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ORIGINAL PAPER

CONSUMER PREFERENCES OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS FOR ROMANIA

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Abstract

The holistic production systems have been gaining more attention from the agricultural producers and a rising demand from the society due to increasing health concerns. While this is valid for developed countries, it is also gaining attention in developing countries as well. Driving out of these facts, it was intended to overview the consumer decision making process for organic agricultural products, namely fresh fruits and vegetables and legumes by utilising primary data retrieved from Timisoara province of Romania. Due to the survey results of 2018, it was understood that demand for organic agriculture and its outputs is still a quality-price comparison matter for consumers and people with lower per capita income require price motivators. Yet, with rising income and level of education, quality price assessment becomes more prevalent and people demand more variety of products. This confirms the income-demand co-movement for non-conventional products. It was understood that there is an interest in organic agricultural and food products in Romania as well, yet the level information is limited. Consumers are willing to be acknowledged but do not consider the conventional promotion tools as satisfactory. Non-conventional tools and increased consumer awareness are essential to increase the demand and corresponding farmer orientation on organic agricultural production.

Keywords: organic agricultural products, demand, marketing, producer supports, correlation

INTRODUCTION

Consumption attitudes have been induced by different preferential and market related factors and development of marketing policy and tools can mostly be achieved by analysis of primary data (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 1999). While price is the most effective factor for normal goods, goods and services including more value-added and referred as fully or partially luxurious back on other factors as well (Maggie and Ajuruchukwu, 2014; Maxwell, 2001; Soderlund, 1998).

With rising emphasis on food safety and healthy consumption relationship, organic production schemes incorporating minimisation of chemical use appeared as alternative food and agricultural supplying system (Mulero, et al., 2010; Morris, et al., 2001; Gil, et al., 2000; Johansson, 1999).

However, inferences of consumers regarding income and price relationship resulted in low saturation of organic market. However, there is an increasing emphasis on organic products especially in developing and agricultural resource abundant economies (Inci, et al., 2017; Kozelová, et al. 2013). Departing from these observations, it was intended to evaluate consumer preferences and attitudes towards organic products for Romania, which is a rapidly growing eastern member of the European Union.

Yet, as an improving market, organic production potential in Romania is not motivated completely. Having grown with a limited pace during 1990s, the market potential for organic products grew almost by 20 times since the beginning of the 21st century (Myers and Rorie, 2000; Vandeman and Hayden, 1997). Yet, encouragement for producers to ship organic production schemes in developing markets is related with signal provision on a rising consumption demand. Being a developing country, organic products constitute 1% of the total agro-food market with 2 million Euros per year in Romania (Roman, 2010), as there are limited supports to the producers or lack of demand information on the contrary to developed members of the Union (Kozelová, et al. 2013).

Yet, it is also important to note that Romania has been considered as a growing market for organic agro-food products both in terms of production and marketing (Dabija, et al., 2013). The proof of this relies on rising number of producer and processors from 72 in 2000 to 2775 in 2008, and the trend has been continuously rising despite the fact that the market still relies on imports mostly (Vietoris, et al., 2016).

In accordance with these challenges, it needs to be shortly noted that growth and saturation of new markets relies on emergence of an irreversible consumer demand. Therefore, the consumption trend changes and whether conventional and renovated marketing tools can be utilised for improvement of the market should be considered for developing countries, on the essence of organic agro-food products for Romanian case. It is intended that whether the widespread acknowledgment on rising concerns of food quality, security and safety as well as environmental conscious play a significant role in decision making process of consumers for organic products (Krystallis and Chryssohoidis G., 2005).

It is widely known that health concerns and social and psychological factors affect consumers' decision making process. Social motivators as the impact of friends and families and learning process affect organic product demand, which is referred as high-cost for individuals with medium or lower level of income (Dahl, 2014).

Accordingly, it was aimed to measure the consumers' preferences of and attitudes towards organic products with respect to their personal and social characteristics, involving economic effects as well. Relying on these objectives, the primary data retrieved from a sample of Romanian consumers were evaluated and interpreted in the scope of this paper.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Materials

The research is based on consumer data retrieved from Timisoara city of Romania at the beginning of 2018. Randomly selected 53 participants were asked to indicate their consumption preferences and attitudes towards organic food and agricultural products. In order to make inferences on consumption preferences, personal data including socio-demographics and economic situation of consumers were also collected with the questionnaire implemented. No specific sampling criterion was applied. As the research was conducted to understand main consumption trends, randomly selected participants were asked to indicate their preferences and reasoning behind.

Methodology

The main objective of the study was to evaluate the relationship between consumer preferences for and attitudes on organic consumption and socio demographic features of the consumers. The potential sociological impact induced by social cycles of consumers was demonstrated initially. This encompasses whether the consumer is affected by reference groups. Additionally, the attitudes whether product satisfaction or lifestyle characteristics affect the purchasing decisions were considered. The reflections on available brands or the consumer's attachment to organic products with rising income were part of this research. In addition, the use of existing or potential marketing information tools and their impact on consumers were scaled from the least important (1) to the most important (5) (Likert, 1967) as well to undermine potential marketing policy fields.

These inferences were considered in attachment with social and economic characteristics of the consumers. The relationships were categorised under three groups. These are impact of reference groups, effective economic and market related factors and the need and appreciation of contemporary marketing tools. Chi-Square analysis was used to portray the relationship between the variables within these categories and the correlation levels were checked in order to indicate the direction of the potential relationship. SPSS software was utilised to undertake these analyses.

Correlation of variables needs to be checked specifically for marketing studies in order to understand whether there appears a joint trend between variables. This relationship was measured via Pearson's correlation coefficient, which seeks existence of a linear relationship between variables (Pearson, 1920; Blyth, 1994a). Pearson's correlation coefficient ranges between -1 and +1 and refers to unidirectional or inverse relationship between variables and its effective when used for categorised survey data (Moore and McCabe, 2003; Kurtulus, 1998; Zimmerman, 1994).

Accordingly, the effects of social and economic features of consumers on the above mentioned categories referring to variables included were measured with Chi-Square analysis. Chi-Square testing is an effective tool for measuring the simultaneous effect between categorised characteristics and it is valid in small samples as well (Kurtulus, 1998; Blyth, 1994b). With this methodology, it is possible to correlate factors affecting consumer choices and consumers' characteristics. The main intention was to check relationship between organic product consumption preferences and attitudes with personal characteristics of consumers and market related attributes.

1	There are significant relationships between reference group effects and socio-demographic characteristics of consumers for organic product preferences.
	There are significant relationships between effects of economic factors and market related attitudes

2 and socio-demographic characteristics of consumers for organic product preferences.

3 There are significant relationships between information and marketing tools and socio-demographic characteristics of consumers.

Accordingly, the data was analysed with respect to three categories and personal attributes. The categories refer to the following indicators.

Reference Groups	**:**	Effects of Friends, Family, Co-workers, Social Cycles on organic product preferences
Economic Factors and Market Related Attitudes Of The Consumer	**:**	Effects of Level of Satisfaction, Brand – Image, Occupation, Life-Style, Income – Level, Accepted Premium
Information and Marketing Tools	**:**	Information Necessity, Internet, TV/paper advertisement, Public Information - meeting
Socio-Demographic Characteristics	**:**	Gender, Age, Occupation/Studentship Status, Household Size, Number of People Working in the Household

The expected market effects of these tools and attributes are referred in the marketing literature (Kotler, 1997). The possible effects of the relevant factors and interrelationship of consumer attributes and attitudes leading to consumption decision are demonstrated below.

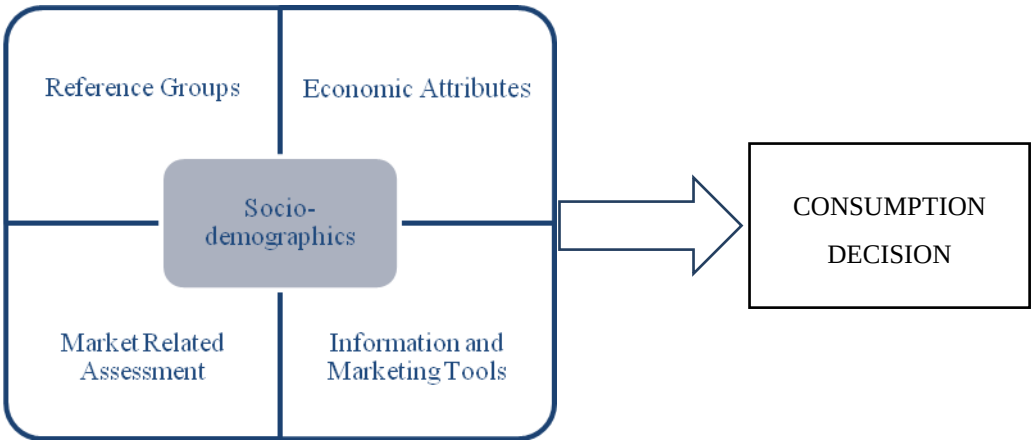

Figure 1. Interrelationship of Consumer Characteristics Leading to Consumption Decision

FINDINGS

Socio-Demographic Findings

Therefore, the relationship between these variables were analysed respecting afore mentioned reference groups, attitudes developed for organic product consumption preferences and informational tools that are utilised or can be utilised to increase market share or organic products. Prior to indicating the statistical findings, the overall characteristics of the target groups should be notified.

The gender distribution of the targeted group is sound with 29 female and 24 male respondents. The age variation within the group refers to density of youth respondents. 72% of the sample was between 20 and 29, 22% was between 30 and 39. The participants above middle ages constituted a smaller share accordingly. The education level of the group was high as well considering the age distribution. 87% of the target group constituted of university graduates, while the rest 13% had a secondary level degree. More than half of the participants were university students and one third of the group was employed. This studentship status refers to above Bachelor's education process, with reference to the graduation level statistics. Accordingly, the reference group assumed to be acknowledged about organic products and evolution of the organic market at least on moderate level.

Another significant characteristic of the participants can be considered as the household size. A priori, crowded families assumed to allocate a relatively smaller share of their budget for high priced products. This can be an indicator for organic product consumption tendency as well. Yet, 28% of the families were composed of 4 members. 23%

respondents were living with 3 companions, either family member or flatmate and the shelter sharing people is more than 5 in 21% of the houses. Number of survey participants living alone was only 4.

Another characteristic that should be notified is the level of income. The participants were asked to indicate their monthly household income with open-ended questions and the average income appeared as 653.33 Euros. In addition, the responses were scaled and demonstrated in Figure 2.

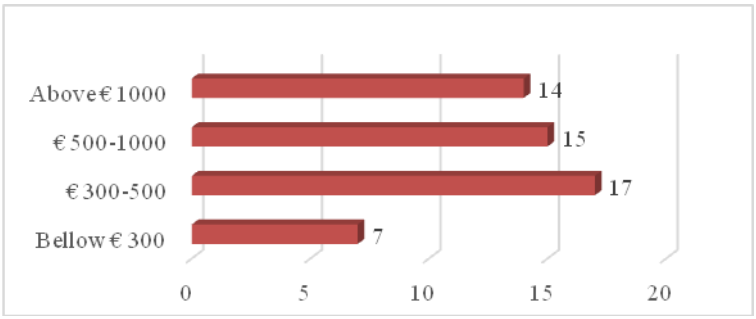

Figure 2. Scaled Income Range

The highest share referred to the persons having monthly income between 300 and 500 Euros with 32.5%. 28% was holding between 500 and 1000 Euros, while the rate is 26%. Considering monthly average per capita GDP for 2017 as 778.47 Euros (Vega-Zamora, et al., 2014) the target group has an average of 84% of the country average.

In addition to these socio-economic indicators, it is worth to notice that all participants had awareness on organic products. The target group was asked to indicate the initial reminder of organic product. 59% of the audience referred as "healthy product", followed by "environmentally-friendly" with 26%. This reference partly confirms with the finding of (Anonymous, 2017) indicating the main motivator of Romanian citizens on organic food consumption is health.

Relationship between Consumer Profile and Organic Consumption Preferences

As mentioned above, the preferential factors were categorised under three titles. Before focusing on the relationship between variables, it is essential to check whether there is an improvement path for the preferences. The average factorial levels were demonstrated in Figure 3. Out of the reference groups, the most effective motivator group is family, as can be expected. Yet the effect of other groups as friends and co-workers can be induced using the interrelated demographic factors.

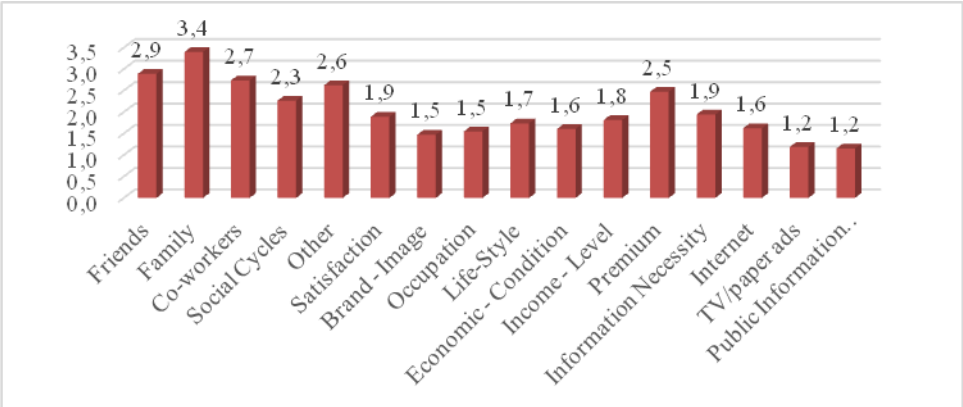

Figure 3. Weight of Preferential Factors Affecting Purchasing Decisions for Organic Products

For the economic condition effects that are expected to lead consumption, it was understood that all have a considerable effect with two scaled responses retrieved. Yet, with increasing income level, it was understood that consumers might accept from 10 to 20% price premium for organic product consumption. This confirms with the indication that most of the consumers have willingness to buy and consume more of organic products if their income rises. However, the conventional marketing tools were appeared as important when 1 to 5 category scale was considered, 1 being "very important".

In order to evaluate whether there is a room for improvement referring to these preferential factors via using socio-demographic characteristics of consumers, it is firstly essential to check the available relationship between variables, considering the direction as well. The Pearson's correlation coefficients retrieved were demonstrated in Table 1. Significant correlations were interpreted afterwards due to their significance level.

Table 1. Linear Correlation between Preferential Factors and Socio-Demographics of Targeted Group

	Gender	**Age**	**Education**	**Studentship**	**Household size**	**No. of Working People**
Friends	-0.062	-0.102	0.128	0.236	0.085	-0.172
	(0.659)	(0.469)	(0.361)	(0.89)	(0.547)	(0.219)
Family	0.041	-0.044	0.112	0.136	0.123	-0.184
	(0.771)	(0.755)	(0.424)	(0.331)	(0.380)	(0.188)
Co-workers	0.039	-0.094	**0.263**	**0.300**	**0.295**	-0.077
	(0.72)	(0.505)	**(0.057)***	**(0.029)****	**(0.032)****	(0.583)
Social Cycles	0.192	0.047	0.042	-0.030	0.177	**-0.235**
	(0.169)	(0.738)	(0.764)	(0.83)	(0.206)	**(0.090)***
Other	**0.289**	0.090	0.057	-0.086	0.151	-0.196
	(0.036)**	(0.521)	(0.684)	(0.54)	(0.280)	(0.159)
Occupation	-0.239	**-0.231**	-0.019	**0.313**	**-0.349**	0.025
	(0.085)	**(0.096)***	(0.893)	**(0.023)****	**(0.010)****	(0.862)
Life-Style	**-0.311**	0.039	-0.107	0.144	-0.161	-0.137
	(0.022)**	(0.783)	(0.444)	(0.303)	(0.261)	(0.329)
Economic -	**-0.271**	**-0.232**	0.140	-0.018	-0.127	-0.143
Condition	**(0.050)****	**(0.094)***	(0.318)	(0.896)	(0.118)	(0.305)
Income - Level	-0.046	0.018	0.097	-0.069	0.102	-0.125
	(0.745)	(0.896)	(0.491)	(0.624)	(0.469)	(0.373)

*significant 90 %; ** significant at 95 %

For ease of understanding, the relationships were classified with regards to individual and social characteristics and market related attitudes. Due to the findings, the impact on female's decision making process is positive from non-classified reference groups referring to membership to non-governmental organisations. Life style conformity and improving economic conditions seemed to affect females inversely. With rising age, it was understood that organic preferences are affected negatively for those who hold a job or who expect a higher income.

With rising education level, people indicated that they become more open to co-workers' suggestions. Co-workers were also effective for people living in crowded houses. Preferences towards organic products were positive for students, who are employed. However, when people live with more of others, their preferences were negatively affected irrespective of the employment status. Subsequently, when the number of people employed in the household rises, the impact of social cycles on preferences seemed to be negative. This means, with more working family members, households become less open to outbound affects.

Table 1. (continues)

	Gender	**Age**	**Education**	**Studentship**	**Household size**	**No. of Working People**
Satisfaction	**-0.273**	0.102	0.037	0.005	-0.147	0.010
	(0.048)**	(0.469)	(0.795)	(0.97)	(0.293)	(0.945)
Brand - Image	-0.100	-0.010	0.145	-0.044	-0.030	**-0.322**
	(0.475)	(0.993)	(0.299)	(0.755)	(0.833)	**(0.019)****
Premium	0.101	0.054	0.027	-0.176	0.177	-0.063
	(0.473)	(0.701)	(0.850)	(0.207)	(0.205)	(0.656)
Information	0.059	0.145	0.146	-0.061	**0.311**	0.007
Necessity	(0.676)	(0.30)	(0.248)	(0.665)	**(0.024)****	(0.963)
Internet	**-0.233**	-0.186	0.156	0.073	-0.216	-0.035
	(0.097)*	(0.183)	(0.264)	(0.603)	(0.120)	(0.806)
TV/paper ads	**0.289**	0.160	-0.097	-0.007	0.264	-0.082
	(0.084)*	(0.254)	(0.491)	(0.959)	(0.057)	(0.560)
Public Information	-0.066	-0.055	-0.147	-0.006	-0.039	0.068
- meeting	(0.639)	(0.694)	(0.294)	(0.964)	(0.783)	0.627

*significant 90 %; ** significant at 95 %

Due to the findings, it was first understood that there is a significant negative relationship between gender and rebuy behaviour after having satisfied with the product and reach via internet media. This means that female consumers were affected inversely by these preferential factors. Yet, the crowded houses consider utilisation of information sources as important and household size affects decision requirement positively. When there were more employed people in the house, brand-image loses its effect in organic preferences.

After evaluation of significance and direction of the linear relationships, the significance of the relationship between preferential factors and categorised demographic variables, referring to the hypotheses mentioned above, were tested by Chi-Square analysis and the findings were indicated in Table 2 and 3. Yet, it is important to note that, there appeared significant relationships for gender and studentship status, while age and income related factors were not found compatible with preferential factors. This is partly compatible with the overall characteristics of the target audience. In addition, the economic interpretation drew upon household size and number of people working in the household.

Table 2. Relationship of Gender and Studentship Status with Preferential Factors

		X^2 - Gender		**X^2 - Studentship**	
		X^2	ρ	**X^2**	ρ
REFERENCE GROUPS	Friends	0.524	0.971	**15.523**	**0.050****
	Family	**7.785**	**0.100***	6.949	0.542
	Co-workers	0.559	0.968	7.774	0.456
	Social Cycles	**8.521**	**0.074***	5.128	0.744
	Other	**14.224**	**0.007*****	11.568	0.172
ECONOMIC AND MARKETING PREFERENCES	Satisfaction	**3.954**	**0.047****	1.561	0.458
	Brand - Image	0.533	0.465	0.305	0.859
	Occupation	**3.015**	**0.083***	**6.045**	**0.049****
	Life-Style	**5.249**	**0.022****	1.846	0.347
	Economic - Condition	**3.878**	**0.049****	0.243	0.885
	Income - Level	0.111	0.739	3.421	0.181
	Premium	1.572	0.456	1.720	0.787
INFORMATION TOOLS	Information Necessity	0.183	0.669		
	Internet	**2.808**	**0.094***		
	TV/paper ads	**3.039**	**0.081***		
	Public Information - meeting	2.30	0.63		

*, Significant at 90%; **, Significant at 95%; ***, Significant at 99%

Table 3. Relationship of Household Characteristics with Preferential Factors

		X^2 – Household Size		**X^2 – No. of Working People**	
		X^2	ρ	**X^2**	ρ
REFERENCE GROUPS	Friends			5.251	0.262
	Family			4.382	0.357
	Co-workers			**7.972**	**0.093***
	Social Cycles			4.837	0.304
	Other			7.266	0.122
ECONOMIC AND MARKETING PREFERENCES	Satisfaction	6.651	0.248	0.005	0.944
	Brand - Image	2.462	0.782	**5.508**	**0.019****
	Occupation	**20.230**	**0.001*****	0.032	0.858
	Life-Style	2.520	0.774	0.990	0.320
	Economic - Condition	6.690	0.245	1.091	0.296
	Income - Level	5.401	0.369	0.825	0.364
	Premium	**21.393**	**0.019****	0.967	0.616
INFORMATION TOOLS	Information Necessity	**16.795**	**0.005*****		
	Internet	4.578	0.470		
	TV/paper ads	4.887	0.430		
	Public Information - meeting	1.821	0.873		

*, Significant at 90%; **, Significant at 95%; ***, Significant at 99%

Reference Group Relationships

Family suggestions and social cycles surrounding as neighbours were effective for female participants more than male participants with 90% of significance. Surprisingly, the impact of membership to non-categorised social groups, as non-governmental organisations was considerably higher for female consumers with 99% significance.

For those, who were students, suggestions of friends were significantly effective in organic product preferences and impact was positive. In addition, while household size is not effective for organic preferences in relationship with reference groups, number of households occupied affect the decision making process. If there are more employed people sharing the same house, directions of co-workers became more effective in preferring organic products.

Economic Conditions and Marketing Preferences

In the second phase, the impact of categorised socio-demographic variables on preferences related with economic and market related factors were interpreted. It was understood that female participants valued employment situation's effect on directing their positive preferences with 90% more than males. However, rising income level, altering economic conditions and improving lifestyle perceptions seemed to affect preferences towards organic products. Yet, the negative correlation between these variables, referred in Table 1, leads us to conclude that females' organic product preferences are weaker for altering economic and market related conditions than males.

For those, who were students, employment status affects preferences positively. In other words, students holding jobs would have a positive perception towards organic products. For more crowded houses, having employed positively affected the preferential status and when there are more employed people in the household, brand-image and how organic products have been marketed became prevalent factors affecting preferences. Even though, there appeared a weak linear relationship, the effect of premium price acceptance was high for crowded households, when it was attached with more income brought in the house.

Information and Marketing Tools

Finally, marketing policy tools and their impact on preferences of surveyed individuals is far more the most significant evaluation aspect of our study. In this respect, for households with more members, reach of information was rather effective with 99% of significance as word-of-mouth is important in direction consumer behaviours.

Besides, promotion tools as use of newspaper ads and internet is effective for females with 90%. Yet, considering the directional impact, it can be noted that female attendants preferences get affected by printed media positively and online media negatively. This can be attributed to more printed media reach to females as the target group declared that they follow periodicals at least occasionally focusing on fashion and consumption trends. However, it was understood that for more working people in the same house, the media tools were not significant for rising preferences. This can be understood residing on the impact of co-worker suggestions and in-house attitudinal directions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within this research, the main objective was to understand the effects over organic product preferences respecting a randomly selected sample from Timisoara province of Romania. The potential effects of reference groups, economic and market related factors and contemporary marketing tools in relation with demographic, social and economic characteristics of surveyed 53 individuals. The linear correlation of the effective factors with personal features and degree of association was measured with Chi-Square testing, which can provide insights even from small samples.

The outputs retrieved from the considerably young aged and educated group set forward that reference group effects vary depending on the individual characteristics. While females were affected more from family members and membership to non-governmental organisations positively, students were affected from their friends' suggestions and individuals having more employed family members or flatmates declared that they were motivated by co-workers. Rebuy decision after having satisfied or correlation between higher income expectations and lifestyle changes seemed to affect female participants' preferences negatively. However, for employed people, brand-image was less important than reference group suggestions. The significant finding for students was their rising preferences depending on occupational expectations.

Females who indicated that they were following at least periodicals seemed to be motivated by paper ads rather than online promotions in contrast to males. Yet, rising household size induced a need for further information.

These findings indicated that, reference group impact for organic product preferences is highly acknowledged by the target audience. However, there appeared a need for alternative marketing tool development for increasing market stance of organic products, as the only positive effect was set forward with regards to conventional promotion tools' directive role for female participants. Accordingly, as people mostly declared and emphasized the need for more information, market entry and saturation efforts should focus more on non-conventional modifications.

Considering the age and educational orientation of this sample, motivating demand, which would lead to development of supply and increased agricultural value added, present situations and preferences of people should be watched up continuously. Besides, rising income, changing lifestyles and rising awareness are assumed to effect demand of the young population and marketing efforts should be driven on these direction.

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