

CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONAL PRODUCTS IN THE CONTEXT OF FOOD PRODUCTION GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

In the context of food globalization, traditional products play a special role in preserving cultural identity and supporting the local economy. This research aims to examine the economic and social importance of these products, using data collection methods such as specific laboratory analyses, as well as surveys, and interviews with producers and consumers. The study seeks to highlight the differences between traditional and industrial products, as well as to understand the significance of the concept of traditional products for each consumer and how these differ from industrial products, focusing on the perceived benefits and challenges associated with each type. The results show that, although traditional products are perceived as healthier and more authentic, they face difficulties in competing with industrial products. The paper provides recommendations for policies that support the preservation and promotion of traditional products.

Key words: traditional products, industrial products, globalization.

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of food production has transformed markets and agricultural practices worldwide, bringing both challenges and opportunities for traditional products.

This research aims to explore the economic and social importance of traditional products in the context of globalization, providing a detailed analysis of their dynamics within the global economy. We will assess current trends, challenges, and opportunities, and identify ways in which traditional products can be protected and promoted.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to write this paper, a detailed study of various published works was carried out on topics like globalization, food production, traditional products and customers perception of the traditional products. Scientific articles and papers were selected from Science Direct, PubMed, Google Scholar, Web of Science databases using multiple search keywords

related to traditional foods market, food globalization, or European Union policies. Eligible articles were selected on this topics and more. The selected articles were analyzed for their eligibility and to extract the data necessary for the creation of this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Economic and Social Impact of Traditional Products

To determine the economic and social impact of traditional products, this research seeks to answer two fundamental questions:

1. What does a traditional food or product mean to the Romanian consumer?
2. What is the real difference between traditional and industrial products?

In the current context of rapidly changing consumer preferences, understanding the significance of the concept of traditional products for each individual consumer, and distinguishing them from industrial products, is important for economic, social, and cultural reasons. By exploring the question, "What does

a traditional food or product mean to the Romanian consumer?", we aim to understand the perceptions and values that consumers associate with these products. This understanding can help producers develop more effective strategies to meet the needs and desires of consumers. Additionally, this can support efforts to preserve Romanian culinary heritage, contributing to the preservation and promotion of local culture in the face of globalization.

By addressing the question, "What is the real difference between traditional and industrial products?", the study intends to provide a fundamental knowledge base to guide informed choices and educate consumers. Through a better understanding of the Romanian consumer, more well-founded strategies can be developed for preserving culinary heritage, fostering local economic development, and enhancing consumer health and well-being. Furthermore, the study will support policymakers and industry stakeholders in formulating policies and practices that protect and promote traditional products in a globalized market (Stanciu et al., 2022).

Definitions and Context

Globalization (as defined in the Romanian Dictionary - Dex): "the phenomenon of transforming the world into a unit, which manifests on a global scale through specific means" (<https://dexonline.ro/>).

Globalization (as defined by Wikipedia): "the modern term used to describe the changes in societies and the global economy, resulting from significantly increased international trade and cultural exchanges. It describes the growth of trade and investments due to the reduction of barriers and the interdependence between states" (<https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Globalizare>).

Tradition (as defined in the Romanian Dictionary - Dex): "A set of conceptions, customs, practices, and beliefs that historically become established within social or national groups and are transmitted (orally) from generation to generation, constituting the specific trait of each social group. Custom, practice, habit, rule, order, usage" (<https://dexonline.ro/>).

Traditional product (as defined by MARD): "A food product manufactured on the national territory, using local raw materials; which does

not contain food additives; which follows a traditional recipe, a traditional production and/or processing method, and a traditional technological process, and which is distinguished from other similar products in the same category" (<https://infocons.ro/produse-traditionale-romanesti>).

The Role of Traditional Products

To what extent is our eating behavior biologically determined, and to what extent are our choices based on cultural reasons? Some peoples develop extremely varied preferences regarding certain foods, such as coffee, sweets, or certain spices, which they integrate so deeply into their daily lives that they become true community rituals, and eventually become representative of the local culture. This is why the English and the French eat differently and have been teasing each other on culinary topics for centuries. The English call the French "frogs", and the French respond by saying that "the English have a hundred religions but only one sauce". Pizza is another world phenomenal food, which quickly went from complete obscurity to being Americans' favorite dish. Our nutritional needs and some very general preferences are strictly biologically determined. The environment can modify our needs to a certain extent, but it cannot completely change the biological foundation - we need proteins or vitamin C, regardless of what we believe or think. Preferences, however, are strongly influenced by culture and social influences (Vintilă & Iancu, 2009). "Convinced that their health is in their own hands, the modern consumer has become much more attentive and selective regarding their diet" (Ossipow, 2022). In the past, people's diets were heavily limited to what they could gather or produce at home. However, as technology and society evolved, distances between communities became easier to cover, and access to an increasingly diverse range of food became more convenient (Brandabur & Tănase, 2010). In our times, globalization has revolutionized the trade, production, and distribution of food products, with both positive and negative effects. Yet, at the root of the purchasing decision lies the individual, with their options and preferences. What we aim to explore are precisely these preferences, which have always been influenced

by cultural, social, or environmental factors (Săgeată et al., 2014).

The Nutritional Value of Traditional Products

The modern consumer, beyond the nutritional and health attributes of food, expects products to stand out through sensory qualities, natural ingredients, and high quality. Therefore, this results in an increased interest in traditional products. Convinced that their health is in their own hands, the modern individual has become much more attentive and selective about their diet, as noted by (Ossipow, 2022). In a study conducted in Romania, Reget et al. (2020) compared traditional products (smoked and dry-cured ham, smoked ham, and sausages) collected from a traditional production unit in Sălaj County with similar industrial products purchased from hypermarkets. The traditional smoked dry-cured ham has a higher protein content (28.54%) and lower water content (55.23%) compared to industrial products. Traditional sausages have a higher fat content (32.25%) and a greater collagen-to-protein ratio, but do not exceed legal limits. Traditional products are of superior quality compared to similar Swiss or German products regarding water content. Industrial smoked dry-cured ham presents a significantly higher water content and lower protein content, reducing its nutritional value. In smoked ham, the differences in water and protein content are significant, with the traditional product being nutritionally superior. Industrial sausages have a much higher fat content (45.14%) and lower protein content (16.84%) compared to traditional products. The study revealed significant differences between pork products obtained traditionally and those produced industrially. Traditional products have a higher biological value due to their increased protein, fat, and collagen content, and reduced water content. Histological analysis highlighted cellular hyperhydration and increased fibrous tissue in industrial products, confirming their inferior quality compared to traditional products. Traditional cured meats offer a superior nutritional profile compared to industrial ones, with fewer additives and controlled levels of preservatives, making them a healthier choice for consumers, according to a similar comparative study conducted by

(Halagarda et al., 2018) compared the nutritional value and potential chemical risks of traditional and conventional cured meats from Poland, obtaining the following results:

Tabel 1. Comparative nutritional indicators for traditional and industrial meats (Halagarda et al., 2018)

Nutritional Indicator/ Food Safety	Traditional sausages	Industrial sausages
Proteins	High content	Low content
Zinc	High content	Low content
Magnezium	High content	Low content
Potassium	High content	Low content
Calcium	High content	Low content
Total Ash	Low content	High content
Water/Protein Ratio	Lower ratio	Higher ratio
Polyphosphates	Absent	Present
Nitrites	Low quantities	Higher quantities
Nitrates	Moderate	High content
Total and Added Phosphorus	Moderate	High content
Cadmium	Moderate	High content
Lead	Moderate	High content

Functional foods

Are also closely linked to traditional products through the use of plants for their functional benefits, the recognition of the importance of culinary and medicinal traditions, and the understanding of the ecological and evolutionary role of plants in nutrition. Modern research in this field provides scientific validation for this traditional knowledge, highlighting the importance of integrating both traditional and scientific approaches in promoting health and well-being. Many traditional products, such as kimchi, kefir, and green tea, are now recognized for their functional properties. Modern research confirms the benefits of these foods, highlighting their bioactive compounds and mechanisms of action (Marriott, 2000).

Traditional Products and the European Union

Traditional food products play an important role in supporting local economies, contributing to the development of rural communities, creating jobs, and preserving cultural heritage. The EU's geographical indications system protects the

names of products that come from specific regions and possess certain qualities or whose reputation is linked to the geographical area where they are produced. The distinction between PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) and PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) primarily concerns the minimum limits of raw materials from the region of origin and the extent to which the production activity takes place in a specific region. The geographical indication (GI) is used solely for flavored wines and alcoholic beverages. The European quality label ensures and promotes the origins of a product, local traditions, and the specific characteristics of many European products with unique features (Rotari, 2015). Romania has 13 products protected within the European Union. Traditional products protected by the EU's quality schemes, such as geographical indications (GI) and traditional specialties guaranteed (TSG), represent food and beverages that benefit from protection and recognition at the European level due to their unique characteristics, linked to geographical origin or traditional production methods (<https://www.euipo.europa.eu/ro/gi-hub>).

Geographical Indications (GI) are a protection system for products that have a specific connection to a particular geographical area. These products must meet certain criteria and be produced in a specific region, using traditional knowledge and methods. GIs are divided into two categories:

PDO (Protected Designation of Origin): This term is used for products that are produced, processed, and prepared in a specific geographical region and that possess qualities or characteristics primarily attributed to that geographical environment and traditional production methods. Romania has one certified PDO product: Telemeaua de Ibănești.

PGI (Protected Geographical Indication): This term applies to products that have a connection to a specific region, but not all stages of production must take place in that area. It is sufficient for one of the stages of production, processing, or preparation to occur in the respective region. Romania has 11 certified PGI products: Salinate de Turda, Pită de Pecica, Plăcinta Dobrogeană, Telemeaua de Sibiu, Cârnații de Pleșcoi, Scrumbia de Dunăre afumată, Novacul afumat din Țara Bârsei,

Salamul de Sibiu, Magiunul de prune de Topoloveni, Cașcavalul de Săveni, Salata cu icre de știucă de Tulcea.

Traditional Specialties Guaranteed (TSG): TSG refers to products that have a traditional composition or production method, without necessarily being linked to a specific geographical area. These products must reflect a tradition of at least 30 years and be recognized for their traditional character. Romania has one certified TSG product: Salată tradițională cu icre de crap (traditional carp roe salad). The EU's quality schemes for protected traditional products play a crucial role in safeguarding and promoting the diversity and authenticity of European food products, while also providing significant economic and cultural benefits (https://romania.representation.ec.europa.eu/indicatii-geografice-si-sisteme-de-calitate-produse-romanesti-protejate-ue_ro).

These schemes protect product names from unauthorized use and imitation, ensuring that only authentic products that meet the defined specifications can use the protected designation. Quality schemes contribute to the recognition and promotion of traditional products, encouraging the maintenance of high-quality and authentic standards. Products protected by these schemes often command a premium price on the market due to the recognition of their quality and authenticity, which can bring additional economic benefits to local producers. These schemes help preserve traditional production methods and cultural heritage, contributing to the preservation of regional identity and biodiversity.

The European Community Strategy on Traditional Products

The development of traditional food production constitutes an EU community strategy, regulated by strict production and sales criteria. The European marking system for traditional foods is based on assigning distinctive signs related to origin and quality, ensuring and protecting over 1,000 registered names. In 2015, a total of 1,317 traditional food products were registered in Europe, with the majority being Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) products. The distribution of traditional agri-food production across European countries varies, with Italy

leading with 21.4% of registered products, followed by France and Spain. The Gini-Struck and Herfindahl-Hirschman concentration indices for traditional products in the EU do not indicate an excessively concentrated market, with values below alert thresholds.

Romania, despite its rich history and cultural heritage, does not fully exploit the niche of traditional products. To compete with large producers and retailers in the EU, the domestic food sector could adopt strategies linking traditional production with tourism or specialized food stores. Strict regulations have reduced the number of certified products. As of December 2015, 513 products were registered, the majority being meat products, dairy, fruits and vegetables, and bakery products. Between 2012 and 2015, the number of traditional producers significantly decreased, with most concentrated in the counties of Braşov, Argeş, and Maramureş (Stanciu, 2015). Traditional products present considerable potential in both local and international markets. They serve as a means of diversifying the food supply while simultaneously preserving local identity, traditions, and the unique characteristics of communities. At the European level, measures taken by officials in recent years have led to a significant increase in the registration of traditional products under the PDO, PGI, or TSG labels. This suggests that food traditions could represent a strategic advantage for Romanian production in a highly competitive national and European market, which remains underutilized by local producers (Bichescu & Stanciu, 2017). As points of Mirea & Casangiu Slea, (2022), gastronomic tourism, being connected to local communities and their customs, inevitably becomes a promoter of sustainability, thus evolving into a form of sustainable tourism. Gastronomic tourism fully contributes to the promotion and development of local traditional food products, representing a generator of the multiplier effect of tourism (Soare, 2018). These aspects are advantages for the local community. Consumers are motivated to buy organic food due to positive perceptions related to health, taste, and the environment (Nan et al., 2019). These perceptions are supported by the belief that organic products are more natural and less processed compared to conventional foods. This suggests that the

market for traditional products may benefit from increased demand due to consumer trends towards seeking more natural and authentic products (Bichescu & Stanciu, 2017). Local production and the tourism industry are interdependent, contributing to both economic development and cultural preservation. The development of tourism in rural areas must be sustainable, protecting natural resources and cultural traditions. Artisanal production plays a crucial role in preserving local identity and attracting tourists, having a significant economic impact on rural communities (Haller, 2011).

The Contribution of Traditional Products to the European Economy

In 2017, the sales value of products under the GI/TSG schemes reached EUR 77.1 billion, representing 7% of the total EU food and beverage sector. Agricultural and food products under the GI schemes accounted for 35% of this value, highlighting their importance in the agricultural and food sectors. Total exports of GI/TSG products were estimated at EUR 32.1 billion, representing 42% of the total sales value. Of this, 22% was destined for non-EU markets, while 20% went to intra-EU markets. These significant exports contribute to generating income for local producers and boosting the local economy by expanding market access.

Value Premium

GI/TSG products had an average value premium of 2.07 in 2017, meaning that the sales value of GI products was 2.07 times higher than that of similar products without a GI/TSG label. This value premium indicates that protected traditional products are perceived as higher quality, allowing for higher prices and increased income for local producers. The implementation of GI/TSG schemes involves an increased number of procedures and controls, which improve quality management along the supply chain. This aspect helps ensure product quality, attracting a segment of consumers willing to pay a premium price for authentic and high-quality products (Tanasa et al., 2015).

GI and TSG cover a wide range of products, from wines and spirits to cheeses and processed meat products. For example, in 2017, wines accounted for 51% of total sales value, followed by agricultural and food products (35%) and spirits (13%). The diversity of these products

supports a variety of local sectors, from agriculture to the food industry, strengthening the local economy by creating jobs and stimulating local production. Registering and protecting products under the GI/TSG schemes contributes to the preservation of local heritage, genetic resources, landscapes, and cultural traditions. This not only supports the sustainable development of local communities but also attracts tourists and investors interested in the region's authentic and traditional products. (European Commission, 2021).

Traditional products can also contribute to the sustainable economic development of communities, offering employment opportunities and generating income. This can lead to a reduction in migration to urban areas and help maintain a demographic balance in rural regions. Economic development based on community products can be sustainable from an ecological perspective as well, since these products are often made using traditional practices that respect the environment. (Buzoianu et al., 2023)

Traditional products play an important role in maintaining social cohesion and shaping community identity. By promoting social interactions and cultural events, they strengthen the bonds between community members. Additionally, they are essential for reaffirming cultural identity in a homogenized world, while also contributing to the sustainable economic development of communities (Belo Moreira, 2004). Thus, traditional products represent more than just a source of food for the community; they are a way to preserve cultural heritage and a means to ensure the long-term cohesion and prosperity of the community (Necula et al., 2022).

The Beneficiaries of Traditional Products

Studies on the consumer niches that prefer traditional products have yielded quite varied results. For example, in a study conducted by Gundala & Singh (2021), surveyed 770 individuals from the United States and identified the following demographic differences in actual purchasing behavior: Regarding gender, there were no significant differences between men and women in purchasing behavior. Regarding age, the 41-50 age group was more likely to purchase organic foods. In terms of income,

higher income was associated with a greater likelihood of buying organic foods. Regarding education, higher levels of education were correlated with a greater probability of purchasing organic foods.

In a study conducted by (Turek Rahoveanu et al., 2008) the following consumer niches for traditional products were identified in Romania: the profile of the traditional food consumer is defined as female, living in urban areas, with an income between 1,000 and 2,000 lei, generally students or professionals such as engineers, teachers, doctors, and economists. Individuals from rural areas, especially men over the age of 56 with incomes below 1,000 lei, and occupations such as administrators, farmers, company owners, self-employed professionals, or unemployed, do not consume traditional products.

The market for traditional agri-food products is primarily segmented by residence and age, with less influence from income and occupational status (Chistruga & Crudu, 2015). Urban populations are more open to trying new products, have higher incomes, and are more receptive to purchasing value-added products and those with higher levels of processing compared to rural areas.

The demand for traditional food products varies by age group, with preferences such as bread and bakery products for those under 25, meat products for those aged 41 to 55, and dairy products for individuals over 56. Globalization is a complex system or phenomenon, sometimes even contradictory, which has been viewed and analyzed from a multitude of perspectives by those who have taken on this responsibility. The globalized or economic-centric person risks becoming a dehumanized individual who lives only for production and consumption, devoid of culture, politics, meaning, conscience, religion, and any form of transcendence (Felea, 2023).

Community identity is closely linked to the traditional products specific to each community, which are often considered symbols of local distinctiveness. These products reflect the history, culture, and natural environment of a community, contributing to the creation of an identity (Komer & Cop, 2022). They are the result of knowledge and practices passed down from generation to generation, many becoming family legacies and an integral part of both the

personal cultural heritage of each individual and that of the community. By promoting and protecting traditional products, communities can reaffirm and strengthen their identity in an increasingly globalized world. This process of identity reaffirmation can be relevant in combating the negative effects of globalization, such as the loss of cultural diversity and local identity. Moreover, a strong community identity can generate a sense of pride and belonging, which motivates community members to actively engage in the protection and promotion of their cultural heritage (Belo Moreira, 2004).

Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Globalization

Globalization has brought with it a demand for standardization, which can lead to the uniformity of products and processes. This poses a challenge for producers of traditional products, who often rely on unique characteristics achieved through culturally specific and specialized production methods. Standardization requires changes in production processes to comply with international regulations, which can impact the quality and authenticity of these products (Bercu et al., 2010).

Traditional products typically involve manual or semi-manual production methods, making them more expensive compared to mass-produced goods. This puts them at a disadvantage in the global market, where price is often the decisive factor for consumers (Rahoveanu et al., 2008). Traditional products are often tied to the cultural heritage and identity of a community, but to be attractive in global markets, these products may be altered to conform to international tastes and preferences. This can lead to a dilution of their cultural significance (Boldea & Buda, 2014). Another risk is that traditional products may be copied and mass-produced by entities with no connection to the original communities, without respecting intellectual property rights and without compensating the communities for the use of their traditional knowledge and techniques (Drori, 2006).

The close interconnection of communities also generates increased risks to food security, which is crucial for human survival and is directly affected by conditions of poverty and inequality. Conflicts, climate change, rising prices, and

economic shocks (including the pandemic) are key factors that have triggered major food crises. The UN has set a goal to eradicate hunger and ensure global food security by 2030. To address these crises and improve food security, global cooperation and effective policies are necessary. Governments must invest in climate-resilient agriculture, improve resource management, and promote alternative energy sources. Additionally, the use of technology to provide information to farmers and the application of the principles of reduce, reuse, and recycle can help reduce the negative environmental impact and improve food security both globally and for local communities (Miu & Mihailescu, 2023)

Standardization is one of the main effects of globalization that impacts traditional products. The globalization process involves increasing pressure for the harmonization of standards and procedures, which can lead to the uniformity of products. International standards, such as ISO, while useful for facilitating international trade and ensuring quality, may impose strict rules that do not take into account the local specificities of traditional products. For example, the ISO 9000 standards were developed to ensure uniform quality management, but they can be criticized for not always reflecting the local particularities and values associated with traditional products. (Buzoianu et al., 2023).

Competition: Globalization increases competition in both local and international markets, exposing traditional products to competition with industrial products, often produced by large multinational corporations. These corporations benefit from economies of scale, advanced technology, and global distribution networks, allowing them to offer products at lower prices and with greater availability than traditional products (Scoppola, 2021). In the agri-food sector, for example, multinationals like Nestlé and Unilever have the capacity to take over local markets through strategic acquisitions and vertical integration of production, which can marginalize traditional local producers.

Loss of Identity: Another critical aspect of globalization is the loss of the cultural identity of traditional products. As local products are adapted to meet international standards and compete in global markets, they may lose the

unique characteristics that set them apart. This process, often referred to as "cultural homogenization", can lead to a significant loss of cultural diversity. In the fields of agriculture and food, this phenomenon is evident in the way local products are standardized and marketed under global brands, thereby diluting their authenticity and specificity (Buzoianu et al., 2023; Belo Moreira, 2004).

In addition to these three major challenges, globalization brings other difficulties:

Financial Instability: The penetration of fluctuating foreign capital can create economic instability and vulnerabilities in traditional sectors. **Pollution and Environmental Issues:** Rapid industrial development and urbanization can lead to environmental degradation, affecting sustainable traditional practices and disrupting the local ecological balance (Buzoianu et al., 2023).

Exposure to Global Crises: COVID-19: The opening of markets to global flows exposes local communities to external factors that can disrupt and even threaten their well-being. Globalization has made national food systems vulnerable to external shocks, such as price fluctuations on international markets and disruptions to global supply chains. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted supply chains for agricultural inputs (seeds, plant protection products) and food products, affecting both primary supply as well as food processing and distribution. International transportation was delayed, and restrictions led to difficulties in sourcing essential inputs for agriculture. The economic crisis associated with the pandemic reduced the purchasing power of the population, impacting demand for higher-quality products, such as organic or traditional foods. The pandemic exacerbated poverty in rural areas, disproportionately affecting small farmers and agricultural workers who lost income due to restrictions and the closure of farmers' markets (Alexandri et al., 2020)

Globalization presents challenges, but the opening of markets can also bring new opportunities for development and expansion. It is essential to find a balance that protects and promotes the cultural identity and specificity of these products. Solutions could include policies that support local producers, the promotion of origin labeling, and educating consumers about

the value of traditional products (Schileru, 2005). These strategies could help preserve cultural heritage and ensure long-term economic sustainability for local communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The Romanian market for traditional products is still in a development phase, with Romanian consumers positioned between two extremes: accessible but ultra-processed industrial products and those perceived as traditional but often financially inaccessible. For the Romanian consumer, there is a discrepancy between the official definition of a traditional product and their personal perception of what traditional means. After liberation from the communist regime, the transition to capitalism, and integration into the European Union, Romanian society has undergone numerous changes, the effects of which are also visible in today's eating habits. In a world where McDonaldization coexists with Protected Geographical Indication products, Romanian consumers strive to navigate their options and understand the true meaning of the term "Traditional Product", as well as the essential differences between traditional and industrial products.

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