Emerging trends in food consumer behavior in Romania: A PLS-SEM approach

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Abstract: *The agri-food market is in constant flux, influenced by economic, social, and technological factors, as well as recent challenges such as economic and health crises. In this context, consumer behavior adjusts dynamically under the influence of needs, desires, and environmental factors, aligning with market demands and conditions. The proposed research focuses on emerging trends in food consumer behavior in Romania, emphasizing the determinants of economic decision-making. To this end, data was collected through a questionnaire and processed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), revealing the role of key factors shaping consumer behavior. The study identified two major categories of influential factors in food consumption within the Romanian market: determining factors (age, gender, income, and education) and sensitive factors (consumer psychology and market characteristics). These factors contribute to the development of behaviors aimed at saving, responsible consumption, and a healthy lifestyle. Based on the research findings, the study proposes measures to support responsible consumption and facilitate decision-making processes, considering the shared interests of consumers and retailers in adapting to current market trends.*

Keywords: *Food preferences, motivational factors, planned behavior, unplanned behavior, responsible consumption, Romania.*

JEL Classification: *E21, E27, R20, R22, Q18.*

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Introduction

The global macroeconomic and geopolitical context that has recently impacted the Romanian economy has also left its mark on the development of the food market and, implicitly, the entire food supply chain. Under these circumstances, markets are constantly undergoing change and adaptation, driven by socio-economic development, increasing consumer demands, technological innovations,

diversification of commercial activities, the rise of digitalization, as well as economic and health crises (Chivu et al., 2020).

As a result, consumers today shape their behavior under the influence of desires, needs, and factors that their purchasing and food consumption decisions. The buying and consumption behavior of individuals evolves under the cumulative impact of these factors to better meet demands and adapt to market conditions in general.

Starting from these considerations, the aim of this paper is to highlight the existence of certain purchasing and consumption habits that influence choices and alter consumer behavior, as well as the potential emergence of specific consumption patterns that shape the development of the entire food supply chain and offer new business models. In this context, consumer behavior undergoes multiple transformations, evolving from a simple model focused on meeting specific needs and rationality to a complex behavior influenced by emotions, experiences, lifestyle, and values.

The study seeks to establish a correlation between programmed and unprogrammed consumer behavior by analyzing the relationship between needs and rationality versus emotions and experiences. The importance of the study lies in presenting the main consumption patterns observed in the post-pandemic era, patterns that reveal adaptation and change across the entire food supply chain. These patterns emerge in a period of unpredictable and rapid changes, where societal and global values are constantly shifting, presenting challenges for each consumer's social existence.

The research highlights the existence of certain purchasing and consumption patterns that have become established in recent times. These patterns can be categorized as either programmed and conditioned behaviors that respond to specific consumer needs or unprogrammed and unconditioned behaviors influenced by sensations and emotions. It proposes aligning with a particular economic or psychological consumption model, and these patterns reveal how consumers are influenced by their social environment, time, past experiences, or the adoption of a particular lifestyle.

The research is logically and coherently structured, presenting the theoretical framework of the paper based on the analysis of the specialized literature and grounded in the objectives and hypotheses formulated in the introductory section.

Subsequently, the review of the literature and the research methodology are presented, forming the basis for the results, discussions, and conclusions, which synthesize the significance of the analyses conducted. Additionally, the paper highlights the limitations of the research and the potential avenues for its further expansion.

1 Theoretical background

Romanian consumers have recently shown an increasing interest in healthy and high-quality food. Pop (2022) analyzed consumer behavior in the nut market, highlighting the preference for products perceived as beneficial to health, especially among the urban population. Similarly, related studies indicate that health concerns are correlated with growing interest in organically certified products (Stanciu, 2022).

Nutritional imbalances remain a significant issue among the younger generation in Romania. Popescu et al. (2015) emphasized the tendency of young people to adopt unhealthy eating habits, influenced by a hectic lifestyle and the accessibility of fast-food products. The authors suggest that educational interventions are essential for changing this behavior.

In her doctoral research on consumer behavior regarding Romanian vegetables, Sanda (2016) examined the phenomenon of ethnocentrism and its influence on vegetable purchasing behavior in Romania. A high level of ethnocentrism within a population favors domestic products over imports, and understanding this level can help establish effective strategies to promote Romanian vegetables. After 26 years of transition to a market economy, the domestic population has reached an intermediate stage, where nationalist motives increasingly dominate the food purchase process.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to food behavior. According to a study by Stanciu et al. (2020), Romanians became more mindful of food expenses, opting for well-known brands and products considered healthy. The pandemic also accelerated the digitization of the food purchasing process, a phenomenon observed in other regional countries. During lockdowns, Romanians rediscovered an interest in organic or at least natural foods, avoiding food waste, and showing greater environmental concern.

A study on Romanian consumer behavior during the pandemic by Mureșan et al. (2022) found that women were more concerned with socio-economic aspects and food waste compared to men. At the same time, older individuals were more focused on eco-friendly, socio-economic, and health-related food characteristics compared to younger groups. Entrepreneurs interested in developing social enterprises that provide food-related goods and services to vulnerable populations must also consider food consumer behavior, especially among disadvantaged groups or those with special needs.

A study by MKOR Consulting (2022) shows that interest in sustainable and ethical products is growing, especially among younger consumers. Consumers are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of food products, with brands adopting sustainable practices gaining popularity.

A report by ANSVSA and INSP (2019) highlighted Romanian dietary preferences and consumption habits, providing a detailed perspective on meat, dairy, and vegetable consumption. The study also emphasizes how rising incomes influence dietary diversification. An interesting trend regarding consumer perceptions of organic versus traditional products was noted by Feldmann and Ham (2015). Compared to organic foods, local foods are not perceived as expensive. However, consumers are willing to pay a premium for local foods. The authors' predominantly quantitative research assessed consumer characteristics, attitudes, and purchasing behaviors regarding local foods.

Steenkamp (1997) remarked that food occupies an essential place in consumers' lives, serving as a source of nutrients and hedonic experiences. Food fulfils social and cultural functions and represents a significant part of consumer expenditure. However, consumer behavior related to food has not attracted systematic research due to the complexity and diversity of influences involved in food choice and consumption. Such research also requires knowledge and perspectives from a wide range of scientific and social science disciplines, including food science, nutrition, medicine, psychology, physiology, psychophysics, sociology, economics, marketing, and anthropology.

The added value and perceived quality of food along the agri-food value chain depend on both market demand and consumer preferences. In highly digitalized societies, social networks can play an important role in redefining the quality and value of food products. From this perspective, the impact of social media platforms, especially Facebook, can be significant for the sustainability of food consumption (Constantin et al., 2021).

Makowska et al. (2024) conducted a study on Polish consumers across Baby Boomers, X, Y, and Z generations. Key factors in food selection among Polish consumers include product quality, price, and nutritional information. Older generations (Baby Boomers and Generation X) prioritized food quality, while younger generations (Generation Y and Z) emphasized price. The research revealed statistically significant differences between generations regarding the product's country of origin, with older generations placing greater importance on this aspect. The oldest group (Baby Boomers) considered ecological certification the most important. Over 85% of Poles check product expiration dates while shopping, and 82.8% buy only the quantities they need. Baby Boomers are considered the most responsible of all generations.

Research objectives:

RO1: Analysis of food consumption in relation to situational influences that determine consumer decisions and choices.

RO2: Highlighting specific consumption patterns observed in the current stage of the food market.

RO3: Presenting practical solutions for the development of the food system and the modelling of commercial businesses.

Working hypotheses:

H1: The impact of demographic factors on planned behavior.

H2: The impact of demographic factors on unplanned behavior.

H3: The impact of demographic factors on responsible consumption.

H4: The impact of demographic factors on food safety.

H5: The impact of experiential consumption and information sources on consumption.

2 Research methodology

2.1 Research design

The aim of this research was to highlight the presence of specific consumption patterns

within the food market, patterns developed because of the impact of demographic, economic, social, and psychological factors. To achieve this aim, a survey was designed based on a review of the specialized literature, using a questionnaire with 35 questions as the primary research instrument.

The structure of the questionnaire and variable selection followed general recommendations for multivariate research designs (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The questionnaire was administered between March and June 2024 and distributed online via Google Forms, institutional email, or Microsoft Teams to groups of students, pupils, and other trainees participating in various institutional training programs. A total of 417 responses were validated.

The questionnaire was structured with items measured on a 5-point Likert scale and included multiple scales specific to the variables of this research. The collected data were processed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), a method considered suitable due to its ability to simultaneously analyze multiple independent and dependent variables, test mediation relationships, handle relatively small sample sizes, and address multicollinearity issues. This approach aligns with the methodological principles for multivariate analysis outlined by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013).

Consumer behavior was analyzed through the lens of the motives driving specific consumption behaviors (whether conditioned or unconditioned) as well as the factors influencing choices at a given moment, including personal, psychological, situational factors, or those related to the marketing mix. Analyzing consumer behavior and identifying trends in the purchasing process allows for the identification of specific consumption patterns based on these factors.

2.2 Definitions and measurements

Programmed behavior (PB). Programmed behavior is the behavior that is always related to a specific situation or context. Certain situational influences arise from factors independent of the consumer or the necessity of purchasing specific goods. Programmed behavior is motivated and conscious behavior that addresses consumer needs. This type of behavior reflects a specific way of acting, shaped by prior learning, and represents a behavioral pattern formed over time. The questionnaire items analyzed highlight the existence of intentionality focused on aspects such as avoiding consumerism tendencies and filtering impulses for excessive consumption.

The statements used to describe these aspects of rationality in consumer choices cantered on creating a shopping list (PB1), purchasing high-quality goods (PB2), meal planning (PB3), cooking meals based on needs (PB4), avoiding food waste (PB5), reasons strictly related to the necessity of purchases (PB6), and price (PB7). The research employed a Likert scale, with evaluations ranging from “to a very small extent (1)” to “to a very large extent (5).”

Unprogrammed behavior (UB). Unprogrammed behavior is when some consumers are socially oriented, focusing on others’ opinions and recommendations, while others are driven primarily by their emotions and impulses. Generally, unprogrammed behavior is unconditioned and involuntary, influenced by emotional factors, moods, and personal needs that are explainable. The explanation and analysis of unprogrammed consumer behavior were based on items describing impulsive purchases or previous experiences. Response statements included factors such as brand (UB4), warranty (UB5), product availability (UB6), intrinsic characteristics (UB7), design (UB8), packaging (UB9), shelf arrangement (UB1), the importance of a purchase (UB2), and perceived utility (UB3).

Responsible consumption (RC). Responsible consumption corresponds to a sociocultural model influenced by social norms and involves adopting a healthy and sustainable lifestyle driven by social pressures. Considering that responsible consumption reflects altruistic behavior, emphasizing awareness of the impact of dietary habits and strictly necessary purchases, the analysis included questionnaire items representing consumer orientation towards saving rather than consuming.

The responses highlighted the importance consumers place on the following aspects: avoiding food waste (RC8, corresponding to PB5), purchasing quality goods (RC5, corresponding to PB2), meal planning (RC6, corresponding to PB3), cooking within necessity limits (RC7, corresponding to PB4), creating a shopping list (RC4, corresponding to PB1), prioritizing consumption decisions (RC1), available income (RC2), and price levels (RC3).

The connection between responsible consumption and programmed behavior is defined by addressing specific needs at a given moment.

Food safety (FS). Food safety is an essential criterion in the choice of food products, alongside price and taste. Given the omnipresent concerns of Romanians regarding safe purchases for health and nutrition, the questionnaire included items addressing these aspects. The elements analyzed included brand (FS9, corresponding to UB4), warranty (FS8, corresponding to UB5), product availability (FS7, corresponding to UB6), product characteristics (FS6, corresponding to UB7), ingredients (FS3), design (FS5, corresponding to UB8), packaging (FS4, corresponding to UB9), product traceability (origin and provenance – FS1, sustainability certifications – FS2), as well as labelling and ingredients (FS10). The connection between food safety and unprogrammed behavior is explained by previous shopping experiences.

3 Results and discussion

The characteristics of the respondents are presented in Tab. 1. Most respondents are female, representing a significant proportion of 58.5%. Additionally, most respondents are aged between 31 and 55 years, representing the adult group, which accounts for 42% of the sample.

Tab. 1: Characteristics of respondents

Categories	Description	Frequency	
		Total	Percent (%)
Sex	Male	173	41.5
	Female	244	58.5
Age	Youth (18–31 years)	166	39.8
	Adults (31–55 years)	175	42.0
	Elderly (over 55 years)	76	18.2
Studies	High school education	217	52.0
	Bachelor's degree	129	30.9
	Master's degree	62	14.9
	Doctorate	9	2.2
Income (EUR)	Below 400	80	19.2
	400–800	201	48.2
	800–1,200	100	24.0
	Over 1,200	36	8.6

Source: own

Regarding education, the largest share of respondents has completed high school, making up 52% of the total. In terms of income level, the largest segment of respondents, representing 48.2%, corresponds to those earning between EUR 400 and EUR 800.

3.1 Descriptive statistics

The results of the descriptive statistics are presented in Tab. 2 and include the values for the mean, standard deviation, median, and mode.

3.2 Structural model analysis

The relationship between the measurement indicators and the construct was evaluated through the measurement model analysis, which included the assessment of their reliability and validity (Tab. 3).

Additionally, the analysis examined the reliability of the items and constructs, as well as the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. To assess the reliability and convergent validity of the construct, Cronbach's alpha coefficient, composite reliability (CR),

Tab. 2: Descriptive statistics

Constructor		Mean	Category	
Programmed behavior		3.5	To a small extent	
Unprogrammed behavior		3.2	To a moderate extent	
Responsible consumption		3.5	To a small extent	
Food safety		3.2	To a moderate extent	
Item	**Mean**	**Median**	**Mode**	**SD**
PB1	3.4	3.0	5	1.4
PB2	3.4	4.0	4	1.1
PB3	3.3	3.0	4	1.2
PB4	3.5	4.0	4	1.2
PB5	3.6	4.0	4	1.2
PB6	3.6	4.0	5	1.3
PB7	3.7	4.0	4	1.1
UB1	3.2	3.0	3	1.1
UB2	3.0	3.0	3	1.1
UB3	3.1	3.0	3	1.1
UB4	3.2	3.0	3	1.1
UB5	3.1	3.0	3	1.1
UB6	3.1	3.0	4	1.1
UB7	2.8	3.0	4	1.2
UB8	3.5	4.0	4	1.1
UB9	3.5	4.0	4	1.0
RC1	3.6	4.0	5	1.3
RC2	3.7	4.0	4	1.1
RC3	3.8	4.0	4	1.1
FS1	3.0	3.0	3	1.3
FS2	3.0	3.0	3	1.1
FS3	3.7	4.0	4	1.1
FS4	3.5	4.0	3	1.1

Note: The response mean criterion: (1) 1.00 < a < 1.79: to a very small extent, (2) 1.80 < a < 2.59: to a small extent, (3) 2.60 < a < 3.39: to a moderate extent, (4) 3.40 < a < 4.19: to a large extent, (5) 4.20 < a < 5.00: to a very large extent. PB – programmed behavior; UB – unprogrammed behavior; RC – responsible consumption; FS – food safety.

Source: own

and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated. All results obtained for the analysed factors indicate excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.800, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) calculated for all factors is above 0.900, suggesting high reliability according to the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010).

Convergent validity was verified by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE),

Tab. 3: Assessment of model reliability and validity

Construct	Loading
Programmed behavior (Cronbach's alpha = 0.870; CR = 0.940; AVE = 0.566)	
PB1	0.796
PB2	0.725
PB3	0.769
PB4	0.826
PB5	0.779
PB6	0.729
PB7	0.624
Unprogrammed behavior (Cronbach's alpha = 0.815; CR = 0.937; AVE = 0.510)	
UB1	0.706
UB2	0.723
UB3	0.686
UB4	0.714
UB5	0.714
UB6	0.642
UB7	0.692
UB8	0.762
UB9	0.774
Responsible consumption (Cronbach's alpha = 0.868; CR = 0.937; AVE = 0.521)	
RC1	0.796
RC2	0.713
RC3	0.718
RC4	0.780
RC5	0.744
RC6	0.707
RC7	0.666
RC8	0.637
Food safety (Cronbach's alpha = 0.824; CR = 0.937; AVE = 0.521)	
FS1	0.692
FS2	0.728
FS3	0.642
FS4	0.706
FS5	0.693
FS6	0.717
FS7	0.706
FS8	0.815
FS9	0.715
FS10	0.721

Note: CR – composite reliability; AVE – average variance extracted.

Source: own

which exceeded 0.5. Since the threshold of 0.5 proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) is surpassed, this indicates that the construct explains an adequate proportion of the variance in its items. In conclusion, the results support the reliability and convergent validity of the construct used in this study.

Discriminant validity needs to be verified to ensure that a construct has greater variance with its own measures compared to other constructs. To pass this test, the square root of AVE must be greater than the correlation between the construct and any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results in Tab. 4 demonstrate that discriminant validity is met, and thus it can be concluded that the model satisfies the requirements for reliability and validity. Discriminant validity needs to be verified to ensure that a construct has greater variance with its own measures compared to other constructs.

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Tab. 4: Assessment of discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)

	Programmed behavior	Unprogrammed behavior	Responsible consumption	Food safety
Programmed behavior	0.752	0.316	0.366	0.620
Unprogrammed behavior	0.316	0.714	0.676	0.311
Responsible consumption	0.366	0.676	0.722	0.368
Food safety	0.620	0.311	0.368	0.722

Source: own

Tab. 5: Summary of the structural model analysis

Hypothesis			Coeficient β	*p*-value	Decision
Programmed behavior	<---	**Age**	0.163	0.006	*H1* is validated
Programmed behavior	<---	**Sex**	0.172	0.049	*H1* is validated
Unprogrammed behavior	<---	**Age**	0.105	0.006	*H2* is validated
Unprogrammed behavior	<---	**Sex**	−0.061	0.259	*H2* is not validated
Food safety	<---	**Studies**	−0.068	0.105	*H4* is not validated
Food safety	<---	**Income**	−0.133	0.000	*H4* is validated
Food safety	<---	**Age**	−0.089	0.054	*H4* is validated
Food safety	<---	**Sex**	0.034	0.618	*H4* is not validated
Programmed behavior	<---	**Studies**	−0.090	0.094	*H1* is not validated
Programmed behavior	<---	**Income**	−0.016	0.748	*H1* is not validated
Responsible consumption	<---	**Studies**	−0.035	0.573	*H3* is not validated
Unprogrammed behavior	<---	**Income**	−0.051	0.100	*H2* is not validated
Unprogrammed behavior	<---	**Studies**	−0.013	0.694	*H2* is not validated
Responsible consumption	<---	**Sex**	−0.037	0.715	*H3* is not validated
Responsible consumption	<---	**Age**	0.224	0.001	*H3* is validated
Responsible consumption	<---	**Income**	0.009	0.880	*H3* is not validated

Source: own

3.3 Structural model analysis

To test the hypotheses, a structural model analysis was performed. This model was used to determine the effect of demographic variables on different types of consumer behavior. Tab. 5 summarizes the analysis conducted through the structural model.

The structural model allowed for the delineation of the two consumption patterns: adopting responsible consumption and prioritizing food safety through the purchase of health-safe goods. The results highlight the alignment of each consumption pattern with a specific behavior observed in the food market, whether it involves programmed or unprogrammed behavior, conscious or less conscious actions, and motivated or unmotivated choices.

Tab. 5 validates or invalidates the formulated hypotheses in relation to the demographic factors analysed. Within the scope of the research, the age of respondents emerged as the relevant factor that can trigger or influence a particular behavior or consumption pattern. This finding reflects the constant pressure consumers face in balancing the interplay between needs and rationality versus emotions and experiences.

The model was estimated using structural equation modelling based on the partial least squares method in SmartPLS 4.0 (Fig. 1). The schematic representation succinctly illustrates the relationships between programmed or unprogrammed behavior and the two consumption patterns: responsible consumption and consumption driven by interest in food safety.

In the food market, consumers can adopt complex purchasing behaviours, including habitual behaviours based on past experiences, or behaviours focused on diversity and the desire to try something new and gain a specific experience.

Alternatively, they may exhibit impulsive, unplanned behaviours influenced by emotions or moods. This context encompasses both programmed and unprogrammed behaviours. To analyse these dynamics, three hypotheses were formulated to assess whether the two factors (experimental consumption and information sources) impact consumer preferences.

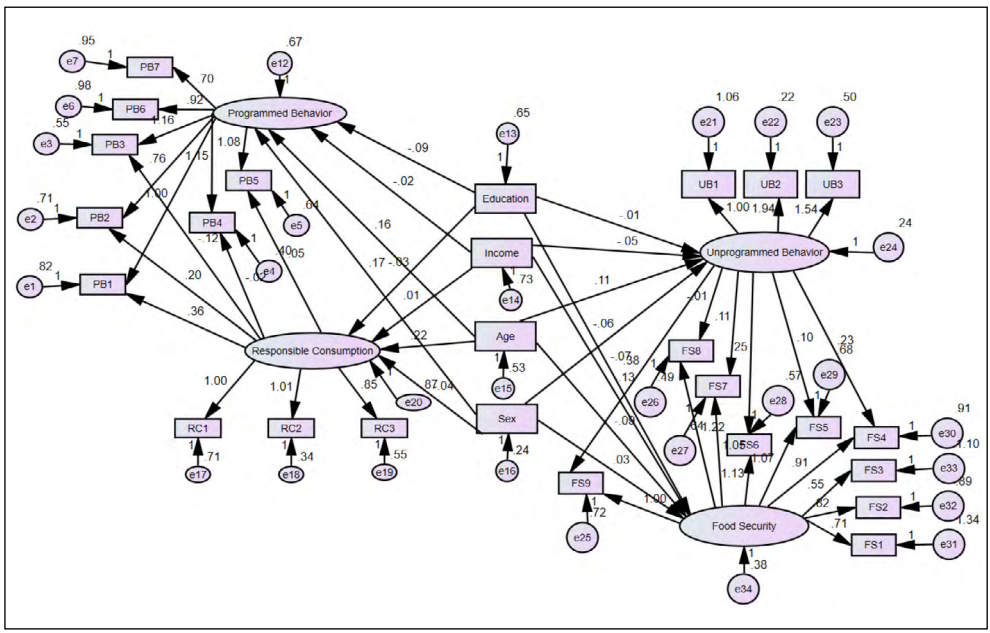

Fig. 1: Structural model of consumer behavior

Source: own

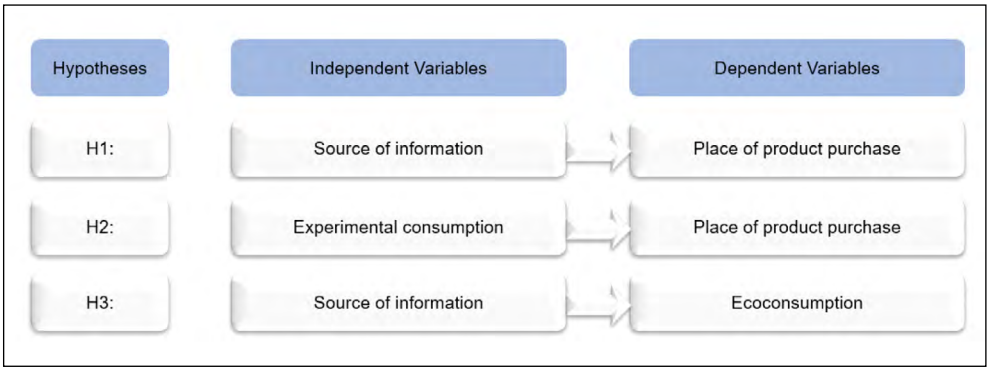

Fig. 2: Hypotheses proposed

Source: own research

Information sources are directly linked to the place of product purchase. Experimental consumption depends on the location of product acquisition. Information sources influence eco-consumerism among consumers. These hypotheses are summarized in Fig. 2.

H1: The impact of demographic factors on programmed behavior.

The first hypothesis focuses on the influence of demographic factors on programmed behavior, which is primarily driven by a specific consumer need. The analysis highlights two key findings: programmed behavior is positively influenced by both age and gender, while income and education do not play a role in decisions related to food product choices. Programmed behavior, being conscious and motivated, is shaped by prior learning. Age emerges as a relevant factor, as purchasing decisions increasingly rely on personal experiences, voluntary mechanisms, and rationality as consumers grow older. Similarly, gender plays a significant role, with women forming the predominant purchasing segment in Romanian households. Income and education are not major factors in programmed purchasing decisions, as these are cantered on rationality and immediate needs. Additionally, previous experiences heavily influence preferences and purchasing behavior.

The hypothesis was validated by the study.

H2: The impact of demographic factors on unprogrammed behavior.

The second hypothesis reveals that unprogrammed behavior is positively influenced by age, while gender, income, and education do not significantly impact such behavior. A plausible explanation is that age increases the likelihood of impulsive purchases driven by emotions, moods, and a desire for novel experiences. However, gender, income, and education are not practical determinants in impulsive purchases, which characterize unprogrammed behavior.

The hypothesis was validated by the study.

H3: The impact of demographic factors on responsible consumption.

The third hypothesis aims to identify determinants in the manifestation of a responsible consumption pattern, shaped by recent shifts in consumer attitudes. The results show that age positively influences responsible consumption, while gender, education, and income have no significant impact. Responsible consumption, focused on saving rather than consumerism, develops over time, with age being a key criterion. The hypothesis highlights segments of consumers who avoid food waste, make shopping lists, and prefer quality goods and local products, often driven by experience and time.

The hypothesis was validated by the study.

H4: The impact of demographic factors on food safety.

The fourth hypothesis expresses consumers' concerns about food safety under the influence of demographic factors. The model shows

that age and income negatively influence food safety, while gender and education have no effect. While food safety concerns typically increase with age, this was not validated in the study. Similarly, lower-income segments show an early interest in nutrition and food safety. Thus, negative influences of age and income on food safety are partially supported.

The hypothesis was not validated by the study (Tab. 5).

H5: The impact of experimental consumption and information sources on consumer preferences and adopting a consumption pattern over time.

The fifth hypothesis aimed to explore how experimental consumption and information sources shape consumer preferences and influence the adaptation of the food supply chain. The hypothesis suggested that novelty-driven or experimental consumption and the sources of information could play significant roles in shaping choices and adapting food consumption patterns.

The hypothesis was not validated by the study (Tab. 5).

Applying the Chi-square test for the first three hypotheses reveals the following. This nonparametric method, suitable for assessing relationships between categorical variables, was applied in accordance with methodological recommendations from Agresti (2013) and Siegel and Castellan (1988), who emphasize its relevance in behavioral data analysis when parametric assumptions are not met. The results indicate that *H1* and *H3* show weak relationships between variables, while *H2* demonstrates a moderate relationship. These results suggest that the first three hypotheses are supported to varying degrees (Tab. 6).

Tab. 6: Hypotheses testing using the Chi-square statistics

Hypothesis	Chi² (*p*-value)	Cramer's V	Decision
H1	0.015	0.138	Supported
H2	0.000	0.208	Supported
H3	0.000	0.177	Supported

Source: own

The study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of programmed and unprogrammed behaviors, responsible consumption, and the impact of demographic factors. However, further research is required to explore additional determinants and broader population samples for deeper analysis.

All three formulated hypotheses are validated through the conducted tests, confirming the importance of information sources in determining the place of purchase. The development of commerce has led to the emergence of c-stores that offer practical and quick consumption solutions to the population, supporting the rise of convenience food consumption. Key drivers of this behavioral trend include urban agglomerations, fast-paced lifestyles, time constraints, shopping ease, and the speed of commercial services. Additionally, the wellness trend (physical, mental, and social well-being) has increased the demand for fresh foods alongside the growth of ready-to-eat food options that can be consumed on the go, meeting the rapid needs of time-constrained consumers. In the initial phase, consumer behavior is driven by novelty or curiosity (experimental consumption), followed by experience-based consumption, which transitions into conscious and programmed behavior.

Secondly, experimental consumption is influenced by the place of purchase, as buying actions are often driven by the novelty of products or curiosity and focus on establishing interpersonal connections. Initially, this reflects impulsive, unplanned purchases driven by emotions or moods during interactions with sales spaces or commercial staff. Over time, these behaviors may evolve into conscious and programmed consumption based on past experiences.

Thirdly, information sources and recommendations from other consumers influence the selection process in the food market.

A notable consumption pattern emerging during the pandemic allowed consumers to reconsider their lifestyles and the implications of their choices on the environment and the local economy. The rise of eco-consumerism brought a long-term behavioral shift, describing an ethical and responsible consumer who initiates motivated and conscious purchasing acts, aligning with programmed behavior. The pandemic significantly impacted the socio-economic environment, altering behaviors, attitudes, consumption patterns, and lifestyles. Consequently, food market actors (retailers and suppliers) must adapt to market demands and comply with a more conscious and motivated consumer behavior, driven by more demanding population segments with higher consumption standards.

In the agri-food market, besides the policies and strategies already applied at the European level and translated into practice, system actors must be prepared to adapt to increasingly discerning and unpredictable consumer demands. This requires innovative approaches from both producers and retailers, as Romanian consumers are now more aware of prices, quality, and living standards, as well as the importance of being informed about food products that meet their specific needs at a given time and place.

Adapting the entire food supply chain to new business models involves significant investment efforts to provide consumers with valuable and personalized food experiences.

Key strategic directions:

i) Encouraging responsible consumption: actively promoting local producers and domestic products, avoiding products with excessive packaging;

ii) Focusing on safe, healthy, and organic products: providing affordable eco and bio options, conducting awareness campaigns on labeling and product traceability, increasing the range of green products sold under private labels at accessible prices;

iii) Launching educational campaigns: addressing nutrition and healthy eating habits;

iv) Initiating volunteer actions: aimed at reducing food waste and developing sustainable, long-term dietary practices;

v) Emphasizing social commerce: catering to consumers who prioritize experiences over products by expanding product ranges, personalizing the shopping experience through active communication and feedback, and employing manipulative marketing tactics to boost sales across the food supply chain.

Additionally, personalizing assortments, integrating e-commerce into business models, and offering delivery services will ensure greater flexibility for retailers. These efforts will enable the development of new commercial space formats through the remodeling of business strategies, helping retailers attract new consumer segments.

Conclusions

Rethinking the commercial system and adopting new business models and practical consumption solutions guide the efforts of commercial actors towards offering valuable and personalized food experiences to consumers. Trends in food markets, innovation, and the development of smart technologies will enable a better understanding of consumer behaviors and preferences at the current stage of food market development.

Based on these considerations, the paper aims to highlight specific purchasing and consumption habits from the perspective of how consumers relate to their environment, which influences their choices and changes their economic behavior. The importance of this research lies in its approach to the consumption patterns observed in the post-pandemic era, considering the multitude of factors that influence purchasing decisions and choices, as well as how these patterns integrate into programmed or unprogrammed behavior.

Practical significance is represented by the way variables are presented, which allowed for the shaping of certain consumption patterns within the agri-food market. The research also had limitations, given the relatively small number of respondents and the complexity of the issues addressed compared to behavioral analyses conducted in other markets over time. If the research results are compared to the diversity of approaches within the food market, the methodology and description used in this study represent a valuable addition to the specialized literature.

Future research will develop a more detailed analysis of how other determinants can modify and influence purchasing and consumption behaviors, as well as conduct evolutionary comparisons to identify the emergence of other consumption patterns in the food market. This research could integrate a broader

range of information deliverables that comprehensively describe the food market and help outline consumer and retailer profiles at the national level.

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