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FREE WORD ASSOCIATION FOR ROMANIAN TRADITIONAL FOOD PRODUCTS

Case Study

Abstract

Traditional food products tend to be a subject of real interest for researchers as well as for producers, consumers and local / national authorities. Since 1996, when EU has initiated the attestation and registration of these products, their popularity is continuously growing between EU consumers and not only them. The main purpose of the present paper is to identify a series of possible correlations that consumers and / or potential consumers are making regarding the Traditional Food Products in Romania. In order to reach our objective, we used the "free word association method", by applying face-to-face questionnaires, to a number of 148 respondents. The use of projective technique as research method, allowed us to reveal ideas that consumers expressed regarding the name, taste or aspect of traditional food products. The results provide new words, information that food producers and marketing specialists can use in order to create the message or the insight of a promoting campaign.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of traditional food products has been one of increased attention recently (Kuznesof et al, 1997; Guerrero et al, 2009; Guerrero et. al, 2010; Pieniak et al, 2013).

The paper focuses on traditional food products, asthey are considered to constitute an important element of European culture, identity and heritage and food consumption habits (Trichopoulou et al, 2007; Kuhne et al, 2010; Guerrero et al, 2009). In this article we will use a series of abbreviations to avoid the repetition: traditional food products - TFP and Romanian Traditional Food Products - RTFP.

Traditional or specific products or foods are considered to be those products and foodstuffs of agricultural nature that are obtained by traditional methods, the manner of production is specific to a particular area, have a historical past, are known and marketed in certain areas (Jordana, 2000); are representative of a country or a tourist area (Dabija et al, 2014).

In such a varied market as that of foodstuffs, the consumer feels lost and experiences difficulties in choosing healthy food (Tarcza & Sana, 2015).

The orientation of part of the consumer market in European countries (in particular) to traditional products is also proven by the political and legislative support they benefit from the European Union (Pieniak et al, 2009).

We therefore find a constant increase in the number of traditional products registered in the European Union database (Tarcza & Rosca, 2016), the DOOR (Database of Origin Registration), starting with the year 1996 and until now, when we have a number of 1624 products (DOOR database, 2018).

Among the countries that have understood and acted swiftly to protect their cultural values transmitted through traditional products are Italy, France and Spain (as resulted from DOOR database, 2018).

In Romania, the market situation and the offer of traditional Romanian products followed the course of the European one. A total of 280 products were recorded in 2005, the first year of registration. The maximum number of traditional products registered under national legislation was 1050 in 2011. Due to the change in national legislation in 2013, when manufacturers had to re-establish the documents required for the registration of traditional products, their number decreased to 171. The procedure took time until things returned to normal, but the trend remained upward (Tarcza, 2015). Therefore, 605 traditional products were recorded in the first half of 2018. Regarding the distribution of traditional Romanian products in counties, most of them are registered in Braşov, Maramureş, Botoşani and Alba (data from MADR, 2016- 2018)

Certainly, scientific research over recent decades confirms the same trend. Rudawska (2014) highlights the positive attitude of Polish consumers towards the consumption of traditional products. They appreciate the quality of the raw material, the way of processing and obtaining, the place of origin of the traditional products, factors that increase the satisfaction and loyalty of the consumers.

The Mediterranean diet, which includes traditional products from Italy, Greece part of Cyprus (Cannon, 2005) is considered one of the healthiest in Europe. Being an area with many recorded products, the subject has been extensively analyzed by scientific researchers (Batrinou & Kanellou, 2009; Guerrero et al, 2009; Alamanos et al, 2014).

In Hungary, Szakaly et al (2010) defines traditional products from traditional (classic) products. The latter are those products that can be commercially available, made in large quantities, in industrial production units, respecting generally valid technological conditions, without using raw materials or special.

Similar but different terms are "local food", or "locavorism". These are described as practices and associated social movements that aim at a world in which all people are able to eat fresh and nutrientrich locally grown foods (Navin, 2014). The tendency of orienting consumption to traditional / local products is also found in the US. Conner et al (2009) noted that in the state of Michigan, USA, consumers who frequented healthy food stores were predisposed to consuming traditional or local products purchased directly from the producers.

Studies on the consumption of local products were carried out even on the population of the Canadian area of Artic (Hopping et al, 2010) but also on Chinese traditional food, to understand the reasons that lead consumers to choose between this and European food (Wang et al, 2015). There were also studies (Rutsaert et al, 2015) that offer insight regarding how consumers engage in online deliberation for choosing the traditional products, if they are provided information about the risks and benefits.

ASSOCIATIONS OF TFP IN PREVIOUS RESEARCH STUDIES

The free word association research method is a very useful tool (Malhotra and Peterson, 2006) as it can preveal the respondent the unlimited possibility of answering and expressing himself alone. But, on the other hand, the results get by using projective technique is difficult to be measured and interpret.

In Croatia, a country recently admitted to the EU, studies focus on consumer behaviour and its perception of TFP. Pieniak et al. (2013) conducted

a TFP association self-identification, using the "free word association method".

Previous studies emphasize the relation or association between traditional food products and a series of factors. These items are important for analysing the consumers' motivation and behaviour and further on for thinking the promotional strategies for TFP. As retained from literature review, we consider important to mention some terms such as: nostalgia (Renko & Bucar, 2014); healthy food (Tarcza, 2015); old traditions, grandmother memory, childhood (Vanhonacker et al, 2010; Cerjak et al, 2014); holidays (Alamanos et al, 2014); nutritional status and self identification, obesity (Pieniak et al, 2013); religious traditions and holidays (Alamanos et al, 2014); preservation of tradition, cultures and identity of a region; heritage (Guerrero et al, 2009; Licitra, 2010). Other authors have referred to the benefits of consuming TFP for the communities that produce them, advantages as: supporting the local farmers and being environmental friendly (reduce transportation, reduced emissions) or to the taste of TFP, naming words like: better taste; freshness; higher quality; traditional cooking (recipe). In one research study regarding consumers' perception of traditional food in Ghana (Laryea et al., 2016), the respondents referred to the safety, nutrient composition and convenience.

Due to the fact of finding such a great variety of associations regarding TFP we intend to find out the main words used for associations for RTFP.

METHODOLOGY DESIGN

Starting from the point of literature review regarding the association of traditional food products in different countries, we aim, in the present paper to identify the words with which Romanians most often associate these products, and then to make a comparative study between the results obtained by us and the previous ones.

This research is part of an extensive research that aims to identify the profile and analyse the behaviour of the consumer of Romanian traditional products.

The research method used was the survey, and the research tool - questionnaire. The latter was designed and adapted on the model proposed by Szakaly et al (2010).

The questionnaire was applied face to face, through two interviewers, to the visitors of a fair of agricultural and agri-food products. This fair was chosen for its relevance and reputation, being the second largest trade fair in Romania (Agroinfo, 2018).

Interviewers were trained in the definition of traditional Romanian products, legislation in force; the structure of the questionnaire was presented and

explained so that they provide additional explanations for the respondent. They are the ones who read and filled the questionnaire, having the opportunity to observe the respondent and to record additional information.

The target population in the present research are actual and potential consumers of traditional Romanian agro-food products (Romanian Traditional Food Products - RTFP).

The sample test consists of 150 people, visitors to the Agraria Fair. Of these, 148 questionnaires were validated.

The chosen sampling method for investigating the population of interest is the convenience sampling (convenience sampling) method, which assumes that respondents are chosen for interviewing because they are in a certain place at a given time (Malhotra, 2007). This, being an unproblematic method, presents a number of drawbacks (Dătculescu, 2006), but the advantages of ad-hoc sampling result from the fact that the respondents are easy to approach and cooperative.(Malhotra, 2007).

In this article we have chosen to develop a subject of the pilot study of the extensive research described above, namely the associations that consumers and potential consumers do with regard to RTFP.

The free association method belongs to the category of research projective techniques. Boddy (2005) asserts that projective techniques can be used in a variety of market research, but do not aim to reveal some "hidden" aspects or features of the personality of the subject. The projective methods are well suited to research on consumer motivation, although there are opinions that it might be "quaint" and irrelevant (Belk, 2006).

It is still important to note that RTFP examples were presented at the beginning of the questionnaire so that respondents could properly identify the traditional product category taken in the analysis.

When analysing consumers' perceptions on traditional food clients' profile, on the taste and on the price of these products we used a questionnaire with open items as it follows:

• Item 1: "Thinking of consumers of RTFP, would you say they are….."
• Item 2: " The flavour of traditional food is…";
• Item 3: " The appearance of traditional food is……"

The answers were analysed with the textalyser program which evaluates the frequence of a word/expression in a given text.

The results for words are presented under the form of occurences, frequences and rank in Table 1, Table 3 and Table 5.

The results for expressions are presented under the form of occurences, frequences and rank in Table 2, Table 4 and Table 6.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our research findings were in accordance with others revealed in previous research papers. Though, we found a great variety of answers andwe can notice a lack of homogeneity between the responses of participants.

1. Regarding the expression and the consumers of TFP

Before answering these questions, the respondents had to choose from a list of RTFPs (to recognize authentic RTFPs), then give examples themselves.

For the question: "Thinking about RTFP consumers, you would say about them that they are... ", there have been 35 different answers.

Of the **words** obtained, we chose to keep the first 7 that appeared most often, shown in Table 1.

The results of the words frequencies analysis of the answers for consumers perception on traditional food clients show that the most used word to describe these clients is "Romanians" with a percentage of 15.8% as it is noticed in Table 1. The next most used word by respondents was "authentic" with a percentage of 6.9%, followed by the "patriotic" and "good" with the same percentage of 5.9%.

The more occurring phrases are "good consumers" with a frequency of 4.2%, followed by "good Romanians" and "true Romanians" used by 2 responders each as it is recorded in Table 2. A short analysis of the expressions emphasis three associations: One association is to patriotism and nationalism, six responders consider traditional food consumers as good or patriotic Romanians. Another association is the one regarding responsible food consumers, a reference made by six responders, phrases such as: good consumers, responsible persons, people that acknowledge the product quality. The third most frequent association to traditional food consumer is to health. Three respondents consider traditional food consumers are more healthy, and one considers the opposite, using the phrase: `Quite unhealthy" in the description.

2. Regarding RTFP Taste

The results of the words frequencies analysis on the taste perception of traditional food show that the most used words to describe this variable are "good" with a percentage of 33.7% as it is presented in Table 3. The second most used word by the respondents was "very" used before "good" or "delicious" with a percentage of 17.3%, followed by the "delicious" with a percentage of 13.3%. The three most used words by respondents underline a positive perception regarding traditional foods.

With no notable percentages but with more personal connotations were the association of traditional food with words like:"home" (5.1%) and "mother" (2%) underlining the profound familiarity attached to these type of foods by a segment of the respondents.

In evaluating traditional food taste, most respondents used the phrase "very good" 19.2%. Phrases such as "like home", or "like at my mother's home" were used by 5 of the respondent as it can be observed in Table 4. The following phrases were used only twice or once, but all of them are a positive associations to the traditional food perceptions.

3. Regarding RTFP Price

The variable analyses showed 23 different variants.

The results of the words frequencies analysis regarding the price perception of traditional food show that the most used words to describe this variable are "good" with a percentage of 23.3% as it is presented in Table 5. The second most used word by respondents was "big" with a percentage of 17.4%, followed by the "acceptable" with a percentage of 9.3%. The most used words split the respondents in two categories of consumers: those who are satisfied with the price using words like: "good", "acceptable", "accessible", "average"; and those who are not satisfied with traditional foods price using words as: "big", "enough" or "high".

The phrase analysis of traditional food price perception emphasises the most frequent association with high pricing regarding these type of products. As it is presented in Table 6, 9 of the respondents used phrases that indicated high prices such as "pretty high", "high enough", "more high". Four respondents suggested on the other side that they consider traditional food pricing "pretty good" or "pretty acceptable".

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study presented insights regarding the perception of RTFP, the way respondents see the traditional food consumers and appreciate the taste and the price of RTFP.

The first thing that come into the respondent's mind when asked about RTF consumers, was "Romanian", together with other adjectives like: "good" or "true" Romanians. So, our first conclusion is that respondents considered that consuming RTFP makes you a "patriotic" person. These is similar to Rudawska (2014) research, stating that the Polish traditional food"consumer is a local patriot who wants to preserve and support the cultural identity". Also, we noticed the connection between traditional food and health, though the respondents opinions were divergent, some stating that RTF consumers are healthy, while others considering these products as an unhealthy diet (in a lower number, indeed).

When it comes to RTFP taste, the answers showed a positive association, by using words like: good, tasty or delicious.

Again, going deeper with our research and analysing the expressions stated, we notice the feeling of attachment revealed by words like "the taste of home" , "memories of mother", "as made by mother". So, our findings converge to the previous ones, regarding the nostalgia for home and family. Renko&Bucar (2014) conclude their study about Croatian consumers mentioning that "several respondents went into somedetails about their enjoyment of cocked dinners which their mothers or grandmothersused to do for them."

Analyzing the responses to RTFP pricing perceptions, we see that they are considered a "expensive" category of products (the price is "high"). This may justify a reduced TFP consumption rate in Romania. As demonstrated by Horska&Prokeinova(2011) „while the Western European prototype consumer preferred food quality and the Eastern European is inclined to the price decision".

A conclusion worth mentioning was that respondents who said they were consumers of RTFP know better the situation of the market in the profile, can better identify and appreciate the characteristics of the products, compared with respondents declared as being non-consumer, or those who consume RTFP less often.

Between the limits of the study, we can refer to the chosen sampling method (convenience sampling), as well as the research used (free Word association). The latter is effective and as a result of its application, interesting results are obtained, but it is difficult to apply on large samples.

The use of the textalyser program required careful processing and preparation of responses to achieve the most relevant results. That is why we chose to repeat each analysis for the expressions used, not just to play the frequencies of the recorded words.

Interpreting the frequency of expressions received added value to the study.

The present study is a starting point in identifying the motivation of purchasing decision and analyzing the consumer behaviour of TFP in Romania. Future research directions will follow the analysis of RTFP promotion methods.

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Tables

Table No 1.
Frequency and top words for "traditional food consumers"

Word	Occurrences	Frequency	Rank
Romanian	16	15.8%	1
authentic	7	6.9%	2
Patriotic	6	5.9%	3
good	6	5.9%	3
healthy	5	5%	4
normal	4	4%	5
traditional	4	4%	5

Source: Autors' result using primary data analysed with textalyseraplication.

Table No. 2.
Frequency of top phrases used to describe "traditional food consumers"

Phrase	Occurrences	Frequency	Rank
Good consumers	3	4.2%	1
Good Romanian	2	2.8%	2
A true Romanian	2	2.8%	2
People who are aware	1	1.4%	3
Responsable people	1	1.4%	3
People who know the quality of the product	1	1.4%	3
healthier	1	1.4%	3
With a taste for quality	1	1.4%	3
The most lucky	1	1.4%	3
A little unhealthy	1	1.4%	3
Know what they want	1	1.4%	3
Stimulate producers	1	1.4%	3
Think abouth health	1	1.4%	3
With good taste	1	1.4%	3
True Romanians	1	1.4%	3
More healthy	1	1.4%	3
Good nationalists	1	1.4%	3

Source: Autors' result using primary data analysed with textalyseraplication.

Table No. 3
Frequency and top words for taste variable

Word	Occurrences	Frequency	Rank
Good	33	33.7%	1
Very	17	17.3%	2
Delicious	13	13.3%	3
Home	5	5.1%	4
superior	3	3.1%	5
excelent	2	2%	6
mother	2	2%	6

Source: Autors' result using primary data analysed with textalyseraplication.

Table No. 4
Frequency of top phrases associated with "taste" variable

Phrases	Occurrences	Frequency	Rank
Very good	14	19.2%	1
Like homemade	3	4.1%	2
Like at mom's home	2	2.7%	3
Very delicious	2	2.7%	3
Very tasty	1	1.4%	4
Of good quality	1	1.4%	4
Way better	1	1.4%	4
Particularly unmistakable	1	1.4%	4
Better	1	1.4%	4
Too good	1	1.4%	4
Special and unmistakable	1	1.4%	4

Source: Autors' result using primary data analysed with textalyseraplication.

Table No. 5
Frequency and top words for price variable

Word	Occurrences	Frequency	Rank
Good	20	23.3%	1
High	15	17.4%	2
acceptable	8	9.3%	3
enough	6	7%	4
accessible	6	7%	4
quite high	4	4.7%	5
average	4	4.7%	5

Source: Autors' result using primary data analysed with textalyseraplication.

Table No. 6
Frequency of top phrases associated with "price" variable

Phrase	Occurrences	Frequency	Rank
Quite high	3	4.2%	6
High enough	3	4.2%	6
higher	2	2.8%	7
Quite good	2	2.8%	7
According to quality	1	1.4%	8
Good good	1	1.4%	8
Quite accessible	1	1.4%	8
Towards average	1	1.4%	8
Somewhat higher	1	1.4%	8

Source: Autors' result using primary data analysed with textalyseraplication.