






Young Consumers' Product Perception and Consumer Motivation Towards Buying Local Products

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Abstract: *An important aspect of sustainable food consumption is the consumption of local food. The concept of local food is often linked to sustainability which is gaining importance in the marketing communication of food brands since it fits in with the conscious consumption intentions of young people. In addition to studying the nature and consumer perception of local products, the study explores consumer motivations of young consumers aged 18-25 using qualitative focus group research method. Based on the results, the products that young consumers are willing and motivated to buy can be identified, and the most important trigger words can also be selected. Qualitative research methods were used to identify the most significant consumer motivation elements among young consumers.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Buying locally produced, traditional, safe, and healthy food products has recently been growing in popularity due to a new consumer trend. The young generations (Millennials and Centennials) are increasingly conscious in terms of the ethical, environmental, social and health impacts of their food (BEUC, 2020; Haugum & Grande, 2017; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Kovacs, 2020; Kovacs et al., 2021; Lendvai et al., 2021; Reich et al., 2018) and they increasingly support the local community (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). In general, local/regional food systems (LFS) are often associated with sustainable agriculture since the LFS can be profitable, reduce economic uncertainties and increase food supply resilience (economic sustainability). It benefits society by ensuring fairness and trust, promoting well-being (social sustainability), minimising food miles, pollution and wasting (environmental sustainability), and re-socialising and re-spatializing food (Beke, 2020).

2. SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

There are several definitions of the term 'sustainable food consumption'. In our study, we focus on the definition offered by Pack et al. (2005):

- Food that is produced by lower environmental impact and higher resource efficiency.
- Favouring locally produced food over imported food.
- Diet without meat, or with reduced meat content.
- Reduced consumption of bottled beverages.
- Favouring organic products over traditionally produced foods (Vetóné, 2014, p. 3.).

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Vetóné (2014) suggests that the degree of processing and the packaging of the product can also have a significant impact on the environment. Vetóné (2014) cites the dimensions - that were summarised in a study by Erdmann et al. (1999) - which primarily determines sustainable food consumption. Table 1. summarises these four key dimensions and the related factors.

Table 1. The key dimensions of sustainable food consumption

Economic dimension	Social dimension	Health dimension	Environmental dimension
Global food security	Safe workplace	Human health	Preserving natural resources
Guaranteeing the competitiveness of businesses	International justice	Changing consumer habits	Maintaining ecological resilience
Stable and efficient markets	Strengthening and promoting consumer interests	Joy of eating	Increasing biodiversity

Source: own compilation based on Vetóné (2014) p. 3.

The focus of our research is on local products and the motives for buying local products, therefore in this study, we look at the results of international and Hungarian surveys and compare the findings concerning these focus areas.

3. CONSUMPTION PREFERENCES OF LOCAL FOOD

3.1. International consumers

In October 2018, the market research company IRI published a European Shopper Survey, on geocentric purchases and the attitudes of Millennials. 3334 Shoppers of seven European countries (Germany, France, Greece, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain) were surveyed. The respondents were grouped into three age groups: 18–24 years old (young Millennials), 24–34 years old (Millennials), and those over 34 years old (Generation X).

More than seven out of ten European customers prefer locally produced products. The most important factors in buying local products include support for regional producers, quality, and taste of local products. The importance of buying local products is growing in Europe, but more than half of those surveyed are hesitant to pay more for local or organic products. Generation X prefers buying local products, while young Millennials are less concerned about the product's origin and the environment, however, they are more inclined to buy international brands that they consider innovative (IRI, 2018a).

Locally produced vegetables, meats, and fruits are purchased in the largest quantities. However, Millennials mostly shop online, so the benefits associated with buying local products may be less apparent (IRI, 2018b). In 2021, localization, new supply chains, and transparency appeared among the top 10 trends in food consumption. According to the survey results, 18 per cent of the consumers are willing to pay more for eco-friendly food and beverages (IRI, 2021).

3.2. Hungarian consumers

The quantitative survey was conducted on a sample of 1,500 consumers from Hungary - representative of the population of the country. The domestic product orientation index was established, which expresses the extent to which the customer takes into account or considers it important whether the product is a local or a national product. Women, single parents (most of whom are women), and two-person couples with or without children scored higher. Clusters were also

identified in the survey, and a group of “those who like local specialties” could be identified. One-fifth of the respondents belong to the group that considers the place of origin of the products (be it Hungarian or from a local producer) and the image of the product to be important. Typically, people from the Northern Great Plain or Central Hungary belong to this group, 48 per cent of them live in one-person households, are young people, secondary school graduates, or university graduates, and 58 per cent of them are men (Malota et al., 2018). Based on the results of a survey conducted in Zala and Somogy counties in Hungary, quality and the experience with the product seem to be gaining importance for local producers (Tóth-Kaszás et al., 2017, p. 45).

In 2017/18, a national exploratory survey was conducted on a sample of 504 Hungarian people. 82.9% of the respondents (418 persons) bought local products. The highest proportions of the ‘Alternative Diet Followers’ respondents who buy local products are those who follow a lactose-free diet (94 people), which is 20.3% of the respondents. More than 15% of them buy high protein, milk protein-free, or vegetarian products (Barna et al., 2018). For the statement ‘I buy local products because’ the highest average values can be seen in answer 1. ‘I know where the product comes from.’, 2. ‘I support local producers’, 3. ‘I support local sellers (traders)’, 4. ‘I can reduce the delivery distance of food miles’, and 5. ‘they are natural’. The average values fall into the answer choice ‘very important’ in the importance scale where the Mean is between 3.7 - 4.2 (Barna et al., 2018).

95% of the 152 young people surveyed in Kaposvár, a town in Hungary, have already heard of the concept of local products, but only 50% of the respondents are fully aware of the exact meaning of the term. The majority of young people have already bought local products, and 15% of the respondents buy local products weekly or even more often. Nearly 20% of the respondents have never bought any local products. A strong proportion of non-buyers are not interested in local brand products, and 20% say it is expensive or unnecessary, respectively, and 16.8% mentioned the difficult availability of such products.

The best places to market local products were supermarkets, local markets, hypermarkets, local product stores, and finally shopping directly at the producer (Sántosi– Böröndi-Fülöp, 2014). Contrary to this result, more than 70% of the 1,000 people (18-75 years old) asked in Szente’s 2014 survey considered it important, in part or in full, to be able to buy locally produced food in a specialty store (Szente, 2014). The most important criteria of local products based on the answers include ‘ingredients of natural origin, health benefits, chemical and preservative-free, origin, support of local producers and sellers, the reduction of food miles, environmentally-friendly nature of products, previous positive experiences of the buyer, the free choice regarding the quantity to be purchased and the appearance’. The emotional factors include nostalgia for buying local products, having fun, recalling old times, and guilt over neglecting to buy local products.

The survey conducted among the young people of Kaposvár identified the main attitudes related to the local products. Based on the average values of the evaluation scale 1-5, the following order was formed: 1. fresh; 2. evokes homemade flavours, traditional; 3. safe, healthy; 4. increased trust; 5. environmentally-friendly (Sántosi– Böröndi-Fülöp, 2014). In the survey of Bauerné and Szűcs in 2019, the factors influencing food consumption among the students at the University of Debrecen (Hungary) were examined on a sample of 500 people where the local products received the lowest average value (3.092). The results also showed that both students who consider themselves eco-conscious or health-conscious prioritize quality over price in their food purchasing and consumption decisions. The eco-conscious students prefer local products more than the health-conscious students at the university (Bauerné – Szűcs, 2019).

3.3. Consumer beliefs and motivations

Consumer beliefs and motivations about local food can be based on different motivational elements. Former research emphasises the internal product attributes, quality, freshness, good taste (FSA, 2003, 2007; Defra, 2008) as the first place of importance. Sustainability-related motivations are the environmental, societal, economic, and personal motivations (Seyfang, 2008). Community-oriented (De Bernardi et al., 2020; Soltani et al., 2020) and animal welfare, environmental sustainability, supporting local producers (Stedman et al., 2017) are considered for some specific segments. Benefits related to health (Selfa and Qazi, 2005, Moser et al., 2011, Arsil et al., 2013) are relevant mostly for middle-aged and older generations, as well as the emotional value of food products (Choe and Kim, 2018). Hedonic motivation, e.g., culinary tourism (Soltani et al., 2020), the joy of being together, food speciality (Dedeoğlu et al., 2021) are important drivers of young generations. As consumers' purchase intention is greatly influenced not only by product awareness but also by motivations, our research aims to use qualitative research methods to measure the most significant motivational elements among young consumers.

4. METHODS

Our qualitative study was the second stage of a multi-stage research process. In this empirical study, we aim to reveal information that helps to identify the most important motivational elements of local food consumption of young consumers. The goal of our research is to explore qualitative information that helps domestic producers in product development and sales, as well as to find out what are the product associations and product attributes and the main motivators of buying local products.

In the semi-structured focus group interviews, the main topics of the guideline were the following: food consumption habits, the associations and attitudes towards local food, motivational elements of buying local food. 24 focus group interviews involving 126 young consumers were used in the theoretical sampling technique. The following filtering conditions were applied: respondents purchased local products in the past three months, they were 18+ years old, made consumption decisions. Regarding quota sampling, 50 per cent of the buyers of local food make frequent purchases, while 50 per cent buy different local food products several times per month. The ratio of male respondents was 49 per cent, while 51 per cent of the respondents were females. 50 per cent of the respondents belong to the age group 18-21, while 50 per cent of the respondents were 22-25 years old. Regarding the level of education of the respondents: 16 persons completed secondary school but did not graduate, 82 persons graduated from secondary school, and 28 persons graduated from college or university. Data collection was conducted in October 2021, partly online and face-to-face. Research data were analysed by content analysis.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Associations with local food

In the first part of the interview, we asked the participants to list the first associations they had concerning local food. There were significant differences among the participants regarding their type of residence. Over 40 per cent of the first associations were meat products and flowers among the responses of consumers who are living in the countryside. They mentioned some local brands (four local food brands on average) as well. Overall, brand awareness and the

importance of knowing the producer were found to be more important for consumers living in rural areas. The top product associations on the whole sample include fruit, vegetables, honey, sausages, pickled vegetables, eggs, syrup, pasta, and bread. In addition to these, brands that relate to childhood memories or travel-related products were mentioned. The product attribute associations include healthy, handcrafted, rural, traditional, environmental-friendly, and having high intrinsic quality. Most of the respondents have positive attitudes towards local food.

5.2. Motivational elements

Among the motivational elements, the purchase of healthy products is the most significant. Several health-related reasons can be identified, especially in the case of female respondents, who mentioned “natural ingredients” and “free-range animals”. The association of fewer artificial additives and fresher ingredients is related to local foods. Local products were mentioned together with the terms “chemical-free” and “special”.

More than 50 per cent of consumers living in urban areas buy local products because they find them unique, and their attitude towards local food is influenced by prestige and hedonic value. These consumers think that the concepts of the ‘country of origin’ and ‘local’ overlap, so they often use them together with the adjectives “national” and “Hungarian” in the interviews. However, for those living in the countryside, local food means that the product was produced in the vicinity of their place of residence or its narrow catchment area. Accordingly, for respondents living in urban areas, community support means buying national products and supporting the domestic (i.e., Hungarian) economy.

Emotional factors also appeared in the responses. The memories of “grandmother’s food” and the atmosphere of the countryside also appeared, mostly for those living in smaller rural towns. Satisfaction also appeared among the emotional factors, especially if the producer is known or got known while making the purchase. The word cloud in Figure 1. shows the words most often mentioned by the respondents in the focus group discussions.



N=126

Figure 1. Word cloud depicting the motivational elements mentioned in the survey

Source: own compilation

High quality, uniqueness and good taste are key motivating factors for the purchase of local food, as well as the possibility of buying unique products that are not available in large stores or anywhere else. There are differences in customer motivations among respondents living in

urban and rural areas. In the case of respondents living in towns or cities, the most common trigger words included experience, nostalgia, or travel. In addition, the words “prestige” - “speciality” - “better quality” can be associated most with local foods. Freshness and healthiness could be identified in all segments as distinctive values. For respondents living in the countryside, saving money and convenient accessibility were the motivational elements, whereas the urban segments mentioned higher prices and good quality. In the case of the examined age groups and settlement types, motivational elements were different, as can be seen in Table 2.).

Table 2. Frequency of mention of main motivational elements in each segment (%)

Motivational elements	Area of residence	Age group: 18-21	Age group: 22-25
Health	Capital city	28	34
	City	24	36
	Small town/village	38	45
Experience (taste and novelty)	Capital city	38	34
	City	42	34
	Small town/village	24	28
Community, support for local producers	Capital city	18	28
	City	28	32
	Small town/village	30	34
Environmental protection	Capital city	20	24
	City	22	24
	Small town/village	18	22
Economic efficiency (favourable price, easy access, availability)	Capital city	22	24
	City	28	24
	Small town/village	42	45

N=126

Source: Own compilation

The most important consumption motivations include internal and external motivations, of which the emotional elements such as curiosity and the experience of family traditions and memories during consumption stand out. Other local product mentions, such as textiles and cosmetics, also appeared among young people who live in rural areas or often visit smaller settlements for tourism purposes. The consumption of local products is mostly related to tourism and visits to relatives who live in rural areas. Local wines might serve as a motivational element for selecting travel destinations, however, culinary tourism did not appear spontaneously in any of the respondents' mentions.

6. CONCLUSION

Our research aimed to understand the associations and consumer motivations of young age groups regarding the consumption of local products. Young respondents associated local foods with freshness. Their product perception and attitude towards local food are generally positive. Local food's freshness or purity may shape consumers' brand evaluation.

Regarding product associations related to local products, the noticeable difference among respondents living in rural and urban areas is the difference in product awareness and brand awareness. In the case of those living in small towns/villages, product awareness and the knowledge of local brands are significantly higher.

Our results have partially confirmed previous research findings: product attributes are more important than the price of the product or other attributes such as availability and the conveni-

ence of purchasing. Focus group interviews identified the experience-related and other hedonic motivational elements in the age group studied. The motivational elements related to the environmental and social aspects of sustainability seem to be only tertiary. Among the older age groups (22-25 years old), Brand love: “passionate connection with local food” was an important factor - in the case of consumers living in rural areas in a significantly higher proportion than in the case of respondents living in the capital city. The motivation for healthiness was significant in the older age groups, which is most typically associated with the naturalness, additive-free and artificial dye-free nature of foods.

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