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Traditional Foods at the Click of a Button: The Preference for the Online Purchase of Romanian Traditional Foods during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The 2020 quarantine demonstrated that online food purchase has become one of the main protagonists of the pandemic. The present study valued the Internet as a mediator between producers and consumers with the power to create new demand for Romanian traditional food during the COVID-19 crisis. Authors aimed at carrying out an exploratory research about the online purchase of traditional foods (TFs). Within this context, the study, firstly, outlines the meaning of traditional foods in the Romanian consumers' minds and, secondly, it identifies the variables that can predict the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey was carried out to investigate the Romanian consumers' perceptions (n = 223) of TFs and online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Binary logistic regression tested the relationship between the preference for the online purchase of TFS (vs. in-store) and seven perceived characteristics of TFs. Results show that the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic can be predicted by five variables—"TFs taste"; "Effect of TFs consumption on health during the COVID-19 pandemic"; "Effect of online TFs purchase on health during the COVID-19 pandemic"; "How cheap/expensive is to buy TFS online during the COVID-19 pandemic"; and "Easiness to purchase TFS online during the COVID-19 pandemic". It was concluded that TFs have to claim their place within this digitized landscape by finding the balance between old and new, between preferences for foods taste passed through generations and new life lifestyles at 5G speed.

Keywords: traditional foods; consumers; the internet; COVID-19; perceptions

1. Introduction

The online environment offers solutions to everyday needs and habits of people, besides removing socio-cultural and informational barriers. The Internet matures, transforms, and grows continuously and it proves to be, particularly during COVID-19 pandemic, a useful tool for more and more people. Globally, in September 2020, 63.2% of the population (representing 4,929,926,187 people) had access to the Internet [1] and in 2019, an estimated 1.92 billion people purchased goods online in general [2].

An increase of 30% in 2017 was observed for sales of groceries through e-commerce platforms, a tendency visible mainly in China and South Korea, the latter having the fastest internet in the world and the greatest broadband penetration. Nevertheless, Europe shows significant potential as it is the second-largest market for e-commerce following Asia [3]. Varma Citrin et al. [4] showed that a generally higher amount of Internet use is associated with an increased amount of Internet product acquisitions.

In Romania, according to the most recent documents [5], in 2018, the share of households that had access to the Internet at home was 72.4% (the percentage increased by 3.8% compared to 2017); of this total, 62.9% households were located in urban areas. The share of people who use the Internet decreases with age. The share of people using the Internet in the 16-34 age group is 94.7%, while for the 55-74 age group it is only 53.8%. The proportion of people aged 16-74 who have ever used the Internet was 78.8%, with 5.3 % more than the previous year. Looking at the 2019 figures for the EU Member States, high shares of people who shopped online during the previous year were recorded in particular in the Scandinavian countries. The share of the Romanian population who bought online during 2019 is 23%, ranking penultimate in the EU. The highest shares were found in Denmark (84%) and Sweden (82%) [6].

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the social-distancing rules have stimulated digital shopping all over the world and it seems that this has become a tipping point for digitization [7]. In the EU-27, retail sales, in general, via mail order or Internet in April 2020 increased by 30% in April 2020 compared to April 2019, while total retail sales diminished by 17.9% [8]. This trend towards e-commerce has been observed in particular along the food supply chain. Farmers also have started to use digital technologies for selling their products directly to consumers or restaurants that switched to food or grocery delivery services [9]. In Romania, an exponential increase of online deliveries during the COVID-19 pandemic is reported by Butu et al [10]. An estimation for the online sales in Romania showed that they have risen by 30% [11], a percentage expected to increase as we are in the mid of the crisis. Gao et al. [12] showed that, in China, the share of confirmed COVID-19 cases increased the possibility of consumers purchasing food online. Similarly, among the impacts of COVID-19 on Qatari consumer behaviors related to food consumption, a study of Hassen et al [7] indicates a significant change in food purchase modality with a surge in online grocery shopping. For March 2020, in the United States, 23% of the interviewed persons indicated to use e-commerce more frequently to purchase products normally bought in-store due to COVID-19 [13].

Within the COVID-19 pandemic context, the following two main objectives were identified. The first one is to outline the meaning of TFs in the Romanian consumers' minds. The second one is to identify the variables that can predict the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic. To authors best knowledge, this is the first attempt to observe the meaning that TFs have in Romanian consumers' mind and also the first which identifies determinants for their preference for online purchase of TFs during COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions formulated in relation to the above-mentioned objectives were the following:

- (i) What are the attributes of TFs in the Romanian consumers' minds?
- (ii) Can the selected variables predict the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic? (independent variables: "TFs taste", "Effect of TFs consumption on health during the COVID-19 pandemic", "Effect of TFs online purchase on health during COVID-19 pandemic", "How cheap/expensive is to buy TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic", "Easiness to purchase TFs online during COVID-19 pandemic", "Effect of TFs online purchase on the natural environment", and "Effect of TFs online purchase on the local/ national economy during COVID-19 pandemic").

1.1. An Overview on Traditional Foods

Although many studies have suggested the reduction in environmental impacts (e.g. NO_x emissions, see [14–16]) related to COVID 19, Klemeš et al [17] argue that it is too soon to give verdicts on the long term net environmental consequences. One environmental effect of the ongoing crisis is

the increasing demand for and use of plastic products to protect the general public health which has become a challenge in terms of their sustainable waste management. Overall, COVID-19 has brought to light not only the limits of health systems, but also the fragility and resilience of food systems [18]. Therefore, the crisis we are going through outlines that understanding the human usage of natural resources as a pillar of sustaining local communities is of utmost importance [19], and food production embeds one of these usages.

Being both economic and cultural phenomena, food production and consumption are often linked to the geographical identity and traditional foods (TFs), and transform themselves in the interface between the consumers and producers, protecting cultural associations with a geographical area or with traditional practices [20]. Some TFs have geographical and traditional indications in the European Union [e.g., Protected designation of origin (PDO), Protected geographical indication (PGI) and Traditional specialties guaranteed (TSG)]. These standards promote and protect the names of quality of foodstuffs (and agricultural products also). Thus, the origin and authenticity are the two quality attributes linked to TFs [21,22]. At the same time, TFs can contribute to enhancing the destination attractiveness and, thus, it can support local agro-economies [23]. Kuhnlein and Receveur [24] posit that TFs system refers to “all food within a particular culture available from local natural resources and culturally accepted . . . (it) includes the sociocultural meanings, acquisition processing techniques, use, composition, and nutritional consequences for the people using the food”. Verbeke et al. [25] and Guerrero et al. [26] add to these characteristics those of specific sensory attributes (e.g., taste, appearance, color, aroma) gastronomic heritage, eating habits, and association with a certain local area. The European Food Information Resource Network (cited by [27,28]) included, for a better understanding of TFs concept, statements about traditional ingredients, traditional composition, and traditional type of production and/or processing.

Therefore, the present study draws on valuing TFs as a product of traditional knowledge and a key issue for the resilience of local communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a world where consumption of industrialized foods becomes a global trend [29]. Consumers increased search for novel food led to new food production alternatives [30] which have transformed TFs more and more in what Vanhonacker et al. [31] call as “the odd man out”. Next, as people respond to crises in different ways, when they face a risky situation, they do whatever they can to feel like they have control. This implies a change in their behaviors, such as consumption patterns. It is witnessed that with the onset of lockdowns, online shopping has become more prevalent all over the world [32]. Having as the premise the fact the Internet enables new forms of producer-consumer collaboration [33], a connection that can have an even more important significance during s crises, we valued the Internet as a mediator between producers and consumers with the power to create new demand for Romanian traditional food during the COVID-19 crisis.

1.2. Traditional Foods in the National Context

Romanian consumer are becoming more and more sophisticated, with rising demand for more elaborated food products, and novelty inciting consumers to purchase food products [34]. At the national level, we face a serious challenge with the “Health–Nutrition–Well-Being” trend that asks for rapid adaptation to the new thinking about the synergy between social returns, business success, and better quality of life [35]. Healthy eating is associated with the consumption of different types of foods, among which TFs [36]. In general, in Europe, and Romanian is no exception, TFs are seen as part of the European culture, identity, and heritage and they contribute to the sustainable development of the rural area [26]. The village is associated with tradition, food is part of it and tradition is often linked to an archaic way of production associated with craftsmanship and artisan production, local ingredients that are as natural as possible, and specific local recipes. Moreover, TFs are valued as a more sustainable choice than conventional food because of the shorter transport distances, the support provided to local economies, and contribution to environment preservation [35]. In Romania, capitalizing local resources and the ability to respond to local food demand make TFs market a solution

to reduce regional economic gaps [37]. In December 2019, 727 traditional products were registered under national quality schemes, seven registered under European schemes, and another four products were undergone verification at the European Commission [38]. A survey conducted in seven European countries, among which Romania was also included, highlighted that one obstacle in consuming TFs was the inability to locate traditional food products [39]. This observation indicates that Romanians should better promote and signal TFs to gain a competitive advantage over conventional food and also over other countries. Several authors [35,40] identified another perceived disadvantage of TFs—they are not always considered a healthy food because of animal fats.

In both global and national context, consumers' interest in food quality attributes linked to traditional production techniques and geographical locations lead to increased availability of TFs which outlines a prominent market for TFs [41–44]. In this context, the investigation of factors that can predict the preference for the online purchase of TFs can reveal why consumers decide to purchase online TFs. Moreover, in Romania, like in many other countries from this part of Europe, the consumption of TFs is strongly connected with cultural habit and they are very popular [44]. "Traditional" attribute, in general, is linked to the past, while the "online" environment to the present and future. This opposition can generate a contradiction in consumers' minds between the two concepts, which may frame TFs as not being suitable with the online environment and, thus, may distance consumers from the possibility to purchase TFs online. Even more, TFs are often consumed during celebrations and holidays or in specific locations and, usually, all these require direct food serving or home preparation and not online ordering. We are in a middle of a pandemic that imposes social distancing rules that limit the occasions for the consumption of TFs, putting more pressure on this category of foods which already faces strong competition from modern foods and modern lifestyle (e.g. fast food, international cuisine). Consequently, the present study adds to the research progress on consumer studies by exploring how TFs can find their place in the online environment, namely online purchasing, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methods

The research methodology was developed in two stages. In the first stage, secondary data were used to offer a more comprehensive image of the online Romanian environment, as it was described in the Introduction section.

Next, starting from the TFs definitions presented in the Introduction chapter, it was inferred that "traditional food" is a broad term that encompasses quality aspects characterizing various food product categories such as "local foods" and "natural products" among others, that people often associate with TFs [42]. Therefore, in this first stage, based on the scientific literature, consumers' conceptualization of the TFs characteristics was reviewed (Table 1). A total of 121 manuscripts were retrieved and the selection criteria included English language studies, peer-reviewed journals with an impact factor higher than 0.1 or present in Scopus, and books. The search keywords were "traditional food(s)", "traditional foodstuff", "traditional cuisine", "natural foods", "gastronomic heritage", "local food(s)", "consumer perception", "consumer attitude", "food quality cues", and combinations between them. Searches were conducted in electronic databases (e.g., Scopus-Elsevier, Emerald Management Journals 200, SpringerLink Journals, Cambridge Journals, ScienceDirect Freedom Collection-Elsevier, Springer, Web of Science-Core Collection, Wiley Journals) accessed via Anelis plus platform (Enformation portal). Finally, 35 records of full-text were retained (Table 1). This step was considered of utmost relevance for defining the concept of TFs in the questionnaire in order to have a uniform understanding of it among respondents.

Table 1. Product attributes associated with the concept of TFs based on the literature review.

Attributes Associated with the Concept of TFs	Revised Literature
Traditional cuisine	[20,26,45,46]
Traditional recipe	[25,47]
Homemade/ homey food/recipes from mother's notebook	[29,42]
Original/basic taste	[26,29].
Local food	[20,25,42,48–51]
Protected designation of origin (PDO), Protected geographical indication (PGI), Traditional specialties guaranteed (TSG)	[52–56]
Organic foods	[48,57]
Food naturalness	[27,58–60]
Freshness	[61,62]
Minimal processing	[63,64]
Artisanal product	[54,65–68]
Countryside food	[69,70]

The second methodological step was the investigation of the Romanian consumers' perceptions regarding TFs and the online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey relies on a convenience sample of 223 persons selected online. With respect to the age and gender quotas, 57% of the sample were women, and 52% were of an age between 16 and 34 years old; thus, sample structure respected the age and gender quotas of internet users in Romania [71]. Demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample characteristics.

Variable	Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Gender (% men)	64	-	-
Age (years) (M / SD)	-	35.07	12.25
Income (% of total sample)	Max 800 euro/month	801-1600	1601-2400
	63%	26%	7%
Education (% of total sample)	Primary	High school	Bachelor/Master/PhD
	0%	40%	60%
Living environment (% of total sample)	Urban		Rural
	89%		11%

Participation was voluntary and the purpose of the study was presented at the beginning of the questionnaire. Then, two filter questions were asked. The first one asked if they consumed TFs at least two times during the last 12 months. All persons responded "Yes". The second one asked if they ordered any product/service online at least two times during the last 12 months. Only the persons who answered "Yes" were allowed to continue answering the questionnaire. Nine persons answered "No". The questionnaire was implemented during August-September 2020, after the lockdown, while certain social distancing rules were still in place.

The first question (after the filter ones) served to achieve the first study objective and attempted to capture the meanings associated by the respondents with the TFs. Thirteen attributes indicated by various studies as being associated with TFs were tested in a multiple-choice question (Table 1; Q1, Table 3). Each attribute was clearly explained to respondents. In the questionnaire, an explanation of attribute meaning was attached between brackets to each attribute.

Table 3. Investigated variables and the corresponding questions.

Investigated Variable	Question	Answer Options
Q1. TFs attributes	<p>Please indicate which of the following attributes you consider that represent traditional foods:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Traditional cuisine; 2. Traditional recipe; 3. Homemade/homey food/recipes from mother's notebook; 4. Original/basic taste; 5. Local food; 6. Protected designation of origin (PDO), Protected geographical indication (PGI), Traditional specialties guaranteed (TSG); 7. Organic food; 8. Food naturalness; 9. Freshness; 10. Minimal processing; 11. Artisanal product; 12. Countryside food; 13. Other. 	1= Yes; 0= No
Q2. TFs taste	In general, how is the taste of traditional foods compared to the taste of ordinary foods?	<p>1= Much more unpleasant; 2= Moderately more unpleasant; 3= A little bit more unpleasant; 4= The same; 5= A little bit better; 6= Moderately better; 7= Much better</p>
Q3. Effect of TFs consumption on health during the COVID-19 pandemic	What effect do you think that the regular consumption of traditional foods has on your health during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to ordinary foods?	<p>1= It damages a lot your health; 2= It damages to an average degree your health; 3= It damages a little bit your health; 4= It has no effect on your health; 5= It helps you a little bit to maintain your health; 6= It helps you to an average degree to maintain your health; 7= It helps you a lot to maintain your health.</p>
Q4. Effect of online TFs purchase on health during the COVID-19 pandemic	How much does the online purchase of traditional foods protect your health during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the in-store purchase?	<p>1= It damages a lot your health; 2= It damages to an average degree your health; 3= It damages a little bit your health; 4= It has no effect on your health; 5= It helps you a little bit to protect your health; 6= It helps you to an average degree to protect your health; 7= It helps you a lot to protect your health.</p>
Q5. How cheap is to buy TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic	Is it cheaper or more expensive for you to purchase traditional foods online during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to online purchase of ordinary foods?	<p>1= Much more expensive; 2= Moderately more expensive; 3= A little bit more expensive; 4= The same; 5= A little bit cheaper; 6= Cheaper to a moderate degree; 7= Much cheaper</p>
Q6. Easiness to purchase TFs online during COVID-19 pandemic	How easy is for you to purchase traditional foods online during the COVID-19 pandemic?	<p>1= Extremely difficult; 2= Very difficult; 3= Difficult; 4= Average difficulty; 5= Easy; 6= Very easy; 7= Extremely easy</p>
Q7. Effect of TFs online purchase on the natural environment during the COVID-19 pandemic	What kind of effect has the online purchase of traditional foods on the natural environment during COVID-19 pandemic?	<p>1= High negative effect; 2= Moderate negative effect; 3= Small negative effect; 4= No effect; 5= Moderate positive effect; 6= Small positive effect; 7= High positive effect</p>
Q8. Effect of TFs online purchase on the local/ national economy during the COVID-19 pandemic	What kind of effect has the online purchase of traditional foods during the COVID-19 pandemic on the local/ national economy?	<p>1= It undermines it a lot; 2= It undermines it to a moderate degree; 3= It undermines it a little bit; 4= No effect; 5= It helps it a little bit; 6= It helps it to a moderate degree; 7= It helps it a lot</p>
Q9. Preference for the online purchase of TFS vs in-store purchase during the COVID-19 pandemic	How do you prefer to buy traditional foods during the COVID-19 pandemic?	<p>1= Online purchase on the first place (from restaurants, supermarkets, shops, etc.); 0= In-store purchase/ consumption on the first place (to eat traditional foods at the restaurant, to buy traditional foods in-store from supermarkets, shops, etc.) or Indifferent/ Equal preference</p>

Next, the definition of TFs was given to respondents to ensure a similar understanding of the TFs concept among them. The next eight questions aimed to respond to the second research objective and they investigated perceptions of TFs characteristics and preference for online purchase of TFs (Q2–Q9,

Table 3). Of these, the first four referred to taste, health, and price (Q2–Q5, Table 3). Food literature indicated that taste, health, and price were among the most important motives for food choice [72–75] and, consequently, they were included in the questionnaire (Q2–Q5, Table 3). The questionnaire was pre-tested on 80 consumers prior to its implementation. The TFs taste was examined in comparison to that of ordinary foods. “Ordinary” food was considered to be usually, “everyday” food [76]. Both the consumption and the acquisition of food have health-related implications during the COVID-19 pandemic and, therefore, they were included in the questionnaire. Price perception was assessed by asking if it was cheaper or more expensive for respondents to purchase TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to in-store purchase. Easiness of the Internet use has a significant impact on consumers’ decisions and habits to purchase products online [77]. The questionnaire reflected this aspect by asking about the easiness of the TFs’ online purchase during the pandemic (Q6, Table 3). Two questions referred to the impact of TFs online purchase on the natural environment and on the local/national economy (Q7–Q8, Table 3). Their inclusion was grounded on the fact that TFs were often associated with environmental and social benefits [27,78,79]. One question evaluated the preference for the online purchase of TFS vs in-store purchase (Q9, Table 3).

Data were analyzed in Excel and SPSS. Binary logistic regression was performed using SPSS to test the relationship between the preference for the online purchase of TFs (vs in-store or indifferent) and seven perceived characteristics of TFs (“TFs taste”, “Effect of TFs consumption on health during COVID-19 pandemic”, “Effect of TFs online purchase on health during COVID-19 pandemic”, “How cheap/expensive is to buy TFs online during COVID-19 pandemic”, “Easiness to purchase TFs online during COVID-19 pandemic”, “Effect of TFs online purchase on the natural environment”, and “Effect of TFs online purchase on the local/ national economy during the COVID-19”). The binary regression was run because the dependent variable was coded as dichotomous (1= preference for online and 0= preference for in-store or indifferent). Similarly, binary regression was frequently used in other studies to investigate aspects related to the online or food behaviors, such as the investigation of specialty food buying behavior [80], identification of the factors associated with online selection of foods [81]; investigation of the association between dietary patterns and socio-demographic variables and food intake behaviors [82]; study of the effect of several eating habits on diet change of Generation Z [83]; study of the determinants of organic vegetables purchase in Indonesia [84]; and, also, investigation of determinants of the probability of online working [85].

3. Results

All tested attributes are associated with TFs by most interviewed consumers. The attributes the most frequently mentioned as being considered TFs are “Traditional cuisine”, “Traditional recipe”, “Artisanal product”, “Countryside food”, and “Homemade/ homey food/ recipes from mother’s notebook” (Figure 1).

All tested perceptions of TFs received middle to high evaluations (on 1–7 point scale; the meanings of the scores are included in Table 3). As expected, taste obtained the highest score (Figure 2). Regarding the preference for online purchase of TFs during COVID-19 pandemic, 67.7% of total sample preferred the online purchase.

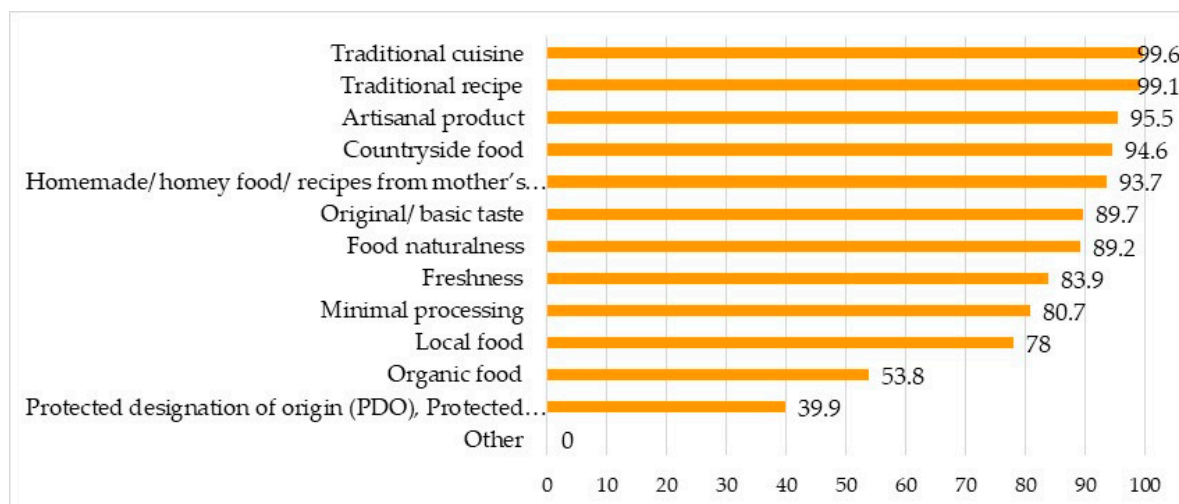


Figure 1. Percentage (of total sample) of respondents who associate a specific attribute with TFs.

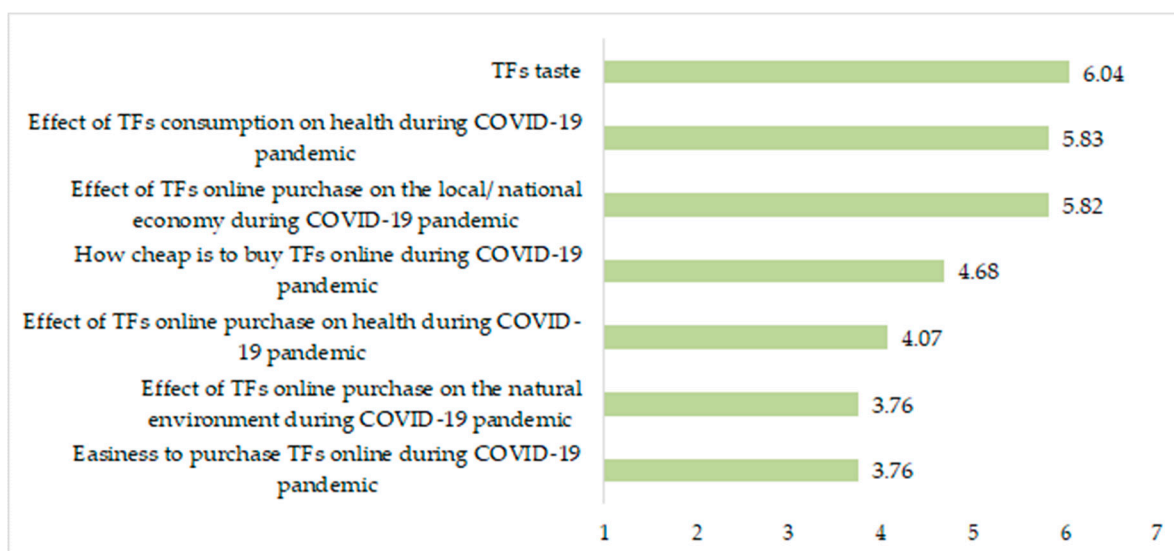


Figure 2. Perception of the TFs taste and of characteristics of the TFs online purchase (average scores).

The binary logistic regression analysis tested how well seven perception variables can predict people's "Preference for online purchase of traditional foods during COVID-19 pandemic" (vs in-store purchase). The Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients which shows how well the model performs, generated a highly significant value ($p = 0.000$) and a chi-square value of 77.034 with 7 degrees of freedom. The values obtained through the Hosmer and Lemeshow Test support the model, too, with a good fit revealed by a p value greater than 0.05 ($p = 0.069$). The Cox & Snell R Square and the Nagelkerke R Square values show that between 29.2% and 40.8% of the variability in the preference to buy TFs online vs. in-store purchase of TFs is explained by five variables. Among the seven tested variables, five contribute significantly to the predictive ability of the model, namely: "TFs Taste", "Effect of TFs consumption on health during the COVID-19 pandemic", "Effect of TFs online purchasing on health during the COVID-19 pandemic", "How cheap/expensive is to buy TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic", and "Easiness to purchase TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic". "Effect of TFs online purchase on the natural environment" and "Effect of TFs online purchase on the local/national economy" do not have predictive power (Table 4).

Table 4. Results of binary logistic regression analysis for the impact of selected variables on the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic (only variables with predictive power are included).

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	p	OR
TFs taste	Preference for online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic vs. in-store purchase or indifferent	0.420	0.148	8.018	1	0.005	1.522
Effect of TFs consumption on health during the COVID-19 pandemic		0.349	0.136	6.596	1	0.010	1.417
Effect of online TFs purchase on health during the COVID-19 pandemic		0.489	0.202	6.037	1	0.014	1.645
How cheap/expensive is to buy TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic		0.305	0.102	8.994	1	0.003	1.357
Easiness to purchase TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic		0.594	0.164	13.034	1	0.000	1.810
Constant		9.668	2.173	19.795	1	0.000	0.000

Note: B is Regression Coefficient; S.E. is Standard Error; Wald is Wald Statistic; df is degree of freedom; p is Significance; OR is odds ratio.

4. Discussion

Over 80% of respondents associate ten out of the twelve tested attributes with TFs which proves that TFs have a very broad meaning in their minds. Only the attributes of being “Organic food” and having a PDO, PGI, or TSG label are less frequently considered as TFs compared to the other ten attributes, but they still have a high presence at sample level (around 40% and 50%, respectively). These comparatively lower percentages may be the consequence of the fact that products labeled “organic”, PDO, PGI, or TSG are rarer on the market compared to the other tested attributes and consumers are less used to look for these labels.

The binary logistic regression shows that the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the COVID-19 pandemic can be predicted by five variables and the model has a good predictive power because the independent variables explain between 29.2% and 40.8% of the variability in the preference to buy TFs online vs. in-store. People who prefer to buy TFs online (vs. in-store or indifferent) during the COVID-19 pandemic are those with the following characteristics: they perceive a higher positive effect on the health of TFs consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic, they consider that TFs have good taste, they believe that TFs are cheap and easy to buy online, and they consider that TFs protect the health when they are purchased online, all other factors being equal. For every increase with one level in the perceived effect of online purchase of TFs on health during the COVID-19 pandemic, the odds of him/her preferring to buy TFs online increase by a factor of 1.417 (OR = 1.417, Table 4). According to Ajzen [86], perception (equivalent to belief, in this case) is a component of attitude and this is a predictor of behavior. Consequently, this perception can be considered an incentive for the adoption of the online purchases and, thus, it contributes to respecting social distancing rules by avoiding social contact that occurs during in-store purchase.

The perception of TFs as healthy foods stimulates both the online purchase of TFs during this crisis. From a practical perspective, this result indicates to marketers that highlighting the health-related advantages of TFs has the potential to increase online sales of TFs during the pandemic. The more people think that TFs consumption is good for their health, the less they prefer in-store and the more they prefer online purchases. For every increase with one level in the perceived effect of TFs

consumption on health during the COVID-19 pandemic, the odds of him/her preferring to buy TFs online vs. in-store increase by a factor of 1.645 (OR = 1.645, Table 4).

Taste is a well-known attribute that drives food preference and also one of the main cues for quality evaluation which gains much more relevance when it is about TFs. Taste also influences sustainability and healthiness of food choices [87]. In the particular case of TFs, taste becomes also an expression of cultural capital [88]. The present study confirms that taste is a motive that supports the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the pandemic. Hence, it can be assumed based on study results that making people appreciate TFs taste will stimulate their preference for TFs online purchase. For every increase with one level in the appreciation of TFs taste, the odds of consumers preferring to purchase TFs online vs. ordinary foods increase by a factor of 1.522 (OR = 1.522, Table 4).

Being cheap and easy to buy TFs online during the COVID-19 pandemic are two more motives that predict the preference for the TFs online acquisition. Other studies have also found that the affordable price and convenience are often considered by consumers in their food choices [89,90]. These findings highlight the importance of framing the online purchase of TFS as affordable and comfortable in consumer's minds. The image of a low price can be easily achieved by comparing it to other products more expensive. Online ordering of TFs can be made easy to consumers, first of all, by making TFS easily available for online buying, for example, on the websites commonly used to order online other types of foods, such as pizza.

5. Conclusions

One of the responses of how people are approaching COVID-19 pandemic is reflected in the purchase behavior, more specifically in a ramping up of the online shopping. We assumed that the pandemic has accelerated the shift towards a more digital world and the changes we are witnessing now will have lasting effects for the future. The study considered the Internet as a mediator between producers and consumers with the power to create new demand for Romanian traditional food during the COVID-19 crisis. The present contribution outlined the meaning of traditional foods in the Romanian consumers' minds and it identified the variables that predicted the preference for the online purchase of TFs during the pandemic. To this purpose, an online survey was applied on a sample of 223 persons with similar age and gender quotas as the ones of the internet users in Romania (Table 2). The TFs were valued as an important part of European culture, identity, and heritage, and they were considered to encompass particular food ingredients and food preparation methods that have been passed on from one generation to another. The TFs were examined in comparison to ordinary foods – considered to be usually, “everyday” food [85].

The study responded to two main research objectives. Firstly, it highlighted the meaning of TFs in Romanian consumers' mind. All tested attributes were associated with TFs by most interviewed consumers. The most frequent meanings associated with TFs were “Traditional cuisine” and “Traditional recipe”. This information brings to marketers' attention the attributes that consumers associate with TFs and which are, thus, suitable to be associated with TFs in promotion campaigns of TFs. The lowest-ranked were PDO, PGI, and TSG. It can be inferred that there is an obvious need for education and information campaigns to inform people that these labels protect both consumers and producers against imitations and misuses within the EU and in non-EU countries where a protection agreement was concluded. The study also revealed that people believed that TFs consumption in a pandemic scenario helped to maintain their health and that it supported local/ national economy. Secondly, the present study found that the preference for the online purchase of TFs during COVID-19 pandemic was well predicted by TFs taste, the perceived effect on health of TFs consumption, the health protection effect of online ordering, TFs price perception, and easiness of the online purchase. From a practical perspective, marketers should be aware that Romanian consumers are keen to purchase TFs at the click of a button. Each of us, no matter which part of the barricade we are, consumers, producers, or retailers, must be aware that the COVID-19 hurried the digital revolution also in the food sector, and the Internet is the instrument through which the food industry, where TFs has its place, has started one

of its most visible makeovers. Probably, the development of food online platforms that connect local producers with the consumers together with the advertising of TFs as contributors to environment protection, sustainable production, or social local solidarity could positively impact on the growth rate of the online purchase of TFs.

The study confined itself to few aspects of its methodology. Firstly, it used a convenience sample. Secondly, the current study presented a brief view on consumers' understanding of TFs' meaning, which it would be worth extending to include more attributes in a future study. Next, the vision for further research includes, at least several of the following directions: to investigate Romanian consumer awareness and knowledge about traditional labels, to explore the drivers and deterrents towards the online TFs purchase, and the willingness to pay (WT) for online TFs. Another promising research direction can be to explore how other aspects of consumer life linked to tradition (e.g., religion and its related holidays, customs, etc.) can play a role in stimulating the consumption of TFs and their integration into the present-day life style with sustainability requirements [91], online activities, and pandemic restrictions.

Summing up, the fear of contagion has driven many consumers to more online approach of their day by day life. Within this context, the 2020 quarantine demonstrated that online food purchase has become one of the main protagonists of the pandemic. TFs have to claim their place within this digitized landscape by finding the balance between old and new, between preferences for foods taste passed through generations and new life lifestyles at 5G speed.

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