

Exploratory Study Regarding the Consumer Motivations for Purchasing Local Products and Their Generally Accepted Definition

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Abstract. In Romania, there is no official definition for the local products and consumers often refer of their benefits thinking of organic products. In many studies, local products are associated with distance, time and farmers markets. In order to build adequate marketing strategies for local products is necessary to study the consumer and his personal motivations and perceptions regarding local products, because he represents the demand on the market. Given their importance for the community and its continuity, it is necessary to determine the consumer perception and significance within the consumers mind. The general opinion among researchers links the consumer's perception of local products with the starting point in building and implementing marketing strategies and studying the general demand. In order to obtain information for building the questionnaire, but also for identifying the consumer perception regarding their meaning and definition, two focus groups were organized in April 2013 and July 2013 with a group of seven persons. The participants were selected according some criteria such as: being the decision-making factor in the buying process within the family, socio-professional status, age, education. Results show that people associate local products to smaller distances from producers to consumers, freshness, and reduced time from production until consumption. Participants mentioned some motivations for purchasing local products that could be grouped into four categories such as: environmental benefits, economy benefits, social and personal benefits. The focus group conducted offered important information both for building a questionnaire and for identifying intrinsic motivations for which people buy and appreciate local products.

Keywords: food chains, distance, focus group, label of origin, local community

INTRODUCTION

Local products do not have an official definition in Romania or anywhere else around the world. Therefore, many researches are trying to establish common attributes in the consumer's mind related to the concept. Roininen *et al.*(2006), highlights the importance of such an effort being the only way to build adequate marketing strategies. Zepeda and Li (2006), considers that in the absence of an official definition, studying the demand for these products is very difficult. Their study, conducted in the U.S.A. indicates that the respondents consider „local” products made in their state or the neighbour states. They also associate farmers markets with local products. Feagan (2007) associated the term „local” to two important terms: „terroir” and „label of origin”. The first designates a specific geographical area which has the advantage of attaching some specific characteristics to the products, while the second is a marketing instrument which combines a geographical area with a label.

In their research, Pirog and Rasmussen (2008), observed that 67% of the respondents in the U.S.A. consider local, products which had travelled less than 160 km from the producer to the consumer. Only a third of the respondents consider that the products from their state are local. Onozaka *et al.*(2010) conducted a study in 2008 in the U.S.A. regarding the difference between „local” and „regional”. Results indicated that 70% consider „local” a distance of 80km, while „regional” involves a 500 km distance. Local products are related to distance. Hingley *et al.* (2010), established some general accepted definitions or words associated by

the consumers to local products such as: „food produced, processed and commercialized on a distance of 40 km”, „restricted area where the consumer lives and buys the product”, „real, connected and authentic”.

Local products are very important for the local community and its continuity because they support its development. Therefore, it is necessary to determine the consumer perception and significance within the consumers mind regarding this category of product. The general opinion among researchers links the consumer’s perception of local products with the starting point in building and implementing marketing strategies and studying the general demand.

The research aim is to determine the meaning of local product within the consumers’ mind since a general and official definition had not been stated yet. The particular objectives were: to determine how important the origin of food is for each participant, to associate local products with different attributes, to correlate local products with geographical indicators and distances and to identify the reasons for purchasing local products. The originality of the research consist in the subject approached and the method of focus group implied.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research has been carried out using a qualitative method, the focus group, which Morgan (1996), defines as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher”. He also highlights that usually this techniques is associated with other qualitative or quantitative methods. In the present study is in fact the starting point in building a questionnaire for a future survey but is also the method chosen to explore the interior motivations and beliefs regarding the local products. McLafferty (2004) considers that the focus group has the main advantage of reflecting social realities of a particular cultural group. The sample size is allowed to vary from four to 20 persons. The number of focus groups also varies from one to 52 depending on time and costs.

Two focus groups were organized: the first in April and the second one in July 2013, in Cluj-Napoca with two different groups of seven persons. The interview guide was elaborated after literature study and built in order to frame in one hour and a half. The socio-demographical information about participants is presented in Tab. 1.

Tab. 1

Focus group participants

Respondent	Shopping place	Gender	Age	Household size	Residence
1.	Supermarket, hypermarket	M	38	2	Urban
2.	Farmers market	F	23	4	Urban
3.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	27	2	Urban
4.	Farmers market	F	23	4	Urban
5.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	30	3	Urban
6.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	48	1	Urban
7.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	49	3	Urban
8.	Supermarket, hypermarket	M	29	3	Urban
9.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	44	2	Urban
10.	Farmers market	F	28	3	Urban
11.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	28	4	Urban
12.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	28	2	Urban
13.	Farmers market	F	57	2	Urban
14.	Supermarket, hypermarket	F	24	3	Urban

The group reunited at a precise hour in the afternoon, so that everybody could be present. The moderator had a set of questions which were known by the participants. Discussions started and everybody expresses the opinion about each subject approached. A second person registered the meeting and made all the transcripts.

Participants were asked whether to respond and interact between them, or to involve in the word association game by writing the word they are associating with local products.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Focus group participants pay a lot of attention to the origin of food. They generally prefer Romanian products especially in the case of fruits and vegetables because in their opinion locally grown food is a guarantee for quality, good taste, good texture, lack of preservatives and genetically modifications. For the participants is very important that they know the origin of food, which becomes sometimes a firm criteria in choosing the food (e.g. cherries from Ciresoiaia, melon from Dabuleni). Two aspects can be observed: in the case of fruits and vegetables the Romanian origin is enough for determine a purchase but for dairy and bread people do not accept a big distance between them and the producer, so they prefer to buy local brands like Napolact, La Colline. One respondent said: “I prefer proudly to support the local economy”. Still, regarding the price, if the difference is consistent, the origin of food becomes not so important in the buying process. People consider that a local product could be better because the specific combination of natural factors like the climate, soil, traditions and methods of fabrication. In the case of milk or eggs, people consider that they must buy them from nearby in order to have fresh and tasty products. Large distances between the producer and the consumer are associated to low quality and lack of freshness.

Local products means different things for different people, but generally four main geographical indicators are associated to them: County (Cluj, Bistrita-Nasaud, and Bihor etc.), region (Transylvania, Bucovina, and Apuseni Mountains etc.), and place of birth and place of residence. Local food is a symbol of identity, of familiarity, being indissolubly related to the place of birth. This is also one definition offered by Hingley *et al.* (2010). To some respondents local products are linked to tourism. Local food could contribute to gastronomical tourism development. In addition, in the case of fruit and vegetables local food is associated to farmers markets. In each case, participants consider that locally means no more than 200 km from their place of residence, as short the distance is, positive attributes are related to the products. Similar results obtained also Pirog and Rasmussen (2008) in the U.S.A. where a local product travelled less than 160 km. Again local is related to distance.

An exercise of word association revealed a number of 48 attributes that participants associate to “local food products” from which six of them are “tradition and “traditional”, other 6 are “natural product”. Biological products are also considered local products. Another important attribute is “specific to a certain area” but unlike Feagan (2007), Romanians do not associate local products to labels of origin because of their novelty on the food market. The intrinsic attributes of local food products are: no preservatives, no color ingredients, freshness, good aspect, safe, tasty, good aspect, ecological, specific recipes, unprocessed, natural flavors, good quality. The extrinsic attributes are traditional package, specific denomination, local raw materials, convenience, easy to buy, uniqueness. In Great Britain, local authorities encourage the consumers to buy local food products and their response is positive because they perceive them safe, tasty, fresh, authentic and of high quality (Chambers *et al.*, 2007).

Seyfang (2008) identified four main reasons for which consumers buy locally produced food: environmental benefits, economic benefits, social and personal benefits. The

focus group results show that in the case of Romanian consumers, the attributes can be also grouped in the same categories (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2

Consumer's motivations to buy local food products

Benefits	Motivations
Environmental benefits	Diversity, Small distances between producer and consumer which means less gas and less pollution Biologic products
Economic benefits	Supporting the local economy Supporting the local farmers
Social benefits	Preserving the local traditions Patriotic feelings Direct interaction with the producers Related to a specific area Staying connected to the roots Emotional factor-being close to the local community
Personal benefits	Better taste Freshness Familiar No risks Trust Expiring date Natural produced

CONCLUSION

The qualitative method of focus group offered important findings because of in depth exploration of the human mind. The local food products are very important to Romanian consumers and especially products related to their place of birth or place of residence. A definition of local products could not be exactly established because each participant attaches different meanings. In geographical terms, local products are produced within a county or region and the distance accepted by the consumer in order to be perceived as "local" is around 200 km.

The attributes related to local food products reflect a high trust and a safety feeling, familiarity being very important when buying. The motivations for which people buy local products are related to four dimensions: environmental, social, economic and personal. The social and personal dimensions are predominant.

Focus group was an adequate method and relevant data was obtained. The research will become the starting point for a future survey among consumers from Cluj County regarding their attitude regarding local products.

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