

A Portrait of the Young Fish Consumer

Mirela Samfira¹, Ionel Samfira², Codruța Gavrilă¹, Mihaela Beu³

¹Teaching Staff Training and Social Human Sciences Department, 300645 - Timișoara, Calea Aradului, 119, România

²Faculty of Agriculture, 300645 - Timișoara, Calea Aradului, 119, România

³Center for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance, Caraș Severin, România

Abstract

This paper is a study concerning the motivation and importance of fish and fish product consumption. The study was carried out on a sample of 112 students (from two high-schools in the Caras-Severin County and from the BUASVM in Timisoara, Timis County) aged 18-25. The main goal of this study was to assess briefly the future fish consumer in the context of the increasing world fish and fish product consumption. The subjects has to fill in a questionnaire containing 15 open-answer questions and close questions concerning the frequency of fish consumption, their preferences, choice criteria, and consumer rights. The results were relevant from the point of view of fish consumption, of the species preferred, and of the awareness concerning the importance of fish in the healthy diet; but it supplied less satisfactory conclusions concerning the preferred type of fish and fish products (frozen) and consumption frequency.

Keywords: fish consumption, fish products, young adult

1. Introduction

Fish is present in many cultures, and in each of them it has a different significance. For Christians, it is the symbol of Christianity; pre-Christians saw in fish a symbol of fertility; and the Celts saw in trout wisdom, knowledge, and inspiration. In Indian mythologies, fish represented the symbol of change and of creation; in China, it is the symbol of unity and fidelity, and of abundance and fertility due to the ability of the fish to gain weight. In Buddhism, fish symbolises freedom and joy, and in ancient European cultures it symbolised adaptability and determination.

As food, fish is an excellent source of high-quality animal protein since it contains a lot of lysine and essential amino acids, easy to digest and recommended for rich diets [1].

At the same time, it has an important energetic value and it is a valuable source of vitamin A and

D, thiamine (vitamin B₁), of iron, phosphorus, and calcium, as well as of other elements essential for a proper functioning of the brain and of the entire body (iodine, found in large amounts in ocean fish).

On the average, fish supplies between 2-30 calories per person per day, and is rich in polysaturated fatty acids, particularly Omega-3, considered to play an important role in the reduction of the bad cholesterol level [2].

According to Caloianu [3], fish is an important source of indirect food safety due to the jobs in the fishing industry and to the incomes from the processing and marketing of fish.

Fish consumption and fish farming date from ancient times: thus, in 2,500 B.C., when in China they started to capture fish after river floods; to note that China is nowadays the largest exporter of fish in the world [4].

Fish consumption has undergone important changes the last decades, increasing from an average of 9.9 kg per capita in the '60s to 11.5 kg per capita in the '70s, to 12.5 kg per capita in the

* Corresponding author: Mirela Samfira

'80s, to 14.4 in the '90s, reaching an average of 16.7 kg per capita in 2006. Most of the fish production is used as human food – frozen, prepared, or preserved. Freezing is the main fish processing method since it represents 50.0% of the total fish processed for human consumption [5].

It is important to know the elements defining the portrait of the fish consumer because the marketing strategy adapts to consumer's requirements which dictate the laws of demand and offer. We also consider that young consumer's requirements in Romania might determine the structure and size of fish farms or direct ocean fish species to be captured.

2. Materials and methods

Due to the fact that the dynamics of fish consumption during the last 50 years shows a continuous increase, we have the right to believe that the same positive trend will characterise the following decades.

We naturally ask ourselves which age segment has played the most important role in this increase of fish consumption and, of course, which age segments will promote this consumption in the future.

We think that at present the most important fish consumers are young, more adapted to novelty, and who are also the trainers of the future generations.

In order to reach this goal, we carried out a study on a sample of 112 subjects (70 of which are undergraduates of the BUASVM in Timisoara, Timis County, and 42 are high-school students from the Caras-Severin County) from both the urban and rural areas, aged 17-25. Since we did not want environment to have an impact on our results (there are considerable material, communication, and information differences between the two), we have chosen an even number of subjects from the two areas.

The 112 subjects were asked to fill in a questionnaire containing 15 items focused on defining elements of the fish and fish products consumer aiming at studying marketing elements, consumption frequency, fish species, and consumer behaviour. The questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

1. Do you eat fish?
2. If so, what fish species do you prefer?

3. Do you purchase live, frozen or refrigerated fish?
4. How often do you eat fish and/or fish products?
5. Do you eat fish specialties?
6. What fish specialties do you prefer?
7. Is the country of origin of the fish important for you?
8. Is the fish processing or marketing firm important to you?
9. Is fish consumption considered healthy?
10. Is fish product consumption healthy?
11. What are your criteria in purchasing fish?
12. Did it occur to you to buy fish that did not meet your expectations?
13. If so, what did you note?
14. What do you do if you see that the fish product you have purchased does not meet your expectations?
15. Are you tempted by the idea of going fishing to eat fresh fish?

The final goal of this study was to identify among the youth the present and future fish consumer and the trainer of new eating habits as a result of more and more information on fish consumption.

3. Results and discussion

Analysing the answers supplied by the respondents, we could note first the validity of the research (the risk factor of the present research was the possibility that most of the respondents do not eat fish). Thus, 73.2% of the respondents answered "yes" to the first question.

The answers to the second question shows that the most appreciated fish species are trout, carp, and catfish. "Trout" shares 50.0% of the answers supplied by the respondents, ranking first among fish consumers' preferences. This confirms the 15th place it occupies in the Top 15 of fish species and seafood produced in the world, as well as in the Top 10 of fish species from the point of view of the total value of this species.

The other fish species sharing some of the other answers are pike, haddock, mackerel, pangasius, salmon, and tuna, while other species share less: perch, goldfish, anchovy and herring.

As for the preferences concerning the type of fish product – alive, frozen, and preserved (salted, smoked), or refrigerated – the situation is the following: 76.8% prefer frozen fish, followed by live fish (34.0%). Salted fish and refrigerated fish share the least.

Unfortunately, the answers concerning the frequency of fish consumption is not what we expected: thus, 43.0% of the respondents eat fish once a month, 20.0% eat fish once a week, and only 10.0% eat fish twice a week. To note, nevertheless, that 6.0% of the respondents eat fish 3-4 times a week.

A share of 69.7 of the subjects answered affirmatively to the question concerning the consumption of fish specialties, with preferences for the following fish preparations: fish fingers, fish salad, fish eggs paste, and fish paste.

Question nr. 7, concerning the importance of the country of origin of the fish we eat, got answers that correlate positively with those supplied to question 3 (preference for frozen fish). Thus, 85.7% of the subjects are not interested in the exporting country.

Likewise, the answers to the question concerning the significance of the firm processing or selling the fish show that 53.6% of the consumers have no preferences for a particular brand.

The next item – criteria in choosing fish and fish products – is very important in defining the profile of the young fish consumer. Thus, the main criteria in purchasing fish and fish products is smell, followed by price, taste, outer aspect, colour, inner aspect, consistency, and flavour.

Another aspect of the research aimed at the analysis of some elements individualising fish consumer based on education and on information on the advantages and disadvantages derived from fish consumption. Thus, analysing the item concerning fish consumption as being healthy or not, we could note that 90.0% of the respondents answered “yes”.

The answers to the next question – Is fish product consumption healthy? – show that 37.6% of them are negative. In other words, the consumer does not trust processed fish; in exchange, he/she trusts whole fish with no intervention of the processing industry.

The answers to the following question show almost the same thing: 70.0% of the respondents answered “yes” when asked if the fish or fish product purchased always met his expectations.

The main claims pointed out by the next question were those concerning smell, taste, freshness, lack

of conformity of the product with the data on the label, etc.

The next item of the questionnaire shows a very direct response to the cases in which fish consumer was dissatisfied by the fish or fish product purchased: petitions in the fish market, to the consumer protection office, abandonment of a brand in favour of another, etc.

The last item of the questionnaire show that 50.5% of the respondents answered affirmatively to the question related to the alternative of going fishing to get fresh fish and to have fun instead of buying it from the supermarkets; other 40.0% answered negatively, while 9.5% gave no answer.

4. Conclusions

The present study is based on the description of the behaviour of the young fish and fish product consumer – a generation that will be addressed by the market of tomorrow.

Unfortunately, the main features of this consumer are directly determined by the present social and economic climate, where purchase power is low in general and lower in the case of this type of food. In other words, the profile of the fish consumer shows a consumer who is not concerned by quality, manufacturer, processor, or product quality, but by low prices allowing the purchase of large amounts of food.

The fish consumer of tomorrow wishes that this low-cost product is high-quality, and is aware of his/her rights as a consumer.

As a conclusion, the segment we have analysed wishes to eat fish and, though he/she has not yet very clear preferences, is well informed.

We also think that the answers to this questionnaire – applied on two social categories that have not been absorbed by the labour market – reflect the material state of their families.

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