

ALBANIAN CONSUMER ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR TOWARD ETHICAL VALUES OF AGRO-FOOD PRODUCTS

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Abstract

It is of paramount importance to know consumers' behavior and attitude toward specific values linked to agro-food products. In fact, there is a constant increase of consumer concern on and interest in products bearing ethical values. The study aims at exploring Albanian consumer knowledge of and attitude toward agro-food products with ethical values such as organic, fair-trade and typical/traditional ones. The work is based on primary and secondary data. Primary information was collected by face-to-face interviews with 311 adult Albanian consumers concentrated mainly in the central, south-eastern, south-western and northern part of Albania. Respondents were contacted randomly mainly in markets and other shopping areas. Questions dealt mainly with sources of information, knowledge and attitude toward agro-food products with ethical values, including reasons and motivations for buying them, purchasing channels, as well as opinion about prices and willingness to pay. Results obtained show that Albanian consumers have positive attitude toward organic products. About 82% of the interviewees buy organic products because they link the term "organic" with products acquisition directly from farms or in farmers' market. Most of interviewed Albanian consumers (68%) are aware that their consuming behavior generates environmental, economic and social impacts. In the meantime, the main motivation for buying organic and typical products is that they are considered safer, healthier and tastier. Higher price and low market availability are the main obstacles that should be overcome in order to increase sales of agro-food products with ethical values, which will bring sustainable benefits to Albanian rural areas and consumers.

Keywords: consumer, agro-food, ethical values, Albania

Introduction

The term ethical consumption - used for the first time in 1989 by the magazine for citizen activists in Manchester, "Ethical Consumer" (Elkington and Hailes, 1989) - now is becoming one of consumer's behavior tendencies. Ethical products and services are experiencing growing market shares and this phenomenon is not restricted only to Europe (Freestone and McGoldrink, 2008).

The main factors that helped developing this market are economical shift of post-industrial area (consumerism) (Martinengo, 2012), government policies and consumer information (Freestone and McGoldrink, 2008). Governmental policies in the past have contributed to ethical production and consumption through pollution control. These policies in Europe now have shifted from industrial pollution control towards bringing about more sustainable consumption patterns (Micheletti *et al.*, 2006). From the other side, consumers are becoming more aware of ethical consumption through market and information campaigns (Harrison *et al.*, 2005). Their behavior influences directly the type of products/services and way of production (Martinengo, 2012) because ethical trade and production have been both consumer and trade driven (Brown *et al.*, 2000).

Ethical consumption in the present paper refers to the consumer behavior of purchasing products and services produced in a way that minimizes social, animal welfare and/or environmental impacts, while avoiding products and services considered as having a negative impact on society, animal welfare and environment. Ethical consumer as a term represents a further development of the term “green consumer” defined by Elkington and Hailes (1989). Ethical consumption compared to “green consumerism” encompasses a broader range of ethical issues including matters of conscience such as animal welfare and fair trade, labor standards, self-interested health concerns (Cowe and Williams, 2000), their concern for deep-seated problems such as those of people of the third world (Shaw and Clarke, 1999), whether a corporation promotes people of minorities, worry about product transportation distances, etc. (Harrison *et al.*, 2005).

The shift of today consumers toward values of social responsibility can be explained by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and corresponds to self-actualization and self-fulfillment (Simons *et al.* 1987). The last shift of consumer’s behavior needs to be further explored by research.

The objective of this research is to explore Albanian consumer’s perceptions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and behavior toward ethical products such as fair trade, organic and traditional or local ones.

There is very few literature and research on marketing and Albanian consumer’s behavior toward agri-food products. To the best knowledge of authors of the present paper, studies dealing with Albanian consumer’s behavior refer to individual products such as, wine (Civici *et al.*, 2004), lamb meat (Imami *et al.*, 2011), olive oil (Chan-Halbrendt *et al.*, 2010), table olives (Zhllima *et al.*, 2012), apple fruits (Skreli and Imami, 2012) and milk (Kapaj *et al.*, 2013). They take into consideration the different attributes of products in general and no one of them has studied consumer behavior, knowledge, perceptions and attitude toward ethical products.

Materials and methods

The present study was based on secondary and primary data: secondary data consist on literature review while primary data on face-to-face questionnaires and interviews with key persons of the sector in Albania. Questionnaires were exercised to 311 Albanian adults in Albanian urban areas. They were filled out by consumers in four main areas of Albania with the scope of including different economic and social distinguished characteristics: central Albania (Tirana, Kruja and Durrës), northern part (Tropoja and Kukës), south-western part (Berat) and south-eastern part (Gramsh).

The questionnaires had three main sections: a). demographical and economical data; b). consumer’s behavior in the market; and c). knowledge, beliefs, motivations and attitudes toward ethical products. The first section (a) was related to demographic and economic information like: age, gender, level of education, employment, marital status, and size of family, children and elder presence, family monthly income. The second one (b) dealt with questions such as: what does ethical product mean; what type of product they buy; on what basis, how often, and where they buy; whether they read and what they search in the label; willingness to pay; types of products they would prefer; to what extent and frequencies would they buy, etc. The last section (c.) asked respondents about: what is the contribution of organic, fair trade and local/typical products to ethical issues such as the environment protection (decreasing food miles and emissions, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, better natural resource use, etc.), consumer’s impact on animal health and welfare, social and civic impacts (food quality and safety, safe and equitable workplace, gender equity, transparent and trustworthy food systems, civic responsibility and care, human rights), economic impacts (fair and equitable financial returns for local farmers/producers, availability of ethical products and affordability of consumers), sources of information for ethical products, knowledge about their certification and control systems, their willingness to be informed further and which type of channels they would prefer, reasons for buying or not buying ethical products).

The respondents were chosen randomly from the end of 2011 till December 2012. The sample belongs to different ages, genders, educations and origins, and family statuses and sizes. Respondents consisted of respectively 58% males and 42% females. Most of them were married (71%); 58.7% of interviewees had children; 91.9% had at least secondary school level and 44.1% graduated at university (5.1% had postgraduate studies). Like in Italian and Serbian studies carried out by Driouech *et al.* (2010, 2013), the range of age intended was from 18 to 50 and over: 65.5% of respondents belong to the age range between 31-50 and over, the age of those that deal more frequently with household shopping. Most respondents (66%) were active (53.5% were employees and 12.5% business-runners); 25.8% were students and housewives and only 13.4% were retired.

Tab. 1. Respondents profile characteristics (n=311)

Items		Percentage (%)	Items		Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	58.0	Family size	Till 2 members	11.1
	Female	42.0		3 members	11.1
Age	18-24	19.0		4 members	32.5
	25-30	15.0		5 members	24.4
	31-40	18.0		6 members	13.0
	41-50	21.0		More than 6 members	7.8
	51 and over	27.0		Student	15.0
Level of education	Primary school	8.50		Employee	52.4
	Technical/professional school	37.8		Businessman	11.0
	Secondary school	39.0		Housewife	8.2
	College/University	10.0	Retired	12.2	
	Postgraduate (Master, PhD)	5.1	Unemployed	1.2	
	Other	0.00	Family income (ALL/Month)	Less than 20 thousand	7.2
Family status	Single	29.0		21-40 thousand	26.5
	Married	12.3		41-60 thousand	33.7
	Married with children	58.7		61-100 thousand	22.3
Household composition**	Children	77.7		More than 100 thousand	10.2
	Elders	47.0	*: . Percentage greater than 100, due to multiple choice		
	People with health problems	6.0	**: ALL: Albanian Lek, 1 €=140 ALL.		
	None of above	12.0			

Data collected through questionnaires were analyzed with descriptive statistics using Microsoft Excel program.

The present study was based on following hypothesizes: Albanian consumers have already basic information on ethical products such as organic, fair-trade and typical/local ones; they are aware of and committed to benefits and positive impacts of ethical products for human health, environment and social justice and; there is more space and willingness to pay for ethical products in the Albanian market.

Results and discussion

About 82% of the Albanian interviewees buy organic products and 50% of them buy them with weekly frequency (20% everyday and 30% 2-3 times a week). It was noticed that “organic” products, for Albanian respondents, mainly mean products acquired directly from farms or in farmers’ market. They do not link it with organic standard and certification. It was noticed that most of Albanian consumers associate between the terms “ethical”-“organic”-“natural” and “farmer’s” products. Ethical products that respondents buy more are “organic”: olive oil (50%), fruits (47%), cereals and pulses (40%), processed food (39%), vegetables (35%) and meat (31%). As previously mentioned, Albanian consumers associate the term “organic” with farm and farmer’s market. For

example, Albanian consumers prefer to buy olive oil directly from olive mills supplied with olives of small farmers (Albanian Association of Olive Oil, 2012). For 75% of Tirana consumers, the domestic originated olive oil has the most important attribute (Chan-Halbrendt *et al.*, 2010). Preference for products of domestic origin as a product attribute is found also for wine (Civici *et al.*, 2004), table olives (Zhllima *et al.*, 2012), apple (Skreli *et al.*, 2012), for milk as a second attribute after fat content (Kapaj *et al.*, 2013) and meat (86% of interviewees preferred meat from butcheries) (Imami *et al.*, 2011). Reason for buying domestic and local products can be explained by the impact of scandals and misinformation. Larger value chains are distancing consumers from production systems, increasing misinformation about the products safety and ethical issues (Corcoran *et al.*, 2002).

Regarding places where they buy ethical products, the most important indicated place was the supermarket, answer that brings contradiction with their belief that “organic” is “farm” product. This is supposed to happen for different reasons: consumers tend to buy the highest share of important commodities such as cereals, fruits, milk, oil etc. of local origin and mostly directly from farmers or their markets; they buy the same locally originated products in the supermarket, too, adding to them during shopping other commodities that are processed, packed or industrialized origin.

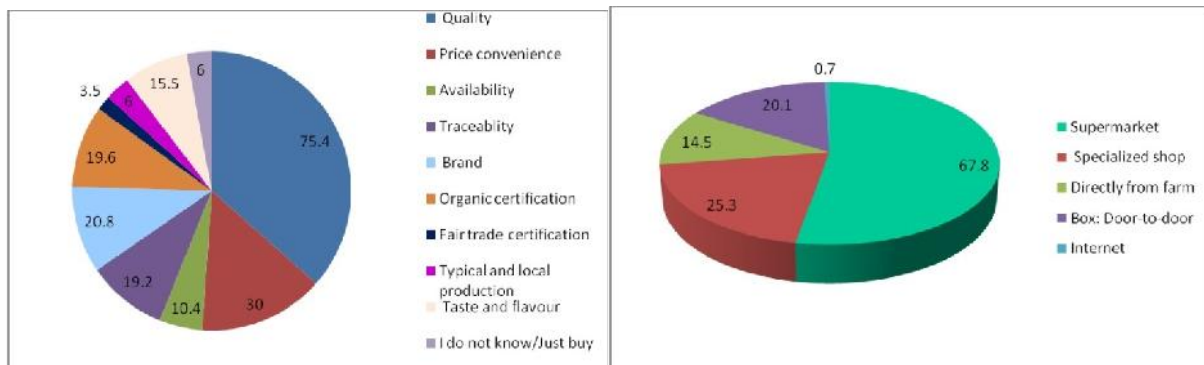


Fig.1. Places where consumers buy ethical products* Fig. 2. Reasons for buying ethical products*

*: Percentage greater than 100, due to multiple choices

The most important attributes of products considered by Albanian consumers are: quality (75.4%) followed by price convenience (30%), brand (20.8%), organic certification (19.6%), traceability (19.2%) and taste and flavor (15.5%) (Fig. 2).

Together with the quality of the products, price is one of the most important attribute that influence the consumer's behavior in Albania as demonstrated by other studies for different products. According to those studies done recently, Albanian consumers together with the origin consider important the price of products (Chan-Halbrendt *et al.*, 2010; Imami *et al.*, 2011; Skreli *et al.*, 2012; Zhllima *et al.*, 2012; Kapaj *et al.*, 2013). Except olive oil where the higher price is indicator of quality inducing higher selling, the other products studied in Albania, are preferred less in case they are highly priced (Imami *et al.*, 2011; Skreli *et al.*, 2012; Zhllima *et al.*, 2012; Kapaj *et al.*, 2013). Behavior of Albanian consumers against olive oil price and its identification with quality can be explained with asymmetric or evasive information (Standalidou *et al.*, 2002; Cicia *et al.*, 2002). When respondents were asked particularly to compare price of ethical products with conventional ones about 52% of them think is medium and 45% think is high. This can explain why Albanian consumers give low share to attributes organic, fair-trade and typical certified compared to quality and price even think that ethical products have better taste. Regarding taste attribute, about 83% of respondents have the belief that ethical products (particularly organic and local products) have a better taste; about 15% of respondents think that ethical products have the same taste as conventional products and only about 2% think that the taste of ethical products is not as good as

conventional ones. When asked for reasons of not buying ethical products, respondents gave two main reasons: the price (56% of respondents) and the availability (about 38%). However, most of the respondents are ready to pay a premium price for ethical (=organic) products: about 91% of them could pay more for ethical products; 25% of them up to 10% higher price; 32% of respondents 11-30% more, 19% could pay 60% more and 14% of respondents could pay 31-60% more.

For the question regarding labels, about 93% of respondents answered that they read label before buying; about 86% of them read expiry date (linked to food safety), about 30% the origin of the product, about 25% ingredients, about 20% nutritional ingredients and only 15% quality certifications.

As for the meaning of the term “ethical” product, about 44% of them answered “agro-food produced organically”, about 22% agro-food products produced locally, 20% production that respects the environment, about 19% agro-foods produced by farms involved in ethical activities, 19% any agro-food production. Only 13% of respondents answered that ethical products are those that respect producers and workers.

Albanian consumers (68%) are aware that their consuming behavior generates environmental, economic and social impacts. About 76% of respondents answered positively the question whether they have knowledge on ethical products, 16% of them responded maybe and only 7% of them responded no.

These answers are in contradiction with answers for another question on how they can generate impacts with their consuming behavior. About 100 respondents (or 30%) skipped the question; the rest mostly answered that the consumer behavior influences less or enough environmental emissions, ecosystems and biodiversity, animal welfare and so on. In the meantime, the main motivation for buying organic and typical products is that they are considered safer, healthier and tastier.

The main source of information regarding ethical products has been electronic mass media including internet, TV, radio (about 58%), lessons in school and training sessions (about 41%), friends (about 24%), newspapers and magazines (about 17%) and lastly stores and shops (16%).

Respondents were asked whether they were interested to know more and be informed about ethical products. Almost all of interviewees responded that they were interested (about 96%).

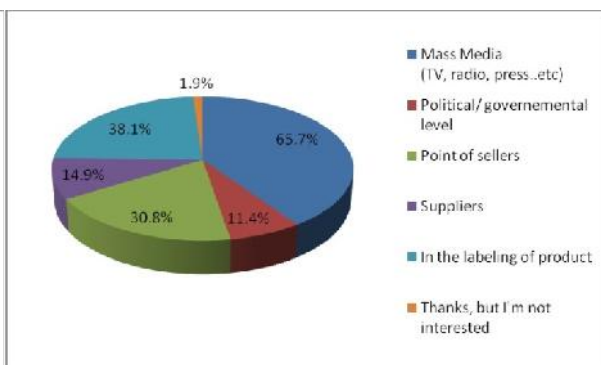
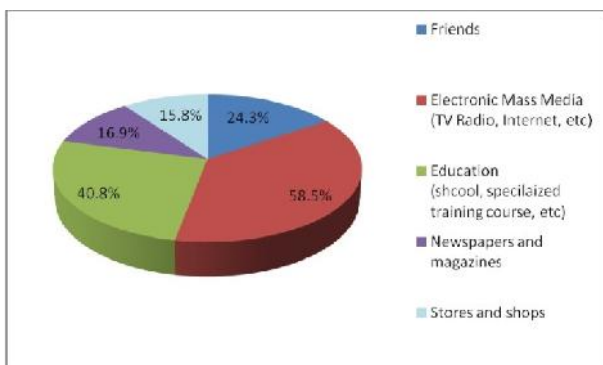


Fig. 3. Sources of information for ethical products*
*: . Percentage greater than 100, due to multiple choices

Fig. 4. Recommended information channels*

The view about possible channels to communicate with consumers about ethical products is as following: mass media (about 65.7%), labels (38%), selling points (about 31%), suppliers (about 15%) and government (11%) (Fig. 4).

Conclusions

The main conclusions drawn at the end of the present research are:

- Most of Albanian consumers have positive attitude regarding ethical products because 81% of them think that are healthy; they think ethical products mostly are produced taking care for the environment and have not much motives related to social impacts;
- For Albanian consumers, ethical product, mostly is organic and local specially from farm and respective zone; they think that they buy ethical (=organic) products every day or week either in farmers' market or door-to-door products;
- The main motive for buying ethical (organic) products is because they are healthier and safer; they buy in the market mostly based on quality and price and the main reasons for which Albanian consumers do not buy ethical products are their higher prices and their unavailability especially in supermarkets; however, about 91% of them are ready to pay a premium price for organic products;
- Even most of Albanian consumers (76%) declare that they have knowledge about ethical products, they want to know more about ethical products (96%) and prefer: mass media, selling points and suppliers, and governmental initiatives.

Overall, higher price, low market availability and education are the main obstacles that should be overcome in order to increase sales of agro-food products with ethical values. The latest could bring sustainable benefits to Albanian rural areas and consumers. Public policies can have an important role especially supporting education and ethical food production and consumption initiatives. Further studies should be carried out including application of a logit model to link better demographical and economical characteristics of Albanian consumers to attitudes and behavior.

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