

CONSUMER AND MARKET ANALYSIS

Introduction

Consumers form an important and integral part of any organization's success and/or failure because the relevant knowledge about consumer behaviour influences the decisions of the company towards catering to their needs and demands (Bakator et.al., 2016). This essay attempts to reflect upon the qualitative study performed on traditional patterns of Romanian food consumption and the integration of sustainable diet principles. According to Petrovici and Ritson (2000, p. 291), "Food has always been an important component of social and economic well-being in Romania". However, considering the increase in food prices, followed by the fall in incomes of the majority population has had consequences on the assumption of the importance of food in Romanian households (Petrovici and Ritson, 2000, p. 291). Voinea et.al. (2020) too have pointed out that "the Romanian traditional pattern of food consumption as a whole is no longer a reference point in shaping a healthy and sustainable food behaviour due to the growing discrepancies between the return to traditions and the constraints of sustainable development". Voinea et.al.'s (2020) study focuses on providing solutions that can reshape the food pattern by incorporating the principles of a sustainable diet. To conduct their study, Voinea et.al. (2020) used qualitative data and semi-structured interviews as the methodology for data collection from a sample of 21 Romanian traditional food consumers. However, the sample size could have been more as the results of the study could potentially impact the lifestyle choices of consumers and mere 21 views seem to be a little less to form an opinion for a larger set of individuals. The study could have had at least 50 participants or more, or at least a demographic area could have been covered such as a complete population of a rural

village/area wherein the food consumption habits and choices of all age groups could have been taken into consideration as that would have led to a better understanding of the food choices of the consumers. A better example is the study conducted by Neagu et.al. (2020) on the diets carried out in Romania that collected data from more than 1500 participants belonging to different age groups by conducting two rounds of interviews. Although the participation rate of the sample population was 72% wherein the response rate recorded was 59.6% of participants after the second round of interviews, which is also indicative of the fact that the study was carried out diligently. Moreover, eventual data thus collected was still of about 894 participants, a number which can still be considered relevant when talking about the Romanian diet (P.3). On the other hand, a study by Voinea et.al. (2020) was performed merely with the interviews of 21 participants, not to mention the profiling of the population to isn't diverse.

Talking about the methodology used in the study, qualitative research, which is inductive, allows the search for meanings and insights that a situation provides the researcher with (Mohajan, 2018). Furthermore, the qualitative study involves data collection methods and analysis techniques such as semi-structured interviews. The study by Voinea et. al. (2020) uses semi-structured interviews for data collection and qualitative analysis, an approach wherein the interviewer is not obligated to adhere to a formal questionnaire i.e., the interviewer can ask open-ended questions during a conversation, and not follow a defined structure of the questionnaire. This not only helps the researcher to establish a personal connection with the interviewee but also makes it comfortable for the interviewee to respond to the questions better. This essay will further explore various aspects of the study performed by Voinea et.al. (2020) keeping the focus on the research methodology.

Romanian Food and its relation with cultural heritage

Located in South-Central Europe, Romanian cuisine "*is influenced by repeated waves of different cultures: the ancient Greeks, the Romans, the Saxons, the Turks, Slavic and Magyar neighbours*" (Salanță et.al. (2015), p. 187). As a delicious consequence of intercultural exchanges, Romanian food culture has a variety of traditional food that is part of the cultural heritage, which has also been highlighted by Voinea et.al.'s (2020) study.

The difference is that Salanță et.al. (2015) are of the view that traditional Romanian food has many elements that have different nutritional benefits, while Voinea et.al.'s (2020) study looks at sustainable diet solutions and highlights the fact that the predominant element of Romanian food is meat consumption of which is not only harmful an "environmentally harmful form of food consumption but is also a contributor in the development of non-communicable diet-related diseases (NCDs)" (p.2). Because the recent study is of Voinea et.al., the highlights of the literary review can not be ignored, however, the pain point remains that the sample size of the study resists the idea of accuracy leading to the belief that the results and findings of the study can be applied to a larger population in a generic sense. For instance, a study by Balan et.al. (2022), which too concluded that the consumption pattern of the population shows the overconsumption of animal products along with other products including starchy veggies, bread and pastries, was performed at a sample size of 1053 participants by means of a questionnaire. So, even recent studies have used a bigger sample population to conduct their studies, while Voinea et.al.'s (2020) study uses mere 21 interview data to intercept the results to research objectives.

Mocanasi (2020) has also highlighted the importance of sample size reflects the appropriateness of research and deciding on the units of sample size forms an integral step in conducting research, assessing the output quality of the study and its reliability. This fact gets

complimented by the study performed by Vasileiou, Barnett and Thorpe *et al.* (2018) wherein they mention that even though there doesn't exist specific criteria or guides to selected sample size in a qualitative study, the researchers must be more transparent in sharing their evaluations while finalizing the sufficiency of the sample size that they select for performing the study. In the case of Voinea et.al., while transparency has been maintained with regard to explaining the procedure involved in the creation of semi-structured interviews, the reason behind selecting the sample size of 21 participants has not been shared. Another loophole that puts the findings of the study under the question of being authentic enough to be applied to a large range of the Romanian population's perceptions towards traditional food consumption. Although, the study does provide the profiling of the sample population, which has been provided in the image below, indicating the careful selection of the sample size wherein the participants aged between 30 to 68 years:

Crt. No.	Gender	Age	Profession	Occupation	Marital Status	Region	Size of the Household	Children	Income EUR
1	F	57	mathematician	expert reviewer	married	Transylvania	3	2	1001-1500
2	F	62	seamstress	retired	married	Muntenia	2	1	450-1000
3	F	36	economist	university lecturer PhD	married	Muntenia	3	1	Over 2000
4	F	38	economist	head of administrative department	married	Muntenia	3	1	1001-1500
5	F	49	teacher	teacher	married	Muntenia	3	1	1501-2000
6	M	67	engineer	retired	married	Muntenia	2	1	1001-1500
7	F	48	pharmacist	pharmacist	married	Moldavia	3	1	1501-2000
8	F	48	economist	secretary	married	Banat	4	2	1501-2000
9	M	47	economist	professor PhD	unmarried	Muntenia	1	1	1001-1500
10	F	62	engineer	engineer	married	Transylvania	2	1	450-1000
11	F	50	cosmetician	cosmetic salon administrator	unmarried	Transylvania	2	1	450-1000
12	F	51	psychologist	sales assistant	married	Transylvania	2	2	1501-2000
13	M	55	engineer	retired	married	Transylvania	2	1	1501-2000
14	F	34	technician	technician	married	Dobrogea	3	1	1001-1500
15	F	53	technician	technician	married	Muntenia	2	1	450-1000
16	F	56	technician	technician	married	Oltenia	4	1	450-1000
17	M	52	driver	driver	married	Muntenia	2	2	450-1000
18	F	49	school-mistress	school-mistress	married	Muntenia	3	1	1501-2000
19	F	30	economist	operations specialist	married	Muntenia	1	0	1001-1500
20	M	68	informatician	retired	married	Oltenia	2	2	450-1000
21	F	67	economist	retired	married	Moldavia	2	1	1001-1500

Figure I: Characteristics of Sample

[Source: Voinea et.al.'s (2020)]

This shows that despite being careful towards the selection of sample size and participants, the study lacks on the front of being transparent about the reason behind choosing the specific sample size, not to mention that it doesn't cover the detailed demographical population for conducting the semi-structured interviews i.e. inclusion of children, youth and old age people. This further question the applicability of the research findings on the larger set of the population as it fails to capture some of the major contributors to the food consumption patterns in Romanian people. This leads to the need for deeper introspection of the results and findings of the study which eventually led to the conclusion of the study.

Methodology and Findings of the Article

The study uses qualitative research methodology to conduct the study which is the right approach to be taken because "qualitative research is concerned with feelings, ideas, or experiences" (Chinyere and Val, 2023, p. 20). Furthermore, qualitative research involves studying the "nature of phenomena, which includes their quality, different manifestations, the context in which they appear, or the perspectives from which they can be perceived" (ibid). Voinea et.al.'s (2020) study focuses on providing suggestions for a sustainable diet wherein the perspectives, experiences and beliefs of the participants were an integral part that was done by conducting semi-structured interviews. This can also be noted in the research objectives as mentioned below (ibid, p. 3):

- Providing insights into the perception of Romanian consumers and their habits of consumption of traditional food
- Finding evidence of consumption attitudes towards 'meat-based' foods and products
- Finding and pointing out the concerns of the consumers with regard to environmental sustainability and health

The objectives of the research also support the fact that selecting semi-structured interviews as a method for data collection was the right step towards conducting the study. As per the basic understanding, an interview is a process that involves interaction between two individuals where they exchange their views about a theme or a topic (Ruslin et.al., 2022, p. 22). Semi-structured interviews are used a lot in social science research that is exploratory wherein the focus remains on the main topic and the researcher delves deeper into facts discovery (ibid). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews mostly help with exploring a life story associated with the participants of the study (ibid). Voinea et.al.'s (2020) study too focuses on understanding the perspectives of the participants associated with food consumption and related sustainability of traditional food in Romania. This could be well noticed in the following interview intercepts (refer to Annexure I for the questionnaire) used for data analysis and discussion:

1. Identification of the fact that local traditional dishes and products form an integral and large part of the diet which is influenced by the fact that the locals take pride in their traditional food:

“I come from the Transylvanian area and I am very proud of my origin, and the consumption of traditional products specific to my area gives me the feeling that I have not lost my roots living in a cosmopolitan city like Bucharest for more than 25 years”
(Voinea et.al., 2020, p.8)

2. The desire for the preservation of traditional habits, recipes and ingredients:

“I learned to cook most of the traditional dishes from my mother and grandmother. For more than 20 years I have kept a notebook with traditional recipes of my grandmother and my mother. For example, recipes for spicy eggplant paste, cucumbers in vinegar and pickles are passed down from my grandmother to my mother, and my mother passed them down to me. I also have some cooking tools kept from my grandmother,

for example, a round cast iron tray that I use to cook steak and pie and a few wooden spoons” (Voinea et.al., 2020, p.8).

Furthermore, the importance laid on understanding, deducing and interpreting the information received in the interviews is, on a positive note, indicative of the fact that researchers did their due diligence with regard to data analysis as they eventually suggested some dietary instructions with regard to consumption of different foods, beverages etc. in Romanian culture. The below images provide evidence of not only a detailed analysis but also a well thought of course of action to be suggested to the policymakers with regard to food consumption and its association with the sustainability of dietary patterns:

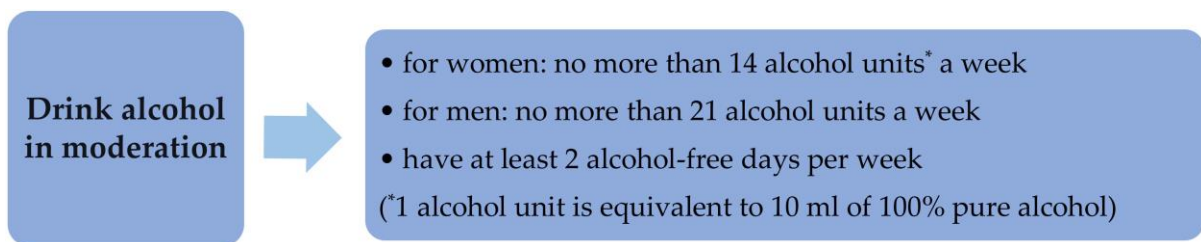


Figure II: Alcohol Consumption related actions

[Source: Voinea et.al.'s (2020)]

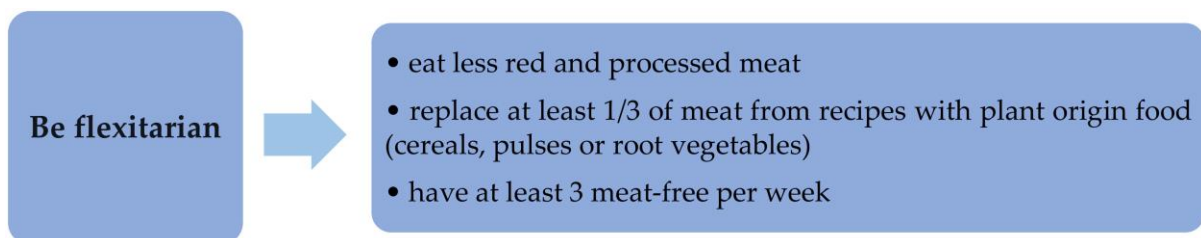


Figure III: Flexitarianism

[Source: Voinea et.al.'s (2020)]

However, the researchers attempt to propose the need for the creation of a new model of sustainability associated with the dietary patterns of Romanian people with mere information

collected from a small sample size, which makes it difficult to rely completely on the authenticity and applicability of the data collected. But to some extent, since qualitative methodology provides the privilege of purposive sampling so as to select the information-rich cases for study (Vasileiou et.al., 2018), the approach of semi-structured interviews focusing on relevant data and information collected, taken by Voinea et.al. (2020) could be considered as justified for the study. Furthermore, to ensure the in-depth analysis of the data collected, the researchers did continuous observations and analysis of the transcripts of the interviews. This shows the seriousness and the amount of effort put in to analyse the collected information to find a conclusion to the study, not to mention the diligent approach of the researchers has been appreciable. Probably because the sample size was very small, the researcher did their due diligence in data analysis to make up for the shortage of a larger sample population to conduct the study.

Recommendations and Conclusion

By far, it can be said that the decision to conduct qualitative research using semi-structured interviews to conduct the study by Voinea et.al. (2020) has been the right choice but the drawback of data authenticity due to the small sample size has been the biggest loophole in the study. Moreover, while the qualitative study doesn't restrict the researcher to picking up a specific sample population for the study, one has to be transparent about the process behind the selection of sample size and the kind of outcomes aimed by the study, a larger sample population would have added to the authenticity of the findings and its applicability.

While the semi-structured interview has been elaborate enough to collect different kinds of information important to understanding the perception of the Romanian food consumer, the inclusion of a more diverse sample belonging to different age groups would have provided a broader perspective of the result implications of the study.

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Annexure I

A.1. Interview Guide

A.1.1. Introduction (10 min)

- Welcome and introduction
- Could you please introduce yourself in a few words? How old are you? What profession do you have?
- What do you do? What is your social status?
- Could you please describe your household? How many members does your household have? How many children do you have?
- What region do you come from?

A.1.2. Traditional Food Consumption Habits (30 min)

- What are the main reasons you consume Romanian traditional foods? For example: healthy, natural, tasty, locally sourced etc.
- Do you consume traditional products and dishes specific to the region you come from? What are your favourite ones? How do you feel when you eat them?
- Where do you buy traditional Romanian products? Who buys traditional products in your family?
- Do you normally prepare traditional Romanian products at home? Which are these?
- What are your cooking habits? Is cooking one of your hobbies? Who cooks traditional dishes in your family? To what extent is the partner involved in cooking it? What about the children? From whom did you learn to cook traditional Romanian dishes?

- Could you please give me details about your dining habits? How many meals and snacks do you eat in a day? Where do you usually eat? With whom do you eat together? What do the daily family meals mean to you?
- Could you describe a typical traditional breakfast of yours? How many traditional food products do you usually eat for breakfast?
- What are your eating habits related to lunch? How many courses do you usually eat at lunch? Are the dishes you eat at lunch usually home cooking? What about the desert? If not, where do you buy them from?
- What does a typical traditional dinner look like for you? Is dinner usually freshly cooked before eating it?
- What traditional products do you usually eat at snacks daytime?
- Are there any divergences between the weekdays' meals and the weekends meals?
- What are the food habits in your family at the main religious holidays of the year? What traditional foods do you eat for Christmas? What about Easter?
- What traditional foods do you usually eat at other special events?
- Where do you buy traditional dishes for festive meals that you do not prepare at home?
- When dining at the restaurant, how often do you order Romanian-specific dishes?
- Do you normally fast? If yes, how often?

A.1.3. Willingness to Change Food Consumption Behaviour (15 min)

- Are you concerned about the long-term consequences of high consumption of animal-origin foods, especially meat? What are the risks you think you're exposed to?
- Would you be willing to replace a part of the consumed meat with products/ingredients of plant origin?

- What is the significance of locally-sourced traditional food products for you? What are some of the reasons you buy from small producers? What fresh products do you buy? What processed products do you buy?
- How concerned are you about reducing food waste in your household? What are you doing exactly?
- Do you normally sort the waste resulting from the consumption and cooking of foods? How often do you do this?

A.1.4. Closing the Interview (5 min)

Conclusions of the interviewer and addressing thanks to the interviewee

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