

ROMANIAN PREMIUM HONEY CONSUMER'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TRACEABILITY

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Abstract. Romania is the fourth biggest producer of honey in Europe. The increasing attention paid to traceability in Europe raised our interest in developing this study. The main objectives were to determine the profile of honey consumers of a particular Romanian premium brand, their perceptions regarding quality and traceability and their willingness to pay for traceability. The research was conducted using a quantitative method based on the use of online questionnaire. As the number of initial statistic population was not known, the sample size was empirical and non-probabilistic. There were filled up in total 85 questionnaires. The analysis of data was carried out using a database created in SPSS. The results of the study showed customers consider necessary traceability so as to ensure safety of the food products and their quality. They would identify a traced honey with the aid of the information on the label. Approximately 80% of respondents are ready to pay an extra bid for honey with a traceability system. To conclude, this study confirms that traceability should not be seen by producers only as regulatory benefit but also as competitive advantage and tool for valorizing their products.

Keywords: consumer behavior, honey traceability, quality, willingness to pay

INTRODUCTION

The first official definition of traceability was given in 1987 by the international norm ISO 8402. Nowadays, in the European Union traceability is defined by the EU regulation 178/2002. After a thorough bibliographical research regarding traceability definition, it was agreed that “traceability is the capacity to follow the life cycle of any food or feed item and find any other relevant information, forward or backward, with the aid of recorded data”.

As traceability became compulsory in Europe, companies tempted to implement traceability in order to fulfill the requirements for market entry. However, a company aiming to be successful on the market should not only attempt to comply with government rules, but should take in consideration as well consumers demand for information (e.g. food attributes, country of origin, animal welfare etc.) and valorize it (GOLAN et al., 2004; BOSON et al., 2006). Thus, over the recent years, after a range of various food safety and health issues, consumers' preferences for safe supply of food products increased essentially (HOBBS, 2004; GIRAUD et al., 2006; THAKUR et al., 2009; OLSEN et al., 2012; HU et al., 2013;). Consequently, this fact determined the growing variety of traceability initiatives in public sector and private sectors.

A survey organized by GIRAUD et al., 2006 in 12 different European countries found that consumers consider traceability useful for ‘better hygiene measures’ (France), ‘food safety and higher quality of product’ (Italy), ‘way to connect consumers and producers’ (Malta), ‘facilitates company control of the image (Spain). Therefore, it is undeniable that consumers benefit from traceability due to its tremendous role in effective food safety systems and during product recall in case of emergencies (FSA, 2002). On the other hand, there is no evidence concerning Romanian honey consumers about traceability.

A range of research studies were conducted so as to determine the opportunities of valorizing traceability by the means of consumers. For instance, a set of research experiments with Canadian consumers' willingness-to-pay for traceability, food safety and on-farm production information for meat products revealed the lowest willingness to pay for the traceability to the farm of origin without additional quality assurances. A combination of traceability with quality assurance systems yielded the highest bids (HOBBS, 2003). MEUWISSEN et al., 2003 consider that the cause of these research results may be lack of communication. If consumers do not know exactly the true role of a traceability system, they cannot express widely their readiness to pay an extra cost for it. Another consumer study on meat consumers in Belgium showed that public authorities' interventions, individual responsibility, meat chain monitoring and organization of the chain (functional attributes) are better rated than access to the information regarding the production process and origin of the product (process attributes) (GELLYNCK, et al., 2007). It can be concluded that only organizing traceability around functional attributes can meet consumer concerns.

The objective of this research study is to observe the general knowledge of Romanian premium honey consumers about traceability, find possible ways of communication about traceability and evaluate their readiness to pay for it.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The survey was organized in response to the demand of a honey processor to implement traceability, in order to understand customers' expectations and find appropriate ways of communication with them.

The collection of data was conducted using mixed-mode design: Net questionnaire and focus group. The questionnaire, accessible through a link, was created on a specialized web site for online surveys. This method, in contrast with email survey, guaranteed the anonymity of respondents (SAPSFORD, et al. 2006). The questionnaire contained 25 questions and was divided in three main parts: general satisfaction with the brand, awareness about quality and traceability and socio-demographical indicators.

The investigated population was represented by customers who tasted at least once a Sănătate Dulce product. It was important to target only people who know already the brand and the products and learn about their feed-back. The application of this survey to a general population consuming honey products would be not so pertinent for the enterprise given the fact that they are working on a niche market with specific needs and expectations.

The sample size was empirical one and non-probabilistic due to the fact that the initial number of statistic population to be covered was not known. There was attempted to obtain the largest sample we could afford (WILEY INTERSCIENCE, 2007). Thus, an incentive was offered to increase the number of respondents. The questionnaire was launched on the company's Facebook profile from 8th to 14th of April 2013.

The analysis of data was conducted in SPSS. Prior to the introduction of the results, there were defined the variables according to the questionnaire, their type and length. For the primary analysis of data were used the following techniques:

- Numerical – relative and absolute frequencies
- Graphical – pie charts, bar charts, histograms, line charts
- Principal numerical descriptive indicators – mean, min, max.

The identification of correlations among variables was done using ANOVA test. The correlations with sig.<0.05 were considered significant and represented graphically.

Lastly, a focus group was organized aiming to validate the findings of quantitative survey. There were invited 8 persons consuming important quantities of honey. The discussion lasted for two hours. There were discussed the ways of honey consumption, importance of traceability and their readiness to pay.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to define the segment of Romanian honey premium consumers and their point of view about traceability. After the implementation of web survey, a total of 85 questionnaires were filled in. According to socio-demographical indicators, the structure of the statistic population was as follows:

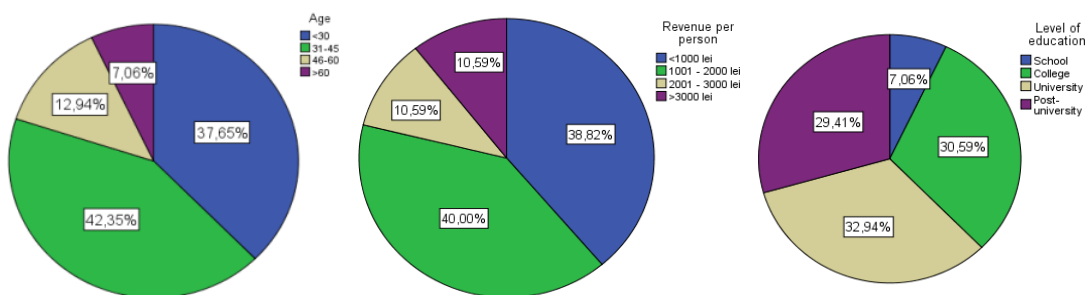


Fig. 1. Investigated sample structure according to age, revenue and level of education, 2013

Well over 80% of respondents are less than 45 years old and according to a study about honey consumption in Romania, both age categories of young people (18-30 years) and middle age category (31-45 years) consume normal quantities of honey close to national average. However, it was found that the medium advanced category (46-60 years) consume honey in greater quantities than the national average (Pocol, et al., 2012). The elderly population (>60 years) is less represented among medium consumers of honey. Consequently, it can be said that consumers of premium honey belong to different age categories.

In this survey participated an equal proportion of people (nearly 40%) with monthly incomes lower than 230 euros or 1000 lei and people with a monthly income ranging from 230 to 460 euros or from 1000 to 2000 lei. The study led by Pocol et al., 2012 concluded that persons with low incomes (maximum 100 euros/month) consume lower quantities of honey than those with middle to high incomes (300-400 euros/month). The average national net income in February 2013 was of 1553 lei or 351 euros per month and the minimum net income of 750 lei or 169 euros (INS, 2013). As the population of this survey is represented by active consumers of honey, it can be supposed that in the sample of this survey are mainly people with incomes higher than 100 euros/month.

93% of respondents have a secondary or superior education and only 7% have elementary education. Pocol et al., 2012 underlined that people with lower education (school) consume less honey compared to those with higher educational level (college,

university) (ARVANITOYANNIS, et al., 2006). Subsequently, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents are big consumers of honey.

Next, the customers were asked what represents for them a high quality product. The figure 2 summarizes the most selected perceptions of consumers about food quality. Though it is an individual perception, it is important to know how customer would evaluate a food product from qualitative point of view. The wide majority (88%) considers quality equal to food safety which is a credence dimension that can never be ascertained by consumers but is controlled by third organizations and guaranteed by quality mark (Röhr, et al., 2005). 65% appreciate the quality of a product according to its taste and 48% consider important also the nutritional value. Fewer consumers associate quality with appearance (44%) and brand (31%). This means that quality marks or traceability on the label represent for people a warranty of high quality.

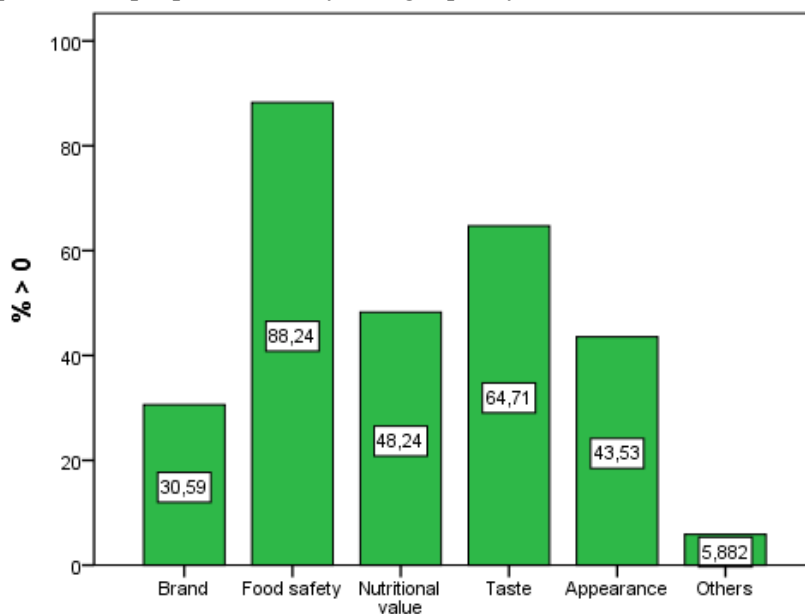


Fig. 2. Consumers' perceptions about quality

Afterwards, we examined the general knowledge of customers about traceability. The survey results have shown that just over 40% of respondents heard about traceability and the majority was able to select from a range of options the closest "traceability" definition (figure 3). It is possible that some respondents could well inform themselves about the definition using internet.

On the other hand well under 60% have never heard about traceability. People did not know specifically the concept of 'traceability' while when explained or paraphrased this term they considered it very important. Thus, 97,6% of answerers believe that it is important to trace and track a food product. When asked why it is so important, 75% agreed its importance to ensure the safety and quality of food (figure 4). Contrarily, only 10% see it as a tool to increase customer confidence. Less than 5% consider necessary to track food products so that consumer can be informed about the origin of food. What can be concluded from these results is that customers do not perceive yet the importance of traceability for them and see it mostly as an advantage for the enterprise.

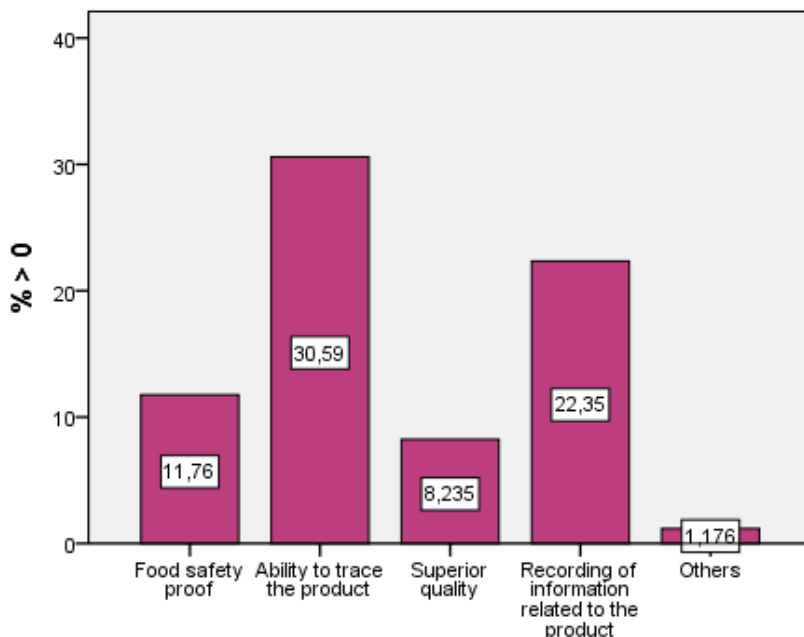


Fig. 3. How would you define the word ‘traceability’?

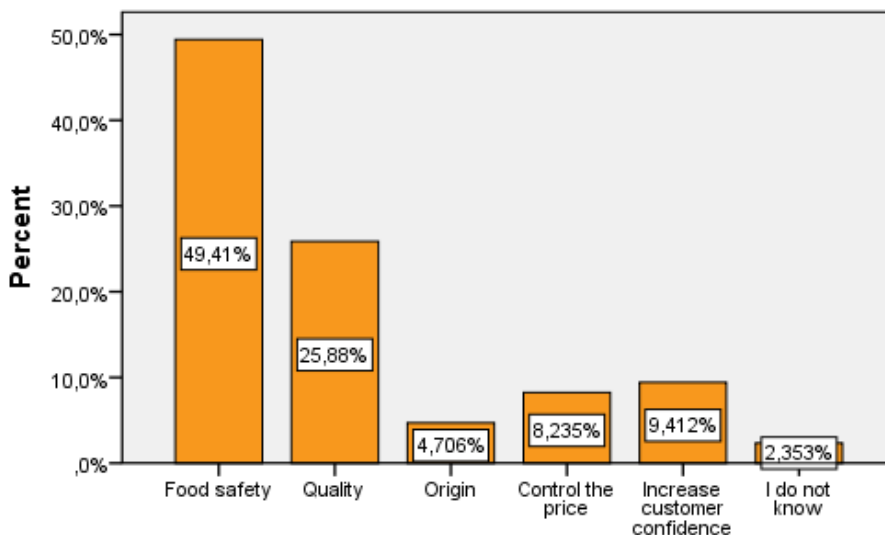


Fig. 4. Why it is important to trace or track a food product?

As customers were not aware about traceability but they recognized the importance of it, it was attempted to find a possible way of communication with customers through the label about traceability in an understandable way. From customers’ point of view they can recognize a traced food product when it has indicated on the label: ISO/HACCP (48%), batch number (41%), word ‘traced’ (39%) and production date (38%) (figure 5). Also, all the participants of focus group agreed that a traced product can be identified using the batch number and the words traceability or HACCP. These results confirm also the findings from quantitative questionnaire showing that a traced product will be identified

with ISO/HACCP, batch number and word traceability. Therefore, on the label can be placed the information “HACCP/ Traceability: Lot nr. 034AB”, that will be sufficient to inform the customer about the fact that a traceability system exists and was implemented.

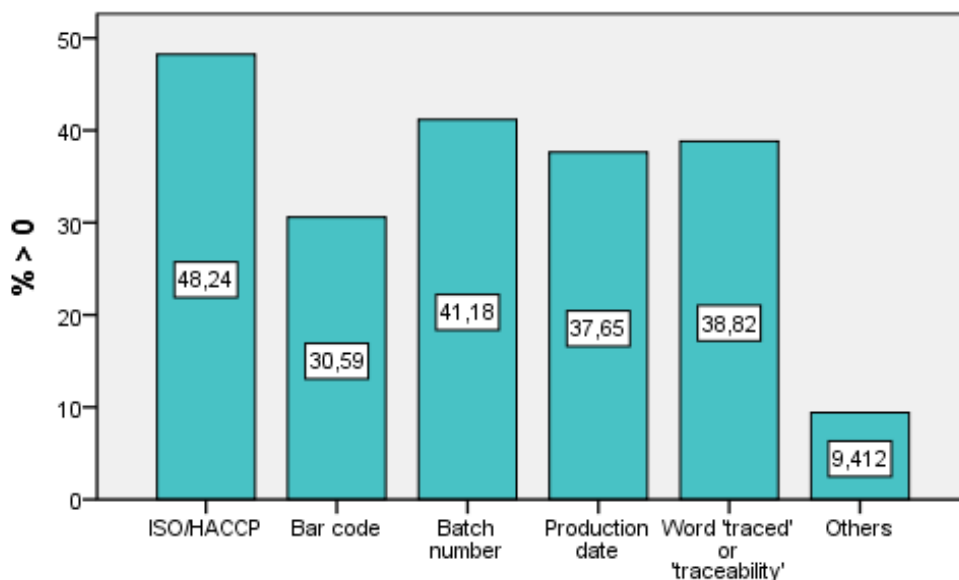


Fig. 5. How can you recognize a traced food product?

Referring to the willingness to pay, nearly 40% of respondents are willing to pay an extra bid of less than 5% for the traceability of any honey product and 20% do not want to pay for traceability (figure 6). Other 40% are ready to pay even more than 5% for product traceability. There are slightly more customers willing to pay for honey traceability than for honey specialties traceability. For instance, for a traced polyfloral honey, 20% of customers do not want to pay more. At the same time, for traced honey with plums and walnuts, 27% do not want to pay (figure 6). Even though 97,6% of answerers consider important the existence of traceability and 95% believe that certificates attesting quality are important, approximately one out of five consumers are not disposed to pay more for a traced honey. Likewise, it is quite possible that some of consumers do not fully understand the concept of traceability and the risks associated with a food product. They do not take in consideration the fact that more ingredients a product has, more risks can occur.

During the focus group discussion, the extra bid the participants were willing to pay for a traced honey fluctuated between 5 – 10%. These values are also close to the results of quantitative questionnaire. Thus it can be concluded that a slight increase of price of less than 5% can be tolerated by the majority of consumers. However, for each particular situation it is necessary prior to the implementation of traceability system to conduct an analysis of costs benefits.

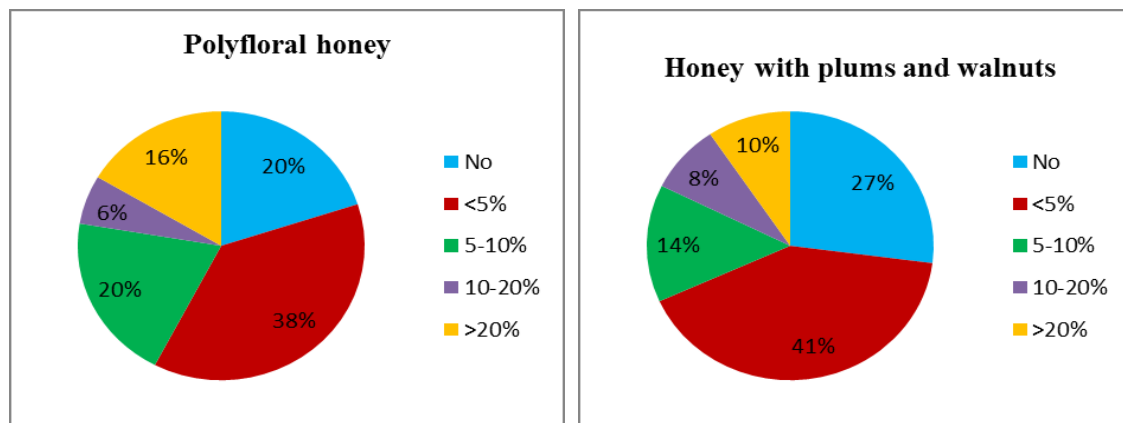


Fig. 6. Willingness to pay for traced honey

There were not found any correlations between the willingness to pay and other socio demographical indicators or consumption because there were surveyed precisely the customers of a specific brand.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study show that Romanian consumers perceive quality mostly from food safety point of view and taste of food. Factors such as social responsibility, respect of the environment, the origin of food are not yet seen as real benefits for them.

Traceability is still very few known among premium honey consumers. However, they recognize the importance of tracing and tracking a food product from field to fork so as to ensure the final safety and quality of the products. Honey traceability would be useful for consumers to increase their trust in products, diminish risks of buying fake honey rather than a warrant for honey safety. A good reason for this is the fact that generally consumers rarely think that honey can bear certain food safety risks.

Communication with consumers about the fact that the jar of honey on a shelf has been traced can be done using information linked to traceability (batch number, HACCP). At the same time, it is very important to communicate with consumers using advertising, news, messages of general education and make them understand the real role played by traceability and what benefits they can have from it. A single mark on the label will be not able to carry the importance of traceability for consumers.

Taking in consideration the fact that the majority of consumers were ready to pay a 5% bid added to the initial price confirms the possibility of generating an additional value to the products using traceability. The effort that should be made by the management of enterprises is to communicate more with their customers and transform traceability in a real competitive advantage.

The limitation of this study is that it was applied to a precise category of consumers. It would be interesting to develop this study on a bigger scale in Romania.

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