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Consumers Attitude Towards Healthy Food: "Organic and Functional Foods"

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays the consumer's health consciousness drives the agri-food market. Superfoods or foods with health-related claims, including organic and functional foods, are the latest trend in the food industry. Since entering the market these products are rapidly gaining a remarkable market share worldwide. In this article, the authors conducted a survey of 300 Greek consumers to better understand attitudes towards these products, through the implementation of factor and cluster analysis and linear regression. Analyzing consumers' perception of healthy food products, in particular, organic and functional foods, is the best way to determine the market orientation and to have a clear market segmentation.

KEYWORDS

Cluster Analysis, Consumer Awareness, Eating Habits, Factor Analysis, Food Trend, Health Concerns, Linear Regression

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, our society is witnessing a continuous increase in life expectancy and greater attention to quality. Consumers are increasingly concerned about their health and pay more attention to their lifestyle and the healthiness of their diet (Szakaly et al., 2012). The increase in demand for such foods can be explained by the increasing cost of healthcare, the steady increase in life expectancy, and the desire to improve their quality (Siro et al., 2008).

The market for food with a health benefit is evolving. Indeed, health food is increasingly attracting interest from both consumers and manufacturers. According to a recent study carried out in France in 2013, nutrition and nutritional balance are the main current trends: healthy, plant-based, with a reduction of lipids and preservatives, and above all, naturalness. This shift in demand for healthy foods is a fundamental trend explained by consumers' awareness of the strong relationship between food and health due to recent food crises that have shaken the world.

On the supply side, we are currently seeing innovations in the agri-food industry offering new products and new techniques in the production and manufacture of food products (Baregheh et al, 2011). These innovations concern new food products differentiated by their nutritional characteristics such as 'light' products (fat, sugar, salt), enriched products (omega-3, -6, fiber), products free of certain constituents (salt, sugar) and food supplements. Other innovations relate to certain production techniques such as organic farming, or those containing GMOs, new manufacturing techniques such as extrusion and lyophilizing, and those characterized by the introduction of new raw materials into processed or cooked food products such as algae, vegetable milks, soybeans, stevia, etc.

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Through these ongoing research and development efforts in the food sector, functional food products have emerged. Indeed, research around these foods has focused on the identification of biologically active components, with the potential to improve the physical and mental state and reduce the risk of disease.

There is no official definition of 'functional foods' common to all States, but the EU project "Functional Food Science in Europe" gives an appropriate working definition: "A food can be regarded as 'functional' if it is satisfactorily demonstrated to affect beneficially one or more target functions in the body, beyond adequate nutritional effects, in a way that is relevant to either an improved state of health and well-being and/or reduction of risk of disease. Functional foods must remain foods and they must demonstrate their effects in amounts that can normally be expected to be consumed in the diet: they are not pills or capsules, but part of a normal food pattern" (Hawkes, 2004).

Similar trends apply also to organic food products, despite not being as recent as functional foods, their consumption has increased remarkably during the last years. The booming U.S. organic industry posted new records in 2015, with total organic product sales hitting a new benchmark of $43.3 billion, up by a robust 11% from the previous year's record level and far outstripping the overall food market's growth rate of 3% according to the Organic Trade Association's 2016 Organic Industry Survey.

The most common definition of an organically produced food emphasizes the technology or production practices and principles used, and/or the 'organic philosophy' (e.g., Bourn and Prescott, 2002; Goldman and Hylton, 1972). Thus, whereas some definitions highlight dimensions such as 'biological' or 'environmental friendliness' (e.g., Goldman and Hylton, 1972), others emphasize the restricted use of artificial chemicals in organic production (e.g., FAO, 1999), or its general philosophy (e.g., Torjusen, Nyberg and Wandel, 1999). Vindigni et al. (2002) put it more poignantly when the authors argued that the term 'organic' usually refers to a "process claim" and not a "product claim".

This study attempts to provide a better understanding of consumer preferences on healthy food markets in Greece, in particular organic and functional foods.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 covers the research objective and describes the data and methods. Section 3 discusses the results in three parts: (a) explorative analysis; (b) factor and cluster analysis; (c) linear regression. Section 4 features the limitations of the study and the conclusion.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The purpose of this paper is to: (1) Explore the everyday eating habits of consumers and their food choices to evaluate the degree of their orientation towards a healthy life style and healthy food; (2) Identify the consumer's behavior towards heathy food in particular organic and functional foods; and (3) Categorize consumers into different clusters based on the attributes of the purchase of healthy food to have a clear idea about the characteristic of each segment which may contribute to better strategic and tactical marketing decisions.

In this study, a total of 300 questionnaires were completed among Greek consumers aged 18 years and older living mainly in Athens, Thessaloniki and Crete. The surveys were realized online and by face to face interviews, and the whole procedure was completed between November and February 2017.

We tested our questionnaire by distributing it to 20 consumers from different backgrounds and ages in order to ensure that it is clear enough and to detect variables and questions that were difficult to understand. As a result, some were removed, elaborated, or modified. The final questionnaire contains three parts and included 27 questions.

The purpose of the first part of the questionnaire is to explore the consumer's everyday eating habits by asking them about the amounts they consumed last week of some food products (dairy products, fruits and vegetables, meat, bead, sweets, alcohol), their food choices (fried vs grilled, processed meat vs regular meat, whole meal bread vs white bread…) to evaluate the degree of their orientation towards a healthy life style and healthy food, and of course to identify the degree of awareness and importance of healthy behavior for them. The questions in the second part are exclusively

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