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# PROMOTING TRADITIONAL FOOD PRODUCTS AS HEALTHY DIET PRODUCTS

Literature  
review

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to propose a brief introspection in the literature review in an attempt to highlight the peculiarities of traditional foodstuffs that enable them to be promoted as the primary food for a healthy diet. The trend of healthy eating is gaining ground not only for experts and researchers, but also for consumers on a daily basis. Traditional foodstuffs are brought back into the consumers' attention in a market full of highly-processed foodstuffs. Marketing specialists noticed the link between the two concepts and they elaborated promotional strategies for traditional foodstuffs, having the 'healthy diet' as insight. Throughout the paper we will present theoretical considerations such as the concept of 'traditional food product', 'promotion', and 'healthy diet' from a marketing perspective followed by several examples of traditional food products perceived as healthy, and lastly, we will highlight the benefits of promoting a healthy diet by consuming traditional food products.*

## Introduction

‘Healthy diet’ is trending now not only in the scientific literature regarding medicine, nutrition, and the marketing of foodstuffs, but also in lay publications on lifestyle. There has been a flow of ideas and recommendations regarding the attention given to nourishment in the past decades on a global scale. This trend occurred later in our country, but it has been expanding rapidly ever since (Dima *et al.*, 2006).

Romanian traditional food products are considered healthy, without preservatives or additives, and obtained through processing methods that preserve the organoleptic and nutritive qualities of the ingredients. For the sake of brevity, we will use the following abbreviations: TFP – traditional food products, TFC – traditional food consumers, RTFP – Romanian traditional food products.

In the European Union, most traditional products are promoted as healthy and nourishing products, recommended for maintaining a proper diet. TFP are perceived by consumers as a category of healthy foodstuffs (Canon, 2005; Mitterer-Dalton *et al.*, 2014). Some authors claim that consuming such traditional products can be curative (Reyes – Garcia, 2006). The tag “healthy” is found in promotional messages, websites, and product labels of TFP.

By examining the literature and the promotional materials in question regarding some TFP (registered in Romania and in the European Union), we highlighted the connection between TFP and healthy dieting and we propose a few positive effects of TFP on consumers’ health.

## 1. Theoretical Background

### 1.1. Traditional Food Products

Regional traditional food products have a long history from a cultural, economic, and social standpoint. For instance, Bordeaux wines and Roquefort cheese (acknowledged by the Parliament of Toulouse since 1666) have been legally acknowledged and regulated in Europe since the beginning of the twentieth century (CambraFierroand Villafuerte Martin, 2009).

Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) with Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) or Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSG) represented a topic of interest for researchers in the academia since the beginning of the 90s. The importance of this topic has been asserted by the governments of member states of the European Union and by the European Commission, and also by the associations of small and local enterprises (comprising the majority of producers in this field) (Barham, 2003; Brito *et al.*, 2010; van Ittersum, 2007; Barham & Sylvander, 2011; Tregear *et al.*, 2007; Vanhonacker, 2010).

A traditional product, or a local one, is tightly connected to the place of origin. Local products are generally used when preparing traditional dishes. One reason would be the economic implications: since it helps the creation of jobs for the locals, which in turn helps develop a sustainable environment (FAO, 2004). The place of origin is seen as “an expression of resources and peculiar local lore embedded in the product” (Allaire & Wolf, 2004), but it is also ambivalent (Barham & Sylvander, 2011), influenced by both the producer (or group of producers) and the consumers; the latter are considered ‘connoisseurs’. Tregear and Giraud (2011) in Barham and Sylvander (2011) tackle the PGI products from three perspectives: firstly, referring to the recognition and labelling of registered products to protect them and to raise their market value, secondly, “as a tangible result of cultural traditions”, and thirdly, “as a social phenomenon in which the contemporary meaning and value of the IG products are created by several actors”.

### Definition and advantages of PDO, PGI, and STG

The quality and unique cultural characteristics of the traditional products as opposed to counterfeits lead to the stabilisation of an European labelling system for the quality of agricultural and traditional foodstuffs originating from various member states in the European Union in order to protect and promote their commercial labelling. The system entails the voluntary use of one of the three specific labels – ‘Protected Geographical Indication’ (PGI), ‘Protected Designation of Origin’ (PDO), and ‘Traditional Specialities Guaranteed’ (TSG) – gathered in an online database, entitled ‘DOOR database’ (Database of Origin and Registration).

These tags put on the labels of traditional products demonstrate that the respective foodstuffs originate exclusively from Europe, from recognised local areas, and were obtained from traditional ingredients or through traditional methods. The work of thousands of agriculturalists and producers is thus capitalized, contributing to the preservation and development of the local peculiar patrimony of each member state. Moreover, the system guarantees the consumers that the foodstuffs with these labels are trustworthy.

### Romanian Traditional Food Products

In Romania, the legislative document bringing the certification under regulation is the Regulation no 724/2013 which stipulates that the traditional product must be manufactured from local raw materials, following a traditional recipe peculiar to the place of production, reflecting a traditional method of production or manufacturing, demonstrating that the product was manually crafted in a traditional manner. The products that

fulfil these requirements are attested as 'traditional' and are later registered in the database of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development entitled National Registry of Traditional Products. Traditional foodstuffs are considered healthy and tasty, appreciated mostly by natives, whether they live in their country of origin or they move elsewhere (Barham & Sylvander, 2011). An interest for traditional foodstuffs has been trending owing to the consumers' concern towards their wellbeing (Vanhonacker *et al.*, 2010). "Healthy and tasty" are two very attractive attributes contributing to the food industry and it is desirable for these products to be obtained in large quantities and later exported (IBA, 2006).

### **1.2. Promotional Strategies (message, insight, advertising arousal)**

Scientific literature presents a series of approaches to the concept of 'promotion' as a component of the marketing mix, along with the product, price, and distribution (Kotler, 2006), approaches ranging from those that present it as an ensemble of promotional activities meant to attract client and to boost sales, to those that consider promotion tantamount to integrated marketing communication (Czinkota *et al.*, 2000). If in the past, the alternate and uncorrelated promotional activities were effective, in the era of marketing 3.0, promotion ought to be the result of unceasing, sustained, and joint efforts of promotional activities, ranging from advertising to online promotions (Kotler, 2010).

Traditional promotional strategies do not always manage to obtain the desired effect or to reach the target market, to trigger a reaction from the target consumers (Todt and Dabija, 2009).

To attract consumers' attention marketing experts have constantly developed alternative or unconventional marketing strategies, using nonconformist messages (Levinson, 2002). Irrespective of the chosen promotional strategy (ATL – *above the line*, or BTL – *beyond the line*) or of the chosen medium (TV, radio, press, OOH – *out of home exposure* – event marketing, online, social media, etc.), it is the insight of the campaign and the message you convey to the target market that draws the attention and interest to potential consumers. According to Saba (2013), an insight is the understanding of human behaviour, or emotions which can be leveraged to build a brand, or to promote a product.

Therefore, irrespective of the evolution and range of promotional activities and technology, it is the proper message conveyed to the target audience that weighs in when making decisions regarding marketing strategies. The message must correspond with the consumers' needs and expectations.

Another important aspect of promotion is 'emotional arousal'. Different researchers highlight that emotional arousal positively impacts the

advertising's persuasiveness (Stout & Leckenby 1988).

The specialized literature also analyses the attention offered to different messages on different levels. The levels identified in literature review are pre-attention, focal attention, comprehension, and elaboration (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). In the case of traditional food consumption, pre-attention refers to the level in which consumers do or do not pay attention to information regarding traditional foods. On the one hand, some consumers were not previously informed; on the other hand, others were informed but did not manifest interest in consuming the traditional products. Focal attention is the level in which consumers start acknowledging the existence of the offer, and manifest an interest; they start to search information regarding that particular product. Comprehension represents the level in which consumers understand the benefits of the traditional product, the qualities that sets this product apart from other, and are ready to action in this respect. Elaboration is the moment of action, in which consumers make the product part of their acquisition package, and integrate this type of product in their lifestyle.

Companies have to relate strategically, obtaining reliable insight for promoting traditional foods to potential consumers that are on the levels of pre-attention and focal attention, levels identified by Greenwald and Leavitt 1984). On the focal attention, comprehension stage and elaboration, companies focus on informing, but also on the emotional arousal of advertising.

Promoting foodstuffs influences the consumers' preferences and culinary habits. Due to the fact that the general trend is to promote 'less healthy' products, some authors claim that food advertisements have a certain part in increasing the obesity rate (Adams, Tyrell & White, 2011).

The individualisation of such products and the attribution of idiosyncrasies bring about additional benefits to the promotion and sales of traditional products. For instance, if the producers mention a peculiarity of their product (origin, variety), that particularity confers trust in the eyes of consumers (Selfa and Qazi, 2005).

The need to purchase individualised products, or products that aren't common, propels these products in the consumers' top list of preferences. The name that trigger consumers' memories, or those that have a rustic appeal, those that trigger the subjectivity and the alleged linkage to the consumers' identity fosters the consumers' desire and decision to purchase that particular product. Moreover, promoting traditional dishes is more effective when coupled with promoting the 'story' (Selfa and Qazi, 2005). Leaflet images containing information regarding the entire production process bring about a touch of authenticity. This type of

marketing is effective and increases the odds of sales.

### 1.3. Healthy Food Diet Trend

This trend of conscious healthy eating has been anticipated a few years ago by researchers in the scientific literature pertaining to Romania. Dima *et al.* (2006) noticed that the relation between agriculture, foodstuffs, and health is increasingly evident, partly because the “civilisation’s diseases” occur due to an improper diet in terms of quality and due to excessive chemical additives in the food industry. Consequently, the ‘bio’ market, that comprises the products cultivated in a sustainable and eco-friendly culture, will be increasingly sought after and appreciated (Dima *et al.*, 2006).

Apparently the concept of healthy diet is, in lay terms, associated with the consumption of eco products, natural products, (Tănase, Roșca & Jurcoane, 2012), with the adoption of a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle, or recently ‘raw vegan’ (the foodstuffs are not thermally prepared).

The perception of benefits a product has on one’s health constitutes an important factor in decision-making when purchasing (Mitterer-Dalton *et al.*, 2014). Consumers who are preoccupied with choosing healthy products tend to pay extra attention to labels and to the information these convey, especially regarding the effects on their health (Hess, Visschers & Siegrist, 2012).

## 2. Research design

The objective of the present research is the exemplification of some traditional food products and promotional concept applicable to reach specific categories of consumers at different levels of decision.

In order to evaluate the principal aspects regarding exemplifications of the traditional food products and the way they are promoted we analysed a number of 30 studies on promotion, healthy and traditional food. Romanian and European traditional food products were taken into consideration, along with the study of some promotional materials. The research is a qualitative one, based on secondary resources.

## 3. TFP and their positive effects on health

The healthy diet trend is an important influencing factor to food industry. “If you habitually buy healthy products, consider yourself a pioneer!”, wrote the health and nutrition magazine of the University of Tufts, New York, in 2008 (Healthy Foods in Fashion, 2008) trying to highlight the comeback of consumers’ preferences for eco, local, or ethnic culinary products (Somali, Cuban, or Korean cuisine, etc). The same report states that the food industry has to take into consideration a large category of consumers, the ‘baby boomers’ who

wish to maintain their youth and health by resorting to healthy eating.

The Internet is an effortless means of promoting a particular lifestyle or of a healthy diet and it enables such promotional strategies to quickly reach the target market. Be it restaurants, catering services, well-known chefs or amateurs, or producers, they are well aware that the Internet enables them to draw closer to their target market.

There are legislative regulations regarding the promotion of foodstuffs on a global and European scale. These regulations pertain to the reduction of sugar, salt, and fats intake, following the recommended daily intake (RDI), cutting down on snacks and portions (Adams, Tyrell & White, 2011; Grey, 2005; Pettersson and Fjellstrom, 2006; WHO, 2014). Producers are starting to get involved in marketing activities meant to promote healthy eating (Adams, Tyrell & White, 2011). Brands and mass-media are two important influencing sources when it comes to promoting the consumption of healthy products. Responsible marketing manages to contribute greatly in this respect, since the media is controlling the advertising and the brands, by creating emotional bonds with the consumers (Pettersson & Fjellstrom, 2006).

The results of a study conducted in 1997 show that the inhabitants of Maine manifested great interest for local products, which were considered healthier than those marketed in supermarkets (Ross, 1998), but the consumers considered the difficult access to such products a disadvantage. A marketing experiment was proposed to commercialise local products at the consumers’ workplace, which led to a significant boost in sales, even in the monitoring period post-implementation.

Conner (2009) noticed that in the state of Michigan, USA, consumers who frequented shops with healthy foodstuffs were more likely to eat traditional or local products bought directly from the producers. British consumers have expressed a great demand for healthy foodstuffs, such as Mediterranean products (Cannon, 2005), which determined some producers in the food industry to excessively (and sometimes abusively) label such qualities.

Even more researchers claim that the advent and spread of degenerative diseases are the result of technological and economic progress (Lang and Heasman, 2004; Kessler, 2009; Chandon and Wansik, 2010). Consequently, we pose the following question: how can we protect, maintain, and differentiate the ingredients of traditional and local foodstuffs from the vast offer of the food industry?

In practice, there are only a few states or regions that dared to fight for maintaining the positive elements of national/local healthy diets to the detriment of massive imported Western goods without imposing measures that breached the law

of free trade. Economic interests triumphed in the fight with consumer health concerns (Lang & Heasman, 2004).

Studies conducted at the beginning of the 90s showed that the majority of chronic diseases (heart diseases, heart attacks, and ischemic strokes, different types of cancer and diabetes, and obesity) are wedded to the patients' dietary habits (Norberg-Hodge, Gorelick & Merrifield, 2000; UNEP, 1999). They claimed that this is the result of the transition from a traditional diet based on the consumption of local products and a healthy lifestyle, to a diet based on processed foods and a sedentary lifestyle (Lang & Heasman, 2004).

*French cuisine* is based on foodstuffs with high cholesterol levels and fats with saturated fatty acids, engendering circulatory and heart diseases. Nevertheless, deaths caused by these diseases are fewer in France than in other countries with similar dietary habits. The explanation is the moderate and systematic consumption of *red wine* produced in France. This situation is globally known as the "French paradox" (Szakaly et al., 2010).

*Mangalița meat* has different qualities than other breeds (Szakaly, Szigeti and Szente, 2012). Mangalița ham contains iron, manganese, zinc, vitamin B, and the isoflavonoid levels are especially higher than those found in other breeds. Regarding the fatty acids, Mangalița meat contains omega-3 fatty acids in proper quantities. For example, one producer of Romanian traditional meat products, Toto Butchery, has the following slogan on their website: "For a healthy diet, we promote Mangalița pork products". This producer from Maramureș promotes Mangalița meat products at different traditional cultural events with the purpose of promoting RTFP and raising consumer awareness regarding the adoption a healthy lifestyle (Butchery, 2015).

Another Romanian traditional product registered on a community level, *Magiunul de Topoloveni*, established itself on the market as a family brand and it highlights its health benefits and it also conveys its intrinsic qualities through various media: it ought to be consumed by diabetics, it is rich in fibres, it has a significant amount of vitamins and minerals, it relieves stress, and it has anti-ageing properties (owing to selenium content) (see advertising banner, Figure No. 1), just as walnut helps in this respect (Ecomagazin, 2012).

The *Mediterranean diet*, perceived as the healthiest dietary lifestyle (Batrinou and Kanellou, 2009) and associated with a healthy lifestyle, is peculiar to Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Southern France (Cannon, 2005). Traditionally, the Mediterranean diet is characterised by the high intake of fruit, vegetables, pasta, bread, nuts, seeds, and olive oil, and moderate intake of meat, fish, dairy products, eggs, and wine. The Mediterranean diet has a low level of saturated fats and a high level of

monounsaturated fatty acids derived from olive oil (Royal College of Physicians, 2000).

Dietary Mediterranean traditions were associated for a very long time with a low mortality rate and with a better health, thus the adoption of the Mediterranean diet pyramid is perceived as the "healthy food" option for those who wish to improve their diet (Batrinou & Kanellou, 2009).

Recent studies bring forth conclusive evidence, especially in Europe, according to which the Mediterranean diet slightly changed in the 50s and 60s towards a more Western diet, to appeal to individuals of all ages (Arvaniti et al., 2006; Polychronopoulos et al., 2010).

Dieticians recommend *personalized nutritional files* for every individual. Based on the nutritional file and iridology (method of examining one's health through one's eye), consumers can be diagnosed and depending on the diagnosis, they can have an individualized diet in order to be healthy. Therefore, this could enable different opportunities in food consumption, by examining which products and quantities are beneficial and which are harmful (Funar, 1999).

### Conclusions and further directions

To conclude, we can posit a few beneficial effects that the *promotion of a healthy diet through the consumption of traditional and local products* has on individuals, both as consumers and producers/salesmen, and on the state as a provider of public health services and social work. The state is interested in supporting and promoting the consumption of local healthy foodstuffs. At least on a theoretical level, if the citizens of a state have a higher index of wellbeing, the state significantly reduces its costs in this respect. By stimulating the production of local and traditional food products, the state can support the small and local enterprises that could cash in higher profits that would in turn benefit the state in taxes.

From the consumers' perspective, if they choose to purchase healthy products from the small enterprises found in their neighbouring areas instead of purchasing imported goods from chain stores (goods which no longer have their organoleptic qualities due to the chemical processing done in order to withstand transportation) they help develop the rural environment. In this manner, we could witness the bridge of the urban-rural divide. Urban inhabitants will be able to consume healthy products along with rural inhabitants, and it will also raise the standard of living in the rural area due to the development of production and to the commercialization of local products. At present, although inhabitants of big cities have greater chances of being healthy, studies have shown that they are 39% more likely to suffer from psychological affections (depression) (Ecomagazin,

2012). Individuals who have a healthy lifestyle based on a healthy diet have some benefits, such as longevity, work productivity, pleasant ways of rest and relaxation in their leisure time.

In their efforts of creating favourable relations between the brand and the consumers, the producers and marketers should also include aspects pertaining to health (Pettersson & Fjellstrom, 2006), especially in the case of products tailored for families and children. The choice of healthy eating can be facilitated if such healthy products are available in restaurants, shops, online, attractively packaged so that they can compete with the regular products.

We propose extending the research on a traditional food products sample selected from DOOR database to analyze the insight of the promotional messages in order to verify the validity of our hypothesis according to which “traditional products are predominantly promoted as healthy”.

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*Figures*

Figure No. 1. Advertising Banner for “Magiun de Topoloveni”



Source: official website of Sonimpex Topoloveni, [www.magiun-sonimpex.ro](http://www.magiun-sonimpex.ro), 2015