

Consumers' perceptions of organic foods in Bulgaria: evidence from semantic differentials application

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Abstract

The article aims to present consumers' perception of Bulgarian organic foods (Bulgarian yoghurt case) by applying the method of semantic differentials. The empirical study is framed by the focus-groups and semantic differential approaches. The first stage of the survey in 5 sessions was carried out in Sofia and Plovdiv. The second stage of the study tests the consumers' perception of quality and safety attributes of Bulgarian yoghurt by the semantic differential method. Principal component analysis with varimax rotations extracted six factors for these results and each of them groups around it specific descriptors of the bipolar scales used in the study. The interpretation of the importance of the factors is done by clarifying the semantic relations between the underlying descriptors.

Introduction

The main tendency for most countries in Central and Eastern Europe is their organic production to be developed mainly for the purpose of export. This leads to the impossibility for organic products to be adapted to the local market. The solution to this is the quick development and expansion of the domestic market for organic agricultural products and foods. Although the share of organic food products in the general food market in Bulgaria is relatively small - less than 5%, the organic market enlarged significantly in the last few years.

In order to promote marketing possibilities for organic foods, it is important to understand consumer motivations in the purchase of organic foods (Magnusson et al. 2003, Thogersen 2009, Zanolini and Naspetti 2002).

The article aims to present consumers' perception of Bulgarian organic foods (Bulgarian yoghurt case) by applying the method of semantic differential.

Material and methods

Choice of organic food product for the purpose of the study

The country is known around the world with Bulgarian yogurt. The presence of the bacterium *Lactobacillus Bulgaricum* guarantees its unique nutritional properties. Bulgarian consumer is familiar with yogurt from a very early age. This allows for a much better appreciation and completeness in describing this product typical for the country. It is important to note that the variety of organic food offered in the Bulgarian market is not great. Based on the above considerations, certified organic yogurt was selected as the object of the study.

Questionnaire

The survey was conducted using a preliminary prepared questionnaire. Focus group discussions preceding this study helped to formulate the main questions of the study (Vasileva et al. 2009). On this basis, a set of descriptors that characterize organic yogurt were determined, 24 of which were included in the bipolar scales of the semantic differential. Part of the questionnaire has the form of an interview with closed questions conducted by the interviewers. The rest, laid out on separate sheets for convenience, is completed by the respondents independently. The aim is to avoid discussing questions in the interview which could cause discomfort - personal information and such requiring concentration (e.g. semantic differential) from the respondents.

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The questions were grouped as follows: a) basic closed questions on the topic; b) questions of the semantic differential (24 bipolar descriptors for organic and conventional yogurt); c) questions describing participants.

Date collection

The empirical study is framed by the focus-groups and semantic differential approaches. The first stage of the survey (5 sessions) was carried out in the towns with the most developed markets of organic foods in the country - Sofia and Plovdiv They were conducted in the period May – June 2009. A total number of 46 people participated in the focus-groups. The second stage of the study tests the consumers' perception of Bulgarian yoghurt by the semantic differential method. Data was collected during April and May 2011 in Sofia. The target population of 84 Bulgarians included consumers who are knowledgeable about organic foods and regularly buy organic yogurt. All participants in the study were clients of the shop "Elemag - gourmet" who have bought organic yogurt. Later, when invited, they have expressed a desire to participate in the study.

Data analysis

To the answers of the participants in the focus groups was applied content analysis, which resulted in a series of descriptors characterizing organic yogurt. The research team limited them to 24 items which were included in the bipolar semantic differential scales. Descriptive statistical analysis is used in the study. Principal component analysis with varimax rotations was applied to the results obtained after using the semantic differential. The software used for the quantitative analyses was SPSS 21 for Windows.

Results

The largest percentage of consumers (29.8%) buys organic products because they hold the view that these products are associated with healthy lifestyle and good health status. Very often, curiosity (interest) in the new product (about 16.7% of the respondents) and recommendation from friends (about 8.3% of the respondents) are indicated as the reason for the purchase. The participants in the study appreciate highly the taste (4.8%), purity (6.0%), organic aspect (7.1%), quality (3.6%) and origin (3.6%) of the products.

The results of the application of the semantic differential for organic and conventional yogurt among Bulgarian consumers describe two separate graphs for the studied products. Principal component analysis with varimax rotations extracted six factors for these results and each of them groups around it specific descriptors of the bipolar scales used in the study. They are used to build the picture of the perceptions of the respondents regarding the quality and safety of the studied products. The interpretation of the importance of the factors is done by clarifying the semantic relations between the underlying descriptors.

The first factor contains the poles "necessary - excessive", "pleasure - displeasure," "happy - sad", "tangible - intangible", "attractive - unattractive" and "practical - impractical." Provisionally we can call this factor "Ability to derive pleasure without difficulty". The emphasis on the possible difficulties is placed because the descriptor "practical" was indicated in this group. In the perceptions of the respondents organic products bring joy and pleasure to the senses, without the need to apply complex preparations, difficult culinary treatments and so on.

The second factor is derived from the adjective "controlled - uncontrolled", "toxic – non-toxic", "polluted - unpolluted", "recyclable - non-recyclable" and "obsolete - contemporary". Putting control in the centre of this set of descriptors by the respondents indicates another of their key beliefs: in modern day conditions the certainty that a product is not dangerous and does not endanger the health of the consumer and others stems from adequate control measures. In the past, it might not be necessary, but in the modern ways of marketing it is required.

The third factor groups the adjectives "risk – trust", "light - heavy", "artificial - natural" and "delicious - tasteless". It cannot be distinguished from the first two factors, if interpreted out of their context. It reflects the confidence of consumers that they are able through their senses to experience artificial or untypical additives. The key features here are trust and perceptions of taste. Apparently respondents, as evidenced by the first factor, tend to rely on the experience gained from the use of these products. However the higher significance they give to the second factor, suggests that this happens only after ensured control (certification). Within this category of guaranteed controlled products the taste, the smell, the feeling of lightness, freshness, etc. will influence the final choice.

The fourth factor includes only three polar elements: "genuine – fake", "harmless - harmful" and "Bulgarian - foreign". The focus on identity is strongly manifested and should be placed in the centre. They connect the descriptors of that identity, that is, what they think is typical for Bulgarian products. Apparently, according to

the participants of the survey organic products are truly "Bulgarian and harmless". Respondents distinguish between non-toxic (proven to not contain poisons) and harmless, i.e. unable to cause harm in any way.

The fifth factor contains only the adjectives "homemade - industrial" and "rural - urban". The connections in this case are direct and obvious. Industrial and urban are related concepts to such an extent that in certain cases they can be used as synonyms. Organic products in the perception of the respondent are typically rural and far from their understanding of industry.

The sixth factor unites the adjectives "high tech - low-tech" and "prestigious - non-prestigious". At first glance, there is contradiction with the previous - organic product is not industrial but are highly technological. The explanation is in the meaning implied in the concepts. Industrial is associated not with the technologies but with the quantity (mass) of produced products. For the respondents high technologies are obviously information technologies, biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, etc. The relationship between high technologies and prestige is logical. Consumer expectations are organic products to be produced in small quantities in small businesses or farms following classical and traditional recipes or approaches but using high technologies. According to them, the process is that of the home made and rural product but in conditions of high hygiene and control, impossible without the use of high technologies.

Discussion

Bulgarian consumers purchase organic products because they differ from the conventional in taste, smell, texture, etc. When developing marketing strategies for launching organic yogurt on the market the fact that Bulgarians distinguish organic yogurt from its conventional counterparts by sensory characteristics (delicious and genuine) and with guaranteed control and safety (safe, non-toxic, controlled) should also be taken into account. Interesting for the marketing of organic yogurt is the relationship between "experiencing pleasure" and "maintaining a healthy lifestyle". Probably a new group of consumers is formed which simultaneously combines the gourmet and the person who tries to eat healthily. Consumer expectations are organic products to be made following traditional recipes and traditional production processes, but by using high technologies which ensure hygiene and proper functioning of the processes.

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