# CONSUMER DEMAND FOR TRADITIONAL FOOD PRODUCTS: A QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

**Adrian-Gheorghe BERCU[1, 2], Carmen Georgeta NICOLAE[1],**
**Paul Rodian TĂPĂLOAGĂ[1], Monica MARIN[1]**

[1]University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest,
59 Marasti Blvd, District 1, Bucharest, Romania
[2]Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 24 Carol I Avenue,
District 3, 020291, Bucharest, Romania

Corresponding author email: adrianbercu.contact@gmail.com

*Abstract*

*The study explores the qualitative and quantitative consumer demand for traditional food products of animal origin, with a focus on dairy and meat, within a broader context of shifting food values. The research is grounded in a rigorous selection of literature from the last decade and is empirically supported by an online survey, based on a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method. The questionnaire, built around Likert-scale items, aimed to capture consumer perceptions, values, and consumption frequency. Data analysis, conducted using SPSS, included descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, ANOVA tests, and behavioral segmentation through K-Means clustering, complemented by a thematic qualitative analysis of open-ended responses. The results indicate a clear consumer attachment to traditional food products, particularly among younger respondents and individuals with medium to high income. Correlations between demographic profiles and consumption frequency revealed significant patterns, while segmentation analysis identified three distinct consumer typologies. Traditional products remain relevant not only for their cultural value, but also as a conscious choice in a food landscape increasingly dominated by industrial standardization.*

*Key words: behavioral segmentation, consumer behavior, food perceptions, statistical analysis, traditional food products.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the current context, marked by a growing reappreciation of local, sustainable, and identity-based food practices, the investigation of consumers' qualitative and quantitative demand for traditional food products has become particularly relevant, both scientifically and practically. The increasing tendency of consumers to prefer foods perceived as authentic, natural, and culturally rooted has been widely documented in recent studies, reflecting a profound shift in consumption behavior (Guerrero et al., 2013; Pieniak et al., 2015; Espejel et al., 2015). Similar trends have been observed in Romania as well (Popa & Smedescu, 2017; Istudor & Petrescu, 2018; Petrescu-Mag et al., 2017).
Recent studies highlight a notable paradox: although consumers consistently declare a preference for traditional food products - justified by perceived authenticity, food safety, cultural connection, and trust in local origin (Cerjak et al., 2014; Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018) - actual purchasing behavior often proves inconsistent or fragmented. Despite this value-oriented stance, choices are frequently shaped by factors such as price, accessibility, and lack of awareness regarding quality labeling (Neagu, 2016; Mureșan et al., 2021; Vanhonacker & Verbeke, 2014).
Moreover, recent research, such as that of Lee & Yun (2015), has revealed significant divergences between consumers' affective and cognitive motivations, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach in demand analysis. Accordingly, an investigation that integrates both quantitative dimensions (purchase frequency, willingness to pay, accessibility) and qualitative aspects (perceptions, cultural values, symbolic attachments) becomes essential. This perspective is further supported by studies demonstrating the impact of packaging and symbolic communication on decision-making processes (Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018), as well as research highlighting the role of

certification labels in strengthening consumer trust (Gaitán et al., 2020; Dinu & Stoian, 2020). In Romania, recent findings suggest a high potential demand for traditional products, yet one that remains fragmented and underutilized due to the absence of a coherent market strategy (Drăghici & Bălan, 2019; Mureșan et al., 2021). In this context, the present study aims to contribute to the existing literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of consumer demand, combining statistical tools with an interpretive approach to the perceptions and values associated with traditional food products.

Therefore, the need for research is justified by the economic, cultural, and social significance of traditional products, the lack of centralized and up-to-date data on Romanian consumer behavior, and the necessity for actionable conclusions to inform public policies and commercial strategies. Consequently, the topic addressed in this study responds to a current, multidimensional issue situated at the intersection of marketing, food sociology, and sustainable rural development.

This study aims to comprehensively investigate consumer demand for traditional food products by combining the quantitative dimensions of consumption behavior with the qualitative aspects of perception, symbolic value, and cultural attachment. The research is guided by the following core objectives: to analyze the structure of effective demand for traditional food products in terms of purchase frequency, willingness to pay, and preferred acquisition channels; to identify motivational and attitudinal factors underlying consumers choice of traditional products, including perceived authenticity, cultural tradition, identity, trust in producers, and perceived health impact; to evaluate the influence of official certifications and packaging elements on purchasing behavior and on the perceived value of traditional food products; to determine behavioral typologies among consumers, through segmentation based on socio-demographic profiles, motivations, and the level of emotional or cultural attachment to traditional foods; to explore differences in perception and behavior across regions and residential environments, aiming to identify regional patterns relevant to the marketing of traditional food products; to formulate strategic directions and practical recommendations for producers, policymakers, and stakeholders involved in the sustainable promotion and valorization of traditional products in Romania. These objectives are intended to provide a deeper understanding of traditional food consumption as a multidimensional phenomenon and to generate scientifically grounded conclusions with practical value for the development of public policies and strategies that strengthen local agri-food identity.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed-method approach, centered on the analysis of data collected through a standardized questionnaire designed to explore Romanian consumers' perceptions, behaviors, and value systems regarding traditional food products. The research design is descriptive-correlational, aiming both to identify the characteristics of the contemporary consumer and to test significant relationships between attitudinal and behavioral variables.

The target population consisted of adult Romanian consumers, from both urban and rural areas, aged 18 and above. Data collection was conducted between May and June 2025, through the online distribution of a Google Forms questionnaire, using a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method. The final sample comprised N = 297 respondents, representing a sufficiently diverse structure in terms of gender, age, education level, occupation, monthly income, and place of residence. This diversity supports the application of meaningful behavioral segmentation analyses.

The research instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire comprising 39 items, organized into four principal sections:
- Socio-demographic characteristics, including age, gender, level of education, occupation, monthly income, and residential environment;
- Consumer behavior, focusing on the frequency of purchase and consumption of traditional dairy and meat products, product preferences, and preferred channels of acquisition;
- Perceptions and attitudes toward traditional food products, assessed through importance ratings, motivational drivers, trust in quality labeling, and symbolic or affective associations;
- Open-ended and exploratory items, designed to elicit personal reflections and insights

concerning individual preferences and the perceived future of traditional food products.

The majority of the items were closed-ended or multiple-choice, formulated in alignment with validated instruments and theoretical frameworks from the relevant literature. Attitudinal constructs were predominantly measured using Likert-type scales, enabling the capture of gradated responses and facilitating the quantification of subjective evaluations.

### Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis was conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics software package, through a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques aimed at capturing both the measurable aspects of consumer behavior and the underlying perceptions and values expressed by respondents.

In the initial stage, descriptive statistical analyses were applied to outline the profile of the sample and the distribution of responses. Frequencies, means, and percentage distributions were calculated for the socio-demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral variables. These analyses provided a general overview of respondent characteristics and revealed key patterns in the consumption of traditional food products.

To explore the relationships between perceptual variables (e.g., importance of labeling, trust in traditional products) and behavioral variables (e.g., frequency of consumption), bivariate correlation analyses were performed. Pearson correlation coefficients were used for continuous variables, while Spearman's rank-order correlation was applied for ordinal variables. These tests enabled the assessment of the direction and strength of associations between key dimensions.

The research hypotheses were statistically tested using procedures appropriate to the nature of the variables under investigation:
- Pearson and Spearman coefficients were employed to examine associations between perceptual and behavioral indicators;
- One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to compare consumption frequencies across different demographic groups (e.g., levels of education).

*Other tests*, such as the Chi-square test, were considered potentially applicable for analyzing relationships between categorical variables. The primary objective of these analyses was to determine whether the observed relationships were statistically significant, thereby supporting or rejecting the hypotheses formulated in the early stages of the study.

### Behavioral Segmentation Analysis

To identify distinct consumer typologies, a K-Means cluster analysis was performed. Input variables included frequency of consumption, level of education, income, and age. This segmentation approach enabled the delineation of meaningful consumer profiles, offering insights into the diversity of motivational drivers and informing potential strategic directions for targeted communication and promotion of traditional food products.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The valid sample analyzed in this study includes 297 respondents, distributed in a relatively balanced manner across key socio-demographic variables relevant for understanding consumer behavior regarding traditional food products (Table 1).

Of the total participants, 58.6% were female and 41.4% male, indicating a slight predominance of women among those expressing interest in the topic, which may suggest greater engagement with food-related values and purchasing decisions.

The average age of respondents was 39.9 years, suggesting that the sample predominantly consists of active adults with significant decision-making and purchasing power within household food contexts.

Participants came from a range of residential settings:
- Small urban areas (< 200,000 inhabitants): 37.4%;
- Rural areas: 29.3%;
- Large urban areas (> 200,000 inhabitants): 27.3%;
- Urban periphery: 6.0%.

This distribution enables comparative evaluation across consumer profiles shaped by varying degrees of access, tradition, or exposure to industrial food systems.

A majority of respondents held higher education degrees (79.8%), of whom: 42.4% had

postgraduate qualifications (master's or PhD), 37.4% had a university bachelor's degree. Additionally, 19.2% completed secondary education, with a small proportion reporting lower levels of formal education. This indicates a highly educated sample, capable of articulating informed opinions regarding product quality and food culture.

The vast majority of participants were employed (79.8%), followed by freelancers, entrepreneurs, unemployed individuals, students, and retirees. This dominance of professionally active individuals supports the analysis of economic and pragmatic considerations in purchasing decisions.

Income structure reflects a sample predominantly composed of the urban middle class, with a relatively high purchasing power and a greater openness toward niche or premium products, categories under which traditional food products are often perceived.

**Correlations between socio-demographic variables and consumption behavior**

To investigate potential relationships between the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and the frequency of traditional food consumption, a Pearson correlation analysis was applied to a set of numerically coded variables. The results revealed several statistically relevant associations, offering a deeper understanding of the current profile of traditional food consumers. A first notable finding concerns age, which is negatively correlated with the frequency of consumption for both traditional dairy products ($r = -0.22$) and meat products ($r = -0.12$). These values suggest that younger consumers tend to consume traditional products more frequently, whereas consumption tends to decrease with age. This trend may be interpreted in the context of shifting food attitudes and a renewed interest in authenticity and local identity among younger generations.

Table 1. Structure of the sample

| Caracteristics | Share in the Sample | N | Ratio % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | 174 | 58.59 |
| | Male | 123 | 41.41 |
| Age | 20-30 | 54 | 18.18 |
| (years) | 31-40 | 141 | 47.47 |
| | 41-50 | 39 | 13.13 |
| | 51-60 | 48 | 16.16 |
| | 61-70 | 15 | 5.05 |
| Residence | Rural | 87 | 29.29 |
| | Small Urban | 111 | 37.37 |
| | Large Urban | 81 | 27.27 |
| | Periferic urban | 18 | 6.06 |
| Household income | 2.000 | 6 | 2.02 |
| (RON) | 2.000-5.000 | 51 | 17.17 |
| | 5.000-10.000 | 156 | 52.53 |
| | 10.000-15.000 | 51 | 17.17 |
| | 15.000 + | 33 | 11.11 |
| Education | Middle school | 3 | 1.01 |
| | High school | 57 | 19.19 |
| | Bachelor's degree | 111 | 37.37 |
| | Master's/PhD | 126 | 42.42 |
| Occupation | Employed | 237 | 79.80 |
| | Unemployed | 15 | 5.05 |
| | Entrepreneur | 33 | 11.11 |
| | Student | 6 | 2.02 |
| | Retired | 6 | 2.02 |

Regarding education level, the data indicate a weak negative correlation with the frequency of consumption: $r = –0.04$ for dairy products and $r = –0.09$ for meat products. Although these values are not statistically significant in a strict sense, they may suggest an emerging tendency among higher-educated individuals to prioritize other food selection criteria, such as sustainability, ethical concerns, or nutritional content.

In contrast, monthly income shows a slight positive correlation with the frequency of traditional food consumption ($r = 0.09$ for dairy and $r = 0.10$ for meat). These results support the hypothesis that individuals with higher income levels may have greater purchasing power and thus increased access to traditional products, which are often perceived as premium or artisan-style goods.

The analysis also reveals a moderate positive correlation between the frequency of consumption of traditional dairy products and that of traditional meat products ($r = 0.23$), suggesting the existence of a consumer segment that demonstrates loyalty to traditional products as a whole, rather than to a specific category.

Although most of the identified correlations are relatively weak in magnitude, they provide valuable insights into the psychosocial dynamics of traditional food consumption. These findings will be further explored in the factor analysis and behavioral segmentation sections of the study.

## Behavioral Segmentation of Consumers

To gain a deeper understanding of the diversity in traditional food consumption patterns, a cluster analysis was performed using the K-Means method, with three initial cluster centers. The segmentation was based on five key variables: frequency of consumption of traditional dairy and meat products, age, education level, and monthly income of the respondents. The results enabled the identification of three distinct consumer profiles:

**Cluster 0** - "The mature, moderate, and balanced consumer"
Average age: 44.8 years (the highest among all clusters)
Frequency of dairy consumption: 4.57 (approximately 2-3 times per week)

Frequency of meat consumption: 4.37 (close to 2-3 times per week)
Average income: medium to upper-middle (mean score 2.93 ≈ 5,000-10,000 RON)
Education level: predominantly higher education (mean 3.23) (Figure 1).

Elena, 44, lives in a large urban area, holds a postgraduate degree, and works in a stable professional role. She consumes traditional dairy products two to three times a week and meat products more frequently - four to six times weekly. With an income in the 10,000-15,000 RON range, she has the means to choose consciously. Elena consistently checks product labels and cares deeply about sustainability, environmental impact, and ethical sourcing. While she occasionally considers industrial alternatives for health reasons, she remains closely connected to traditional flavors - her first thought when hearing "traditional product" is homemade jam.
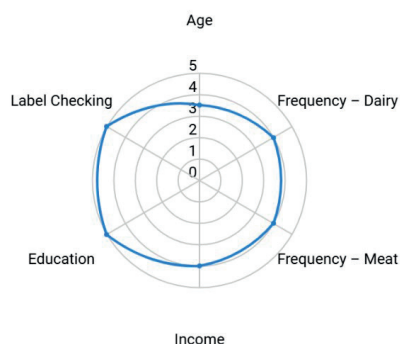


Figure 1. Consumer profile - Cluster 0

This segment represents a mature consumer group, with balanced consumption habits, a rational and moderate attitude toward food choices, and medium to high financial availability. Their behavior reflects a preference for consistent consumption without excess, likely grounded in routine and established values.

**Cluster 1** - "The young traditionalist with limited resources"
Average age: 35.5 years
Frequency of dairy consumption: 5.16 (almost daily)
Frequency of meat consumption: 5.84 (nearly daily)

Average income: lower (mean score 2.58 ≈ 2,000-5,000 RON)
Education level: moderate (mean score 2.79 ≈ between high school and bachelor's degree) (Figure 2).
Andrei, 42, is a high school graduate living in a large city, employed full-time but with a modest income between 5,000 and 10,000 RON. He consumes traditional meat several times per week, though dairy products less frequently. His main priority is health, and he rarely checks food labels. Despite his limited financial means and less structured food literacy, Andrei shows strong loyalty to what he considers traditional products and refuses to replace them with industrial alternatives, stating clearly: "Nothing beats what we grew up with - especially potatoes."
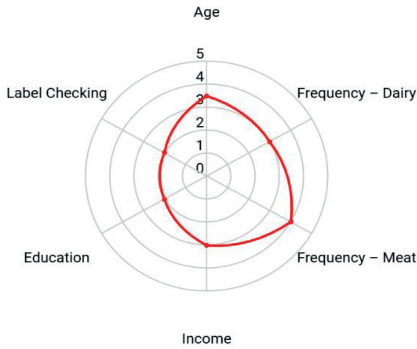
Figure 2. Consumer profile - Cluster 1

This segment consists of younger consumers who exhibit a strong inclination toward traditional food products, despite having relatively modest financial resources. Their preferences may be driven by cultural heritage, family influences, or sensory appeal, reflecting a value-based commitment rather than purchasing power.

**Cluster 2** - "The educated professional with a traditional orientation"
Average age: 36.2 years
Frequency of dairy consumption: 5.36 (daily)
Frequency of meat consumption: 5.36 (daily)
Average income: high (mean score 4.16 ≈ 10,000-15,000 RON)

Education level: high (mean score 3.68 ≈ Master's or PhD) (Figure 3).
Vlad, 24, is a young professional with a master's degree, living in a major urban center. He has a high income (10,000-15,000 RON) and consumes traditional dairy products daily, and meat almost every day. He pays close attention to labels, emphasizing nutritional value, taste, and health. For Vlad, traditional products are not just a cultural artifact - they are a deliberate, well-informed choice. Even when considering modern alternatives, he returns to what he trusts most: carefully sourced, familiar foods aligned with his lifestyle and values.
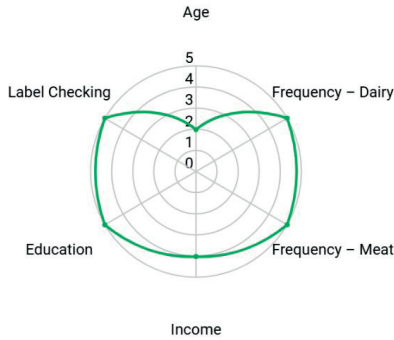
Figure 3. Consumer profile - Cluster 2

This segment consists of young, highly educated individuals with above-average income, who frequently choose traditional food products. Their motivations are most likely associated with trust in the quality of local products, as well as an increased awareness of authenticity and product origin. Their purchasing behavior appears to be a conscious, value-driven choice rather than a matter of habit or necessity.
This segmentation reveals that traditional food products are appreciated by diverse social categories, each with its own motivations and level of access. The findings support the development of differentiated marketing campaigns, tailored to the specific characteristics and expectations of each consumer segment (Table 2, Figure 4).

Table 2. Comparative profile of consumer segments identified through cluster analysis

| Characteristics | Cluster 0 – 🔵 Mature, Moderate Consumer | Cluster 1 – 🔴 Young Traditionalist with Limited Resources | Cluster 2 – 🟢 Educated Professional with Traditional Orientation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Average age | 44.8 years | 35.5 years | 36.2 years |
| Frequency of dairy consumption | 4.57 (2-3 times/week) | 5.16 (almost daily) | 5.36 (daily) |
| Frequency of meat consumption | 4.37 (2-3 times/week) | 5.84 (almost daily) | 5.36 (daily) |
| Average income | Medium to upper-middle (5,000-10,000 RON) | Lower (2,000-5,000 RON) | High (10,000-15,000 RON) |
| Education level | Higher education (Bachelor's degree) | Moderate (between high school and university) | Advanced (Master's or PhD) |
| Consumption attitude | Rational, balanced | Emotionally motivated, culturally rooted | Conscious, selective, strongly value-driven |
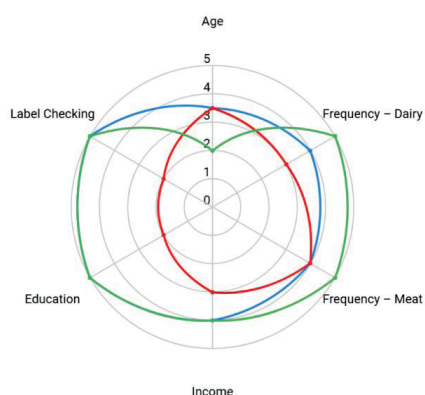


Figure 4. Comparative Radar Chart - Consumer Segments

## CONCLUSIONS

This study determine that traditional food products continue to hold a strong position in Romanian consumers preferences, while being redefined within a modern, competitive context. The findings confirm that traditional food choices extend beyond routine habits and are shaped by taste, trust, identity, and cultural memory. Respondents value authenticity, health, and local origin, often refusing to replace traditional foods with industrial alternatives, reflecting both emotional attachment and skepticism toward mass production.

Statistical analysis reveals that younger consumers tend to purchase traditional foods more frequently, while income positively influences consumption, reinforcing their perception as premium products. Education does not diminish interest but refines it, linking higher awareness to more selective, value-based choices.

Cluster analysis identified three key profiles: the mature and balanced consumer, the young traditionalist with limited resources, and the educated professional with strong ethical motivations. Consumers from small urban and rural areas reported slightly higher consumption, suggesting reliance on local markets. Frequent label checking highlights the role of certification and transparency in building trust.

Overall, traditional foods represent not nostalgia but a reaffirmation of local identity. Their continued relevance depends on strategies that integrate authenticity, health, and cultural values into modern marketing and policy frameworks.

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