative aspects and, in our opinion, are good assessments of the reasons for attending or avoiding a fast-food restaurant.

Table 2. Aspects of fast food restaurants

Positive aspects	Negative aspects
Fast	Bad
Cheap	Unwholesome
Tasty	Destructive
Good location	Harmful

Source: Authors

The purchasing behavior for food was further analyzed. Thus, respondents were questioned about the frequency of purchasing the necessary food from local food markets. Figure 3 indicates that subjects have the habit of shopping in a local food market at least twice a week, with a 40% share. A close indicator has shown us that, in a similar proportion, young people tend to buy food more than three times a week. A positive trend has been identified, as young consumers prefer local food markets, which, according to experts (Ikerd, 2005), provide consumers with healthier products, generally unprocessed, providing superior food safety.

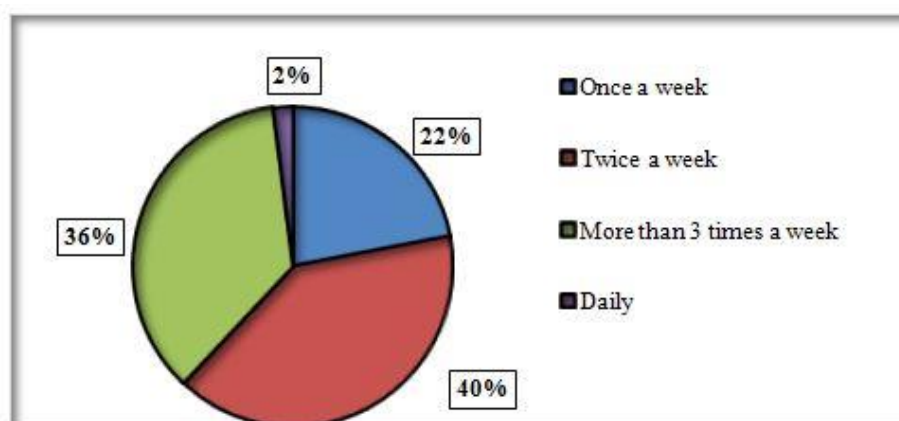


Figure 3. Frequency of food purchases in local food markets

Source: Authors

In order to identify in more detail, the respondents' purchasing behavior for food products, it was necessary to know the types of products they buy most often from food markets or supermarkets. In this regard, the most popular products in the food market were listed along with other products considered to be healthier. Thus, the most voted foods were fruits and vegetables with over 70%. Using our research, we have tried to identify the most purchased foods, which determine the purchasing behavior of the respondents. The foods we considered in the present research were: fruits, vegetables, carbonated beverages, cereals, sweets, bakery products, meat, dairy products. As it can be seen from Figure 4, the foods purchased by respondents to this study may have different influences on their diet, given its variety. There is also a predominance of a certain type of food in the purchasing behavior of the subjects. There was a low interest rate on consumers for foods considered healthier, with significant variations in opinions.

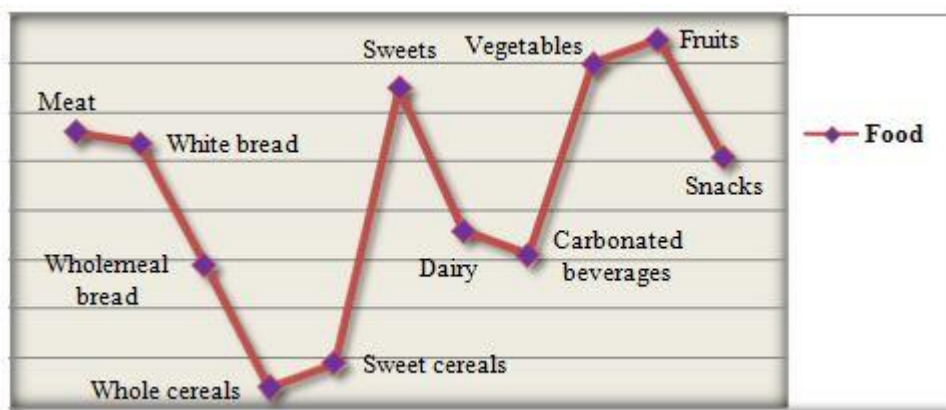


Figure 4. Frequently purchased food and its variety
 Source: Authors

The impact of marketing strategies is on consumers especially through visual promotion (Kim et al., 2017). Marketing agencies produce food billboards, billboards that typically contain a picture that is representative of a particular product, consumers being tempted to be attracted to that image and not to the actual product itself. Unfortunately, such strategies are used daily to promote and produce not just healthy products, some being transported from thousands of miles away. To try to demonstrate the effectiveness of the visual promotion that we talked about earlier, in our research, we conducted a small experiment using one of the items in the questionnaire. Subjects were urged to choose one of two images without thinking about a specific context. In a picture was a healthy food, some cashew nuts, without packaging or attractive visual presentation, and in the other image was an unhealthy food, burgers, clothed in an attractive visual form, being sold in a promotional form, two at the price of one. Most of the respondents chose the unhealthy product, most likely because of the form in which it was presented. As expected, most of our research subjects chose the burgers, with 71.8%. Of note here is the low percentage (28%) of those who have chosen the healthier food variant. Thus, we have been able to demonstrate how visual promotion has a major influence on consumers' eating behavior.

In order to see how the state manages to protect the health of citizens and the safety of their food we have tried to identify the extent to which our respondents are familiar with national health insurance programs, especially those in the food sector. Respondents were asked if they came into contact with one of their programs so far and were offered three possible response options for a program that promotes safe food. Figure 5 illustrates that about 40% of those surveyed came into contact with the National Program "I Live Healthy Too". Concerning is the fact that relatively high percentages (42%) have never heard of such a program, probably because their promotion was not enough, which shows poor consumer information.



Figure 5. The degree to which consumers are informed about programs for healthy eating
 Source: Authors

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed that most of the young consumers surveyed for this research are aware of the adverse effects of processed and fast food on their health, but they do not feel the need for a change in their own eating behavior. An in-depth analysis of the open questions addressed to respondents about fast-food foods can reveal one of the effects of food marketing on consumers. They said they consume these types of products, knowing the negative health effects, because they have created a habit to be specific to the generation they belong to. It is more a trend they want to respect, agreeing with a large number of people.

The first questions in the questionnaire validated the first hypothesis that young consumers think they have a lifestyle strongly influenced by the trend of food markets. Thus, respondents said they are attending at least three times a week, both supermarkets and fast food restaurants. Further, research results validated the 2nd hypothesis that consumer information on processed food ingredients should be improved. The study points out that the purchasing behavior of young consumers predominates with unsafe products for their health. These products should be properly labeled, advising and informing the purchaser of the ingredients of those products as part of the company's corporate social responsibility.

Almost all respondents (95%) confirmed that they are buying local food at least twice a week, while recognizing that local food is healthier compared to those purchased in supermarkets, transported thousands of miles away. Thus, the 3rd hypothesis that local products promotion and the development of local food markets is a solution to improve food choices for young consumers is validated, even if supermarkets still predominate in consumer choice. Some questions addressed to the respondents through the questionnaire were intended to demonstrate that the marketing strategies used by food industry actors are particularly effective, especially those focused on the visual promotion of food. It is worrying that a product known to be harmful remains in the top of the preferences of young consumers only because it is nicely presented. The results indicate that the 4th hypothesis according to which the marketing strategy of the big stores is the reason for the excessive purchase of certain products is validated. The last hypothesis of this study that national health food programs are sources of information for consumers has not been validated. Although these programs should be a good source of consumer information for a healthy diet, the study indicated that 42% of respondents have never heard of such a program. However, we have not been able to identify an indicator in the results recorded by one program or another regarding the number of consumers who have been informed of the existence of such programs.

5.1 Implications for businesses

Today's young consumers are influenced by advertisements and all other forms of promoting various products, including food. Very often promotion does not inform the consumer about certain aspects of the product. For example, carbonated beverage manufacturers claim that beverages contain less sugar or less calories, better taste, etc. without informing about the other ingredients in that beverage, which may have negative effects on consumers. Supermarkets are intermediaries for food producers. They naturally pursue profit and create various marketing strategies to promote the food they sell, but most of the time a promotional campaign created by a supermarket for a product or a range of food will not promote in the first place the content of the product, but rather its price. Better information for the consumer is therefore necessary to be introduced by food businesses as part of their corporate social responsibility.

Marketing in the food industry should promote a healthy and safe food style, informing the consumer as accurately as possible about the foods they might eat and about the risks involved in improper nutrition.

5.2 Implications for policy-makers

Policy-makers should implement a series of legal restrictions, similar to those in the tobacco industry in promoting unhealthy food. Such a solution could lead to an increase in food safety. This requires policies and incentives to promote healthier products (Cuite & Hallman, 2009).

We find ourselves in an era of globalization where freight exchange is made freely, free of taxes or charges, as is the example of the single market within the European Union. This has enabled, for example, certain foods in Romania to be imported to a greater extent from other EU countries to the detriment of local food consumption, which raises some food safety problems. People's food has become a very sensitive issue nowadays, and the European Union has to reconsider its prospects for policies in the field. Cheap imports from other non-EU countries may in the future require the implementation of protectionist policies in both Romania and the European Union, in order to reduce the number of imported food and to develop the local market, which is considered safer.

Thus, food safety can be ensured through a well-informed consumer with regard to the product consumed, the risks involved and the control measures in place (Holland & Pope, 2004).

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