Between Price and Quality: The Criteria of Food Choice in Romania*

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Abstract: This article investigates the issue of food quality and price as criteria of food choice in Romania. Given the country’s less advantageous economic status, Romania seems an ideal candidate on which to research the potential conflicts between such criteria of food choice. As the analysis is built on data from the Special Eurobarometer 389, some comparative findings are also presented between Romania and the rest of the EU, particularly, the EU-15 and the EU-11 (EU-12 minus Romania) country group. The results show that in Romania the manifest variables of food choice criteria are split into two latent constructs: quality related aspects on one hand and price on the other, while in the majority of other countries price enters the same axis as quality. Thus, on the macro-level it is possible to conclude that Romanians’ food preferences have their roots in two sources and fit a quality vs price model. An investigation of the socio-demographic determinants of these two preference criteria confirms the role of Bourdieu’s distinction regarding the influence of social class on these preferences. In Romania, like in the rest of Europe, the price preference is associated with a precarious socio-economic status, while the preference for quality seems to be a habitus specific to a higher social status. The most salient difference between Romania and the two country groups is that in Romania neither age nor gender and only socio-economic background and place of residence have an influence on the studied preferences.

Keywords: food consumption, quality cues, price-constraint, social status, distinction, Eurobarometer, Romania

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Introduction

In the aftermath of several food-related scandals, food quality is nowadays a prominent issue and consumers have accordingly started to take strong note and place high importance on various matters related to food safety and quality. Consumers’ increasing reflexivity in connection with food choice means that they are engaging more and more in conscious consumption behaviours ranging from ‘buycotting’ to boycotting. The international literature talks about a conscious consumption movement and considers it a proper form of political activity [e.g. Connolly and Prothero 2008; Sassatelli and Davolio 2010; Micheletti, Stole and Berlin 2012]. This viewpoint contends that by accepting or rejecting certain products, consumers are in fact voting with their money for particular products, producers, and values. Other viewpoints regard the consumer interest in food quality as a sign of reflexive modernisation and quality-aware food purchases as a form of personal and family health care, without amounting, or at least not consciously, to a political statement [e.g. Szasz 2007].

Obviously, consumers are not uniformly devoted to the issue of food quality and conscious consumption initiatives and there are several cleavages which circumscribe specific consumer segments. In the context of Europe, empirical evidence shows that consumers in northern and western states are more devoted to conscious consumption than those living in the southern and eastern countries [e.g. Thogersen 2010]. On the micro-level, studies indicate the existence of further cleavages according to several individual-level variables. The leading role in this regard is played by social status. The higher prices of better-quality food products mean that quality-aware purchases may be too great a burden for low-income people and their access to this alternative political arena or lifestyle may be limited [e.g. Steenkamp 1997; Harrison et al. 2007]. Bourdieu’s [1984] classic thesis about the role of social status in shaping particular food-related habitus is thus still relevant and, despite the globalisation and standardisation of food products, consumers are still divided into specific categories with particular food-related preferences.

While the price of products can act both as a cue to quality and an indicator of economic constraints that limit access to better-quality products [Ding, Ross and Rao 2010], there is nonetheless a very complex relationship between price and quality and studies aimed at revealing the nature of this relationship can provide important empirical findings and useful arguments. The purpose of the present study is to provide insight into the food-related preferences of Roma-nians by investigating the quality and price tandem as the criteria of food-choice and examining the socio-demographic determinants of these choices. The reason

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1 The reasons for this cleavage could be the better information consumers have in these states [e.g. Halkier et al. 2007], the better macro-economic climate, and micro-economic status, where spending more on better quality products seems like a low-cost situation for consumers [Koos 2012].
for selecting Romania is its less favourable macro-economic and micro-economic conditions,\(^2\) which make the country an interesting case on which to research the quality versus price relationship in food-related choices. The Romanian context allows, therefore, for an investigation into the reverse of the so-called low-cost hypothesis of food choice [Koos 2012], that is to say, whether in an economically less well-off environment, quality-conscious shopping entails high costs and may be a hard-to-afford luxury. Starting with this premise, this study puts forward two main and inter-related hypotheses. The first and more general hypothesis posits that in the specific economic situation of Romania the price of a product is not perceived as a quality cue, but rather as an economic constraint, which serves as an impediment to accessing higher priced, better quality products. Following the classic thesis of Bourdieu’s [1984] *Distinction*, the second hypothesis (which also supports the first hypothesis) is that, in spite of the generally unfavourable economic context, there are individual-level factors that can generate class differences in relation to food preferences.

The empirical analysis below explores these assumptions using the dataset of the Special Eurobarometer 389, which was applied to all 27 member states of the European Union. The analysis aims to provide some comparative insight into the phenomena under investigation and to determine to what degree the Romanian situation is similar or different to what occurs in other parts of Europe.

**Food consumption: between price and quality**

*Price as a quality cue and price as a constraint*

In economic terms and in reference to the general trade-offs between quality and price, scholars tend to talk about the ‘income constraint’, which presupposes a kind of satisfaction maximisation behaviour, meaning that consumers attempt to consume the best available food on their budget. Frequently, budget constraints do not allow consumption of the best quality food for health, only the food that fits best within budget limits. Consequently, as Blaylock et al. [1999] contend, consumers often need to operate with trade-offs: between nutrition and taste; between nutrition and costs; between taste, nutrition, cost and time; and between short-term costs (time, money, taste) and long-term costs (e.g. healthy eating). Depending on what economic resources are available to them, consumers can choose among several strategies, the worst being to focus on short-term costs and choose unhealthy, low-cost products.

\(^2\) Measured in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) and compared to the reference value =100 PPS of the EU-27, the Romanian GDP for 2011 is 49 PPS. With this value Romania has the second lowest GDP after Bulgaria (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tec00114), retrieved 24 January 2013. Moreover, the data of the Romanian Statistical Institute show that 44% of the Romanian households’ monthly income is spent on food and non-alcoholic beverages [NIS 2012].
Today, food is more affordable than ever, but this does not mean that all consumers can afford the best-quality foods for their health, no matter how reflexive and quality-conscious they may be. The nutritional value and other types of qualities of food (e.g. social and environmental values) are usually reflected in price differences, with higher prices placed on better quality foods, and consequently people with a strong income constraint may feel that healthy and ethically and environmentally conscious eating is not worth the effort or sacrifice (at least in the short term). Likewise, to eat healthy foods presupposes spending considerable time looking for information about foods, their nutrients, etc. [Blaylock et al. 1999], and eating better quality products, whether conventional or those which fall under the umbrella of conscious consumption (organic, local, ethical, etc.), frequently remains a privilege for those citizens who are better off.

It has been shown that when there are no severe income constraints consumers do not always buy the lowest priced products, even when they are choosing between products that are otherwise similar [Ding, Ross and Rao 2010]. The reason for this is that consumers frequently infer the quality of a product from its price. In other words, a higher price can decrease consumers’ utility maximisation because they must pay more for the product, while, alternatively, a higher price may induce higher quality perceptions, which increase and compensate utility.

Olson and Jacoby [1972] have demonstrated that people assess food quality on the basis of intrinsic and extrinsic cues. Intrinsic cues refer to taste, healthiness, ingredients, etc., while extrinsic cues include manifest aspects such as packaging, geographic origin, brand, and, of course, price. The quality of the products, and especially their intrinsic quality, usually cannot be asserted before they are purchased and consumers have to formulate quality expectations based on extrinsic cues. Nowadays, quality labelling serves as a source of information about the intrinsic properties of food items, but consumers frequently ignore such labels as they are unfamiliar with or do not understand them; consequently, they prefer to rely on other extrinsic cues [Grunert 2002]. This is because food choice, compared with choosing durable products, is a low-involvement activity and in the case of everyday food purchases consumers have to make decisions quickly. By relying on extrinsic indicators they aim to reduce the time spent shopping and to limit the risk attached to making choices [Kemp et al. 2010].

Price as an extrinsic cue usually correlates positively with the perception of quality, but there is also evidence to suggest that price becomes less important as a quality indicator when other extrinsic indicators are available [Zeithaml 1988]. Thus, objectively, a higher price usually means higher quality, but subjectively consumers do not always associate price with quality when other cues are available [see Olson 1977].

There is also the paradox that while extrinsic cues are more important at the time and place of purchase, intrinsic cues generally play a bigger role in quality-related judgements. Moreover, food preferences are complicated by the fact that food acceptance and rejection depend not only on food characteristics but also on consumer characteristics (e.g. age, gender, available income, family com-
Position); therefore, food product choice is a complex function of sensory preferences, attitudes, ethical concerns, and price [Fotopoulos et al. 2009]. That is, food quality and price always find themselves caught in the interplay between Homo edens (consumer) and Homo oeconomicus [Peri 2006]. The former looks at food primarily in terms of its sensory, nutritional, safety, and ethical characteristics, while the latter looks at food as a commodity, a marketed object with a specific price and availability. In certain situations, which depend on the aforementioned trade-offs between short- and long-term costs and on the social background of the consumers, either Homo edens or Homo oeconomicus may govern product choices. For certain types of consumers and depending on the products, the time and place of the purchase and the perceived value of a product can be represented by different patterns of the product, and both low price, quality (intrinsic or extrinsic) in general, or quality in relation to price can represent values in the eyes of the consumers [Zeithaml 1988].

Food preferences and social class

Given that certain social classes consume certain types of food and view the price/quality tandem in different ways, depending on their available resources, they consciously or unconsciously distinguish themselves from other social classes and create boundaries and delineate the outlines of certain food communities. The classic approach in this area is Bourdieu’s concept of food space [1984]. In the author’s view, people’s food-consumption preferences depend on their habitus, i.e. on their dispositions, which are inseparable from their social status. While high economic and cultural capital predisposes a person to the consumption of rich, fatty food products, when both these forms of capital are low the preference is for cheap, nourishing food. Obviously, in his approach to the food preferences of particular social classes, Bourdieu also makes reference to other variables—for instance, to the role of the division of domestic labour in structuring preferences or to tastes regarding the preferred body image, etc.

Bourdieu’s classic approach has been confirmed by several scholars [e.g. Lupton 1996; Warde 1997; Warde and Martens 2000], all of whom contend that, even if food is nowadays highly globalised and standardised, and even if all social classes generally are becoming more affluent (cf. the approach in Mennel [1985]), these developments cannot eliminate the differences in the tastes and eating habits between different social classes. Class differences in food-related preferences and actual purchases do still exist, and even in the context of late modernity, when lifestyles are rather more chosen than ascribed, consumption is still very much embedded in social contexts and practices [Wilska 2002].

The link between social class—in particular, between specific class variables like income and education—and food preferences is today a well-trodden research path, especially in the case of so-called conscious food consumption. Because those products that are emblematic of conscious consumption (e.g. ethical,
local, organic, green) are usually more expensive than conventional products, it is a common belief, sustained by market literature, that the cost of these products represents a major factor in the practices of conscious consumption.

In spite of several inconclusive findings, Beckmann [2007], Zakowska-Biemans [2011], and Koos [2012], among others, claim that monetary resources can be a budget restriction on conscious consumption. In the same line of thought, Harrison et al. [2007] consider food choices to be mediated by food costs, especially among people with low income; therefore, I contend that ethical consumption is linked to the middle class and represents an elitist food culture and a form of social distinction [Lawler 2005]. In this respect, Guthman [2003] refers to conscious food as ‘yuppie chow’ and associates it with gentrification.

In terms of cultural capital, empirical studies quite uniformly confirm the effect of higher education on the preference for quality. Education—even when income and other factors are controlled for—raises the likelihood of conscious consumption. The explanation is that better educated people have an advantage when acquiring and processing information on food quality in general and on social, ethical, and environmental issues in particular [Starr 2009]; the same holds true when it comes to understanding the ‘underlying complexities and issues in the production and supply of goods through the market’ [Koos 2012: 39].

On the other hand, the relationship between food-related quality and price has also been studied in more general terms and not specifically linked to the idea of conscious consumption. In East-Central Europe, empirical studies have shown that food-related concerns should be judged at the crossroads of low income and income inequalities. In these countries, economic determinants are crucial factors that limit food choices, even though growing income inequalities have also created a segment of the public for whom the quality of food in terms of sensory appeal and healthiness is very important [Petrovici, Ritson and Ness 2002]. Indeed, the recent study by Januszewska, Pienak and Verbeke [2011], which was based on the Food Choice Questionnaire (for the original questionnaire see Step-toe, Pollard and Warde [1995]) and was conducted among other countries, such as Hungary and Romania, showed that in both countries the price of products was less important compared to such intrinsic aspects of their quality as sensory appeal, healthiness, and the natural content of the food. This was also the case of other, previous studies conducted on older EU member states. For instance, Lennernas et al. [1997] found that, in general, the most important food choice factors are intrinsic cues, but subjects from different socio-demographic backgrounds may have their food choices influenced by different factors and price seems the most important criterion among unemployed and retired persons. Lappalainen, Kearney and Gibney [1998] reconfirmed these results: whereas quality is of paramount importance among all consumer groups, price plays a significant role in the choice of food products for many people, particularly for those on reduced income, such as unemployed and retired people.
Quality and price in the case of Romanian consumers

Statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics [NIS 2012] reveal that food consumption constitutes a heavy burden for Romanian households. In the total population, household expenditures on food and non-alcoholic beverages accounted for as much as 44% of total (household) consumption expenditures. This is one of the highest percentages in Europe, and reveals much more about real income constraints than food prices do, which in Romania are among the lowest in Europe [Eurostat 2013].

Determining exactly how much Romanians spend/are able to spend on food is of course complicated by differences between social classes. For instance, farmers’ households spend as much as 59% of household income on food, while employees spend a little less than the national average (41%). When considering these discrepancies it is also necessary to take into account the ratio between monetary expenditures on food and the equivalent value of food products households obtain from their own resources (i.e. from agriculture). In the case of farmers’ households, 44% of total food-related expenditure is on self-supplied food, while in the case of employees, self-supplied food amounts only to 8%. These differences have been outlined well by Alexandri and Alboiu [2009: 152], who contend that:

Romania, as a result of the high share of its rural population (45 per cent of the total population), is characterized by a mixed food consumption pattern. Thus, there the urban population has a consumption pattern in which access to food is mainly restricted by household purchasing power, and a consumption pattern of the rural population that includes the families that own land, whose food situation depends both upon their own production and their purchasing power. These consumption patterns do not exist in a pure state, as even the urban population has a significant degree of self-consumption, coming from the transfers of products from their relatives who live in the rural area.

In terms of Romanians’ political consumption, comparative surveys report very low levels of boycotting and boycotting. On the other hand, a recent survey

3 Here ‘self-supply’ refers to the practice of households producing vegetables and meat products on their own small farms. These products are not usually sold on the market but are instead used to satisfy the personal needs of the households.

4 For instance, according to data from the fourth wave of the European Values Survey (2008), only 2% of respondents declared that they had ever engaged in a boycott, 13% would probably participate in a boycott, while 85% rejected this kind of action. With this percentage, Romania, together with several other East-Central European countries, ranks among the European laggards in a context where Western and Northern European respondents reported higher levels of participation (around 10%) and willingness to participate in boycotts (around 30%). For more, see the European Values Study Website (http://
on a representative national sample [IRES 2013] that addressed Romanians’ eating habits showed that 91% of the population hold the view that Romanians have an unhealthy diet. At the same time, 46% of respondents believe that richer people eat healthier than poor individuals. Moreover, according to the data collected in this study, the consensual profile of the health-conscious Romanian consumer corresponds to a wealthy and well-educated older woman who lives in a rural area. The major impediments to healthy eating people cite are income, price constraints, and the unavailability of healthy products. However, interestingly, home cooking, which otherwise might be seen as an indicator of a less wealthy population who cannot afford to eat out [cf. Warde and Martens 2000], is considered by two-thirds of respondents to be an important opportunity for healthy eating. This can certainly be true if people are attentive to the foods they choose to cook. The data indicate, however, that one-third of respondents declare they are inattentive to what they eat and for the majority of them this is because they cannot financially afford to be concerned about food quality.

In connection with food-choice criteria, the same survey showed that the most important quality cues are smell, expiration dates, and the presentation, price, and packaging of a product. Apparently, price ranks as the fourth most important criterion, and these data agree with the earlier findings of Januszewska, Pienak and Verbeke [2011] and confirm the findings of Zeithaml [1988] that when respondents are presented with several quality cues, price becomes a less important indicator of product quality.

Smaller-scale studies analysing Romanians’ conscious consumption behaviour in the form of preferences for organic, green, etc., products have revealed the importance of several status variables [e.g. Lubieniechi 2002; Stânculescu and Marin 2008; Stancu 2011], such as education, income, urban residence, etc. These studies have also shown that two basic narratives of conscious consumption exist: the subsistence narrative, in which the preference for organic food is a matter of self-supply, and another, less dominant, lifestyle narrative in which conscious consumptions is a reflexive choice in the context of the risk society [Titarenko, Alexandrescu and Marin 2012].

**Research questions and hypotheses**

The aim of the present study is to investigate Romanians’ preferences for quality and/or price in the case of food products. In connection with this general purpose, two specific hypotheses are formulated. The first hypothesis (H1) focuses...
on the macro-level and assumes that Romanians see price not as a quality cue but as an economic constraint. This hypothesis builds on the considerations of Ding, Ross and Rao [2010], according to which the price of a product may play two important roles: an informational role, where price serves as an extrinsic quality cue, and an allocative role, where price is an indicator for budget constraints. Contrary to the low-cost hypothesis [Koos 2012], this assumption claims that in Romania, where consumers have strong budget constraints [NIS 2012; Eurostat 2013] and are of the opinion that the price of healthy products is what deters them from consuming such products [cf. IRES 2013], it seems reasonable to expect that food choice balances the considerations of quality and price.

The second hypothesis (H2) aims to strengthen the first general hypothesis and, following Bourdieu’s ideas about distinction [1984], assumes that when food consumption is considered in relation to social status there are differences between social classes that can be observed, in the sense that higher educational attainment, higher income, and higher occupational status (i.e. cultural and economic capital) increase the likelihood of a stronger preference for quality (H2a), whereas lower social status increases the likelihood of a person preferring price (H2b).

The role of other status-variables will also be investigated. Thus, I claim that age (H3), gender (H4), and the presence of children in the household (H5) will influence preferences, so that older individuals, women, and people with children will prioritise and place greater importance on quality than price. These expectations are formulated on the basis of empirical findings, which have consistently shown the correlation between social status and conscious consumption. For example, a meta-analysis by Hughner et al. [2007] showed that the consumers of organic food are usually women with children and older individuals. As regards the effect of gender, studies frequently refer to the ‘ethics of care’ and explain women’s stronger preference for quality food in terms of their stronger concerns about food safety, health, and ethical consumption [e.g. Micheletti, Stole and Berlin 2003]. As regards age, the assumption is that younger people—probably due to the fact that they obtained their education more recently—attach greater intrinsic value to conscious consumption. However, because they earn less than older people, the higher cost of these goods may represent too much of a financial burden for them, and younger people do not make up the largest group of conscious consumers [Starr 2009].

As noted above, the Romanian context is very specific because half of the population resides in rural areas and obtains a relatively large share of its food by means of self-supply [Alexandri and Alboiu 2009]. This aspect means it is necessary to control for place of residence when studying the influence of social status on food-related preferences.
Methodology

This empirical analysis draws on the dataset of the Special Eurobarometer 389,6 which was carried out in each of the 27 EU Member States in 2012. It studied citizens’ opinions about diverse food-related issues. For the present analysis, I will tackle the issue of preferences in connection with food choice, but I will not complexly model, for instance, the relationship between such preferences and other specific food items. My sole objective is to determine how Romanians, as well as other European respondents, rate the importance of price and quality and which socio-demographic variables increase the likelihood of a preference for one or the other of these criteria and specifically for one over the other.7

With respect to food choice, this Special Eurobarometer asked respondents to state how important the following four criteria are for them when purchasing food: quality, price, geographical origin, and brand.8 The importance of each of the four criteria was measured in a four-step Likert-type format, ranging from ‘not at all important’ to ‘very important’. In addition, respondents had the opportunity to respond ‘it depends on the products’ or ‘don’t know’.9 There are obviously a number of shortcomings to this question that make it appear less comprehensive than, for instance, the questions in the Food Choice Questionnaire [Steptoe, Pollard and Wardle 1995], which assessed the motivations of consumers’ food choices according to the criteria of a food item’s appeal to the senses, ingredients, healthiness, calories, as well as price, familiarity, and ethical and convenience issues. First, in the case of the Eurobarometer questions, we do not know what the four criteria exactly mean. Indeed, the meaning of some criteria, such as price and brand, may be taken for granted, but we do not know the exact meaning of ‘quality’; does it refers to health-related aspects, to taste, or ingredients, etc.? Similarly, in the case of geographic origin, we do not know what kind of location this criterion refers to; does it mean a nearby locality, a country, imported products, etc.? Moreover, extrinsic aspects of products like geographic origin, brand, and even price can be considered manifest variables of food quality.

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6 The Special Eurobarometer survey was carried out in March 2012 on representative national samples covering the population aged 15 years and over in each of the 27 member states. A multi-stage random (probability) sample design was applied in all the states. A report summarising the main results of the survey was published in 2012 by the European Commission. The dataset—study no. ZA5598, titled Eurobarometer 77.2 (2012)—was downloaded free of charge for scientific purposes from the Gesis Data Archive for the Social Sciences in Cologne through their online download and analysis facility ZACAT (http://info1.gesis.org/dbksearch19/Docs.asp?no=5598), last visited 25 March 2013.

7 The statistical calculations are made with the help of the SPSS Statistics 17.0 software.

8 The original wording of the question was: ‘When buying food, how important are the following for you personally: quality, price, where the food comes from (geographical origin), brand?’

9 Given the low frequency of responses on these latter options they were treated as missing values in the analysis.
and thus can complicate or override the meaning of the quality criterion. Given that in the Eurobaromater survey quality is presented as a separate criterion, we must assume that it has an open-ended, subjectively understood meaning, and, in so far as the other three aspects cover some extrinsic product characteristics, the quality criterion is supposed to encompass intrinsic product attributes such as taste, the healthiness of the ingredients, and so on.

In the analysis I consider the frequency, descriptives, and internal structure (through explorative factor analysis) of each of the four criteria, but first I will concentrate only on quality and price in order to investigate whether, in the context of Romania’s less advantageous economic circumstances, social class has the effect of increasing the preference for quality and/or price in accordance with the hypotheses outlined above. For this latter perspective, the analysis uses regression models and, given the Likert-type nature of the dependent variables, an ordinal logistic regression.

Besides the limitations connected with the dependent variables, the Eurobarometer survey is limitative also in terms of the independent predictors (for instance, it does not have variables which are directed towards the respondents’ value orientation, so we cannot research the relationship between axiology and food-choice preferences, which would probably be a fruitful area of investigation). However, socio-demographic variables provide good insight about social class and other status determinants of food-choice preferences.

The socio-demographic variables are represented by age, gender, education, income, subjectively rated social status, occupation, presence of children in the households, and type of locality. Age (minimum = 15, maximum = 85, mean = 45.25; standard deviation = 16.647) is a categorical variable with the following age categories and additional frequencies: 15–24 years (14%), 25–39 years (27%), 40–54 years (26%), 55 years and over (33%). In terms of gender, the sample splits into equal percentages of men and women. The education variable was recoded into the following categories: lower education, i.e. respondents who finished their formal education at age 15 or younger (14%); medium-level education, i.e. respondents who finished formal education at ages 16–19 (57%); and upper-level education, i.e. respondents who studied for more than 20 years (29%).

Income was measured with a proxy variable that represents the economic status of households according to respondents’ answers to the question whether they ever had difficulty paying the bills. Low-income households were considered those which declared they have such difficulties most of the time (14%); mid-income households are households which declared they have such difficulties from time to time (38%); upper-income households are those which declared they have never or almost never had difficulty paying the bills (48%)

The variable of subjective social status asked respondents to rank themselves on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 corresponds to the lowest- and 10 to the highest-income level in society. The original survey variable was recoded into three categories of social status, corresponding to: low level (1–4; 26%), medium level
(5–6; 50%), and upper level (7–10; 24%). Occupation, as an objective indicator of social status, was measured by recoding the initial occupation variables as three variables representing white-collar professionals (27%), blue-collar employees (32%), and unemployed (unemployed + retired; 41%). As expected, these three variables of social status (income, subjective social status, and occupation) positively and significantly correlate with each other; however, in none of the cases is the Pearson’s $r$-coefficient very high (the highest is between the income proxy and subjective social status, $r = 0.329$). Nevertheless, in order to be more precise, in the case of the regression models, three alternative models are going to be presented in which social status is measured in the form of subjective (Model 1), objective (Model 2), or both subjective and objective measures (Model 3). For the sake of simplicity, only the first two models are presented for the comparative analyses of the EU-15 and EU-11 samples.\(^\text{10}\)

The community type variable has three categories: rural setting, i.e. village (43%); town (26%), and city (31%). Households with children represent 38%, while those without children 62% of the total sample of households.

### Analyses and discussion

#### Quality and price among other food choice criteria

The frequency data show that in Romania two-thirds of respondents (71%) consider quality to be a very important criterion of food choice; however, the percentage of those who think price is very important is nearly the same (67%). Thus, on the macro-level and taken grossly, Romanian respondents seem to be equally quality- and price-conscious shoppers and they are forced to balance two equally important criteria when they are shopping for food. In comparison, and also in accordance with earlier international empirical data [e.g. Lennernas et al. 1997; Steenkamp 1997; Lappalainen, Kearney and Gibney 1998; Januszewska, Pienak and Verbeke 2011], geographic origin and brand are less salient criteria of food choice and are deemed very important by a little more than one-third of respondents (38% in the case of geographic origin and 33% in the case of brand). Going back to the above-noted assumption that ‘quality’ refers to some intrinsic aspects of food products, while brand and geographic origin denote extrinsic product features [e.g. Olson and Jacoby 1972], we can conclude that intrinsic aspects of quality are far more important for respondents than extrinsic ones. This is in line with previous findings in the literature that suggested that for consumers the intrinsic qualities of a product (e.g. sensory appeal) are, in general, more important

\(^{10}\) The EU-11 includes the countries that joined the European Union in 2004 (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) and 2007 (Bulgaria). Romania, which also joined the EU in 2007, was omitted from this analysis in order to enable a comparison (Romania vs the EU-11).
than the extrinsic qualities of the product [e.g. Olson and Jacoby 1972; Steptoe, Pollard and Wardle 1995; Zakowska-Biemans 2011] especially when it comes to routine food choices [Sawyer et al. 1979].

The Likert-type response variants measured the degree of importance of each criterion on a 4-step scale (1 = not at all important to 4 = very important). With this format it was possible to calculate the mean scores of each criterion. These scores are presented in Table 1, which comparatively lists the results for Romania and the EU-27 pooled sample. My data show that, both in Romania and in the pooled sample, food quality is the most important criterion, *sine qua non*, of food choice. It is also apparent that price preference is slightly higher in Romania than in the pooled sample.

The comparative, country-level descriptives suggest several other differences. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 present Romania in the context of the other EU member states. Indeed, throughout Europe the general ranking of preferred criteria is quality, price, geographic origin, and brand, but in several Southern and East-Central European countries price is a little more important (or equally important) than quality. There may be a financial constraint on quality-conscious shopping and this is more pronounced in lower-income countries [e.g. Steenkamp 1997; Koos 2012]. This situation starkly contrasts with the one in affluent societies, where higher affluence constitutes a low-cost context, which increases the importance of values in consumption decisions (cf. the ‘luxury good thesis’; Baumol and Oates [1979]; see also Koos [2012]).

The first hypothesis in this study assumes that in Romania price constitutes an indicator of the (household) resources available for purchasing food, that is, it is an indicator of respondents’ budget constraints, rather than a quality cue. In order to investigate this, the latent structure of the four food choice criteria was assessed through an exploratory factor analysis. This analysis (Table 2) transformed our data into two uncorrelated components. The first component corresponds to

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Table 1. Mean scores of the four food-purchasing criteria for Romania and for the pooled sample based on Likert-type data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Romania</th>
<th>EU-27</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>3.66 (0.563)</td>
<td>3.64 (0.549)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>3.60 (0.634)</td>
<td>3.48 (0.674)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic origin</td>
<td>3.00 (0.954)</td>
<td>3.06 (0.905)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>2.85 (0.985)</td>
<td>2.55 (0.948)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are given in the parentheses.

---

11 All calculations in the tables and figures presented in this article are the author’s based on data from the Special Eurobarometer of 2012; see Footnote 6.
Figure 1. Preference for the quality criterion of food choice in EU states—comparative mean scores from Likert-type data

Figure 2. Preference for the price criterion of food choice in EU states—comparative mean scores from Likert-type data
quality, geographic origin, and brand, while the second component comprises the criterion of price. The results can be read in terms of a distinction between the quality cues (both extrinsic, i.e. brand and origin, and presumably intrinsic, i.e. quality) and the economic constraints (price). Based on this dimension reduction
I can put forward my first, very general hypothesis: in Romania, price is not perceived as a quality cue, but rather as a source of allocative information. With this finding I can subscribe to those [e.g. Zenthaml 1988; Ding et al. 2010] who claim that when other cues are available, respondents tend to not consider price in terms of a quality indicator.

The results of the factor analysis confirm the assumption inferred from the descriptive findings above that the food-purchasing preferences of Romanian respondents have two roots: in quality-related issues and in price constraints. For the pool (EU-27) sample, the results reveal that all four depend on one factor. Thus, in conclusion, price in general has an informational value as a quality cue, but in certain circumstances—possibly when there are economic constraints, as is the case in Romania—price can be regarded as something distinct from the other three criteria.

In order to better confirm the assumption that price, as a component distinct from the quality cues, is more an indicator of economic constraints than simply a sign different from the other criteria, it is necessary to investigate whether a stronger preference for price, or a preference for price over quality, is linked to a less advantaged social status in terms of economic capital. To this end we shall examine the second hypothesis. Table 3 presents the results of regression analyses. The first models include the subjective measures of social status (i.e. subjectively assessed income proxies; subjective social status), while the second models investigate the role of the objective status variable (i.e. occupation). The last models include both types of measures for social status.

If we look at the predictors separately, it is possible to confirm the second hypothesis. Higher social status does indeed correlate with a stronger preference for quality, while the same higher social status has a negative influence on the preference for price. The rejection of quality is clearly strongest in the case of the lowest-income category, particularly in the case of the unemployed category, variables which, on the other hand, most increase the likelihood of the preference for price. This finding confirms previous research results contending that the in-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Component 1 (Quality)</th>
<th>Component 2 (Price)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>0.615</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic origin</td>
<td>0.867</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>0.844</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of variance explained</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Rotated component matrix, PCA with Varimax rotation; KMO = 0.610; chi-square = 601.52; p < 0.001.
Intrinsic qualities of products are very important features of food purchase [e.g., Januszewska, Pienak and Verbeke 2011] and that they can be overshadowed only in situations of serious economic constraints [Lennernas et al. 1997; Lappalainen, Kearney and Gibney 1998; Harrison et al. 2007].

Education, which can be considered a proxy for respondents’ cultural capital, i.e. a person’s level of knowledge or ‘enlightenment’ about food-related sub-

### Table 3. Socio-demographic predictors of the two food-purchasing criteria in Romania: ordinal logistic regression with B estimates (N = 1,031)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (reference cat.: 55+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–24</td>
<td>−0.156</td>
<td>−0.365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–39</td>
<td>0.252</td>
<td>0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–54</td>
<td>0.296</td>
<td>0.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>−0.052</td>
<td>−0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (reference cat.: upper)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>−0.468**</td>
<td>−0.602**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>−0.457*</td>
<td>−0.529**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective income proxy (reference cat.: upper)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>−0.408*</td>
<td>−0.424*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>−0.251</td>
<td>−0.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective social status (reference cat.: upper class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>−0.087</td>
<td>−0.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>−0.222</td>
<td>−0.251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (reference cat.: white-collar professionals)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed and retired</td>
<td>−0.153*</td>
<td>−0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-collars</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>0.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with children</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence (reference cat.: city)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>−0.469*</td>
<td>−0.434*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
<td>−0.542**</td>
<td>−0.550**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.054</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.
jects, health concerns, and so forth, is even more important than economic capital (if we look at the values of the estimates) in shaping a respondent’s preference for one criterion or another. Thus, we can conclude that social status—both in terms of economic and cultural capital—has a significant influence on the preference for both quality and price, those rich in both forms of capital showing a stronger preference for quality, while those with less capital showing a stronger preference for price.

As regards the hypotheses about the effect of age (H3), gender (H4), and the presence of children in the household (H5), the results are not statistically significant. They also contrast with findings obtained by Stancu [2011] on a small-scale Romanian sample. Consequently, further, systematic research on Romanians’ food-related preferences and behaviours would be necessary in order to be able to develop a comprehensive framework and explanation of this matter.

A surprising finding from the analysis is the effect of the residence variable, which was taken as a control variable. When all the other socio-demographic variables are held constant, it seems that residents of smaller localities have a significantly lower preference for both quality and price than people who live in large towns do. The first aspect is easily understandable and can be explained by the influence of urban culture, whereby urban residents are exposed to more information sources, which could increase the likelihood of their favouring the criterion of quality over price. Conversely, people who live in smaller localities also favour the price criterion less, at least when compared to the reference category. Besides referring to the knowledge capital, one could explain these findings from the perspective of the above-noted consumption patterns specific for rural residents, according to which a significant share of food in rural households is obtained by means of self-supply. According to Alexandri and Alboiu [2009], the share of self-supply is particularly high in the case of basic foods, such as fresh meat, milk, eggs, fruit, and vegetables. In rural households about two-thirds of these products are obtained by means of self-supply; the share of self-supply is also high in small towns, but is significantly lower in large towns. It therefore seems that, except with respect to access to processed food products, rural households are in a more advantageous position in terms of food access and this makes them less concerned about both food quality and price. Even if rural income per capita is lower, about 22% lower than urban income per capita [Gherghinescu 2008], price (considered only as an ‘attitude object’) may not necessarily restrict access to basic food products. This finding is consistent with previous evidence for the EU-15 [Lappalainen, Kearney and Gibney 1998], which also suggested that when other quality cues are studied, price may not obstruct access to basic food products, but it does limit a person’s ability to buy expensive varieties of food products. Thus, a more complex study should be conducted, in which specific preferences are examined in connection with specific food products, albeit not just from the perspective of attitudes, as this would certainly shed further light on my still rough considerations.
Because a preference also reflects a demand relative to another preference, it is interesting to look at the share and profile of those respondents who prefer both price and quality at the highest levels, and particularly those who prefer quality over price and vice versa. If we consider specifically the price and quality tandem and compute the two items, the results show that 53% of the Romanian respondents rate both quality and price as very important criteria of food choice. Those who rank in this group tend to be middle-aged (mean = 45, standard deviation = 16.52), equally distributed between the two genders, mostly from urban residents (mean = 1.92, standard deviation = 0.885) and from middle-income households (mean = 2.31, standard deviation = 0.708). Concerning the preference for quality over price and vice versa, the empirical artefact, which comes from extracting the item of price preference from the item of quality preference, shows that 20% of the respondents prioritise quality over price (with different degrees of intensity in the attitude scores), 16% prefer price over quality (figuring in the negative categories –3, –2, –1). The null values are those respondents who prefer quality and price with equal intensity, and from previous calculations we know that 53% of these are people who prefer both criteria at the highest intensity, so that the remaining 11% are those respondents who prefer quality and price at the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preference for quality over price</th>
<th>Preference for price over quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Descriptives/frequencies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Descriptives/frequencies</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean = 43 (SD = 15.4)</td>
<td>Mean = 48 (SD = 16.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: 48%</td>
<td>F: 49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: 52%</td>
<td>M: 51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean = 2.3 (SD = 0.59)</td>
<td>Mean = 1.96 (SD = 0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income proxy</td>
<td>Income proxy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean = 2.56 (SD = 0.65)</td>
<td>Mean = 2.23 (SD = 0.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective social status</td>
<td>Subjective social status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean = 2.21 (SD = 0.66)</td>
<td>Mean = 1.79 (SD = 0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W-C: 34% B-C: 36% UE + R: 31%</td>
<td>W-C: 23% B-C: 28% UE + R: 49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household composition</td>
<td>Household composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children: 60% Children: 40%</td>
<td>No children: 56 Children: 44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence</td>
<td>Place of residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village 45% Town 30% City 25%</td>
<td>Village 47% Town 27% City 26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: W-C: white-collar professionals; B-C: blue-collar workers; UE + R: unemployed and retired.
same intensity, but not at the highest intensity. Table 4 presents the socio-demo-
graphic descriptives for quality relative to price and for price relative to quality.

These data provide further support for the results of the regression analy-
ses: those who prefer quality over price tend to be slightly younger, better edu-
cated, financially better off, and tend to rank more in white-collar categories than
those who prefer price over quality, in which case the dominance of the occupa-
tional status of unemployed is very telling and essentially points to the seemingly
constraint-based background of the price-centred food preference. Consequently,
in Romania social status is a good predictor of both the absolute and relative
preferences of food choice criteria.

The Romanian results compared to the EU-27 and the EU-12

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) have already shown that Romanians empha-
sise the criterion of price more than their European counterparts do. In order to
strengthen the comparisons between Romania and the EU-15, and specifically the
EU-11 country group, Tables 5 and 6 present the results of regression analyses
for the two criteria of food choice for these two specific country groups. What we
can see there is that socio-demographic variables, even if they are significant in
the majority of the cases, explain only a small part of the variance of the depend-
ent variables. This concurs with previous research findings suggesting that it is
difficult on the basis of socio-demographic variables to systematically and confi-
dently reveal citizens’ attitudes and behaviours towards conscious consumption
[Starr 2009], because consumers’ motivations for certain preferences are more
complex than their socio-demographic background and a number of axiologi-
cal priorities, such as environmental concerns, health issues, concerns for animal
welfare and food safety, quality and taste in relation with food are also important
determinants of food choice [e.g. Hjelmar 2011; Soyez et al. 2012].

We can observe that both in the case of the wealthier and more quality-con-
scious public in the EU-15 and in the case of the less wealthy and less quality-con-
scious consumers in the EU-11 [cf. Thogersen 2010; Koos 2012] the estimates al-
most perfectly match the theoretical model outlined in my hypotheses. In both
country groups, we can confirm not only the embeddedness of the preference for
the quality criterion in higher social status (whether measured through subjective
or objective variables), but also the role of older age and female gender on the
likelihood of a greater priority being placed on quality. Thus, alongside house-
hold composition, each of the socio-demographic variables exhibits the effects
they were hypothesised to have.

In the case of price, the effects indicate that lower social status and younger
age increase the likelihood of a preference for price. It seems that, as in the case
of Romania, a stronger preference for price is rooted in economic constraints.
We can therefore conclude that once social status variables are controlled for, ir-
respective of the macro-economic context, the price of food products acts not as a quality cue but as an indicator of economic constraints, since it is prioritised by respondents with lower budgets. Thus, it seems that the macro-economic contexts must always be accompanied by a consideration of micro-economic contexts: regardless of whether we take into account the wealthier EU-15 or the less wealthy EU-11 plus Romania (see Table 6), individual economic constraints can limit respondents’ access to better quality products and encourage respondents

Table 5. The determinants of the two food-choice criteria in the EU-15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Quality Model 1</th>
<th>Quality Model 2</th>
<th>Price Model 1</th>
<th>Price Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (reference cat.: 55+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–24</td>
<td>−0.403***</td>
<td>−0.446***</td>
<td>0.187**</td>
<td>0.436***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–39</td>
<td>−0.222***</td>
<td>−0.240***</td>
<td>0.118**</td>
<td>0.233***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–54</td>
<td>−0.111</td>
<td>−0.129*</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.182***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.106*</td>
<td>0.118*</td>
<td>0.150***</td>
<td>0.150***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (reference cat.: upper)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>−0.251***</td>
<td>−0.282***</td>
<td>0.583***</td>
<td>1.027***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>−0.015</td>
<td>−0.016</td>
<td>0.528***</td>
<td>0.584***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective income proxy (reference cat.: upper)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.089***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>−0.028</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.591***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective social status (reference cat.: upper class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>−0.264***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.796***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>−0.038</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.369***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (reference cat.: white-collar professionals)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed and retired</td>
<td>−0.105*</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.425***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-collars</td>
<td>−0.126***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.391***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with children</td>
<td>−0.017</td>
<td>−0.038</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>0.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence (reference cat.: city)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>−0.001</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
<td>−0.028</td>
<td>−0.012</td>
<td>−0.105**</td>
<td>0.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R²</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.119</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 15,516, *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.
to engage in short-term utility maximisation by giving up better quality products for possibly lower quality (in terms of health, social, and environmental values) but economically more affordable products.

An interesting finding is that, in both country groups, being a woman increases the likelihood of a preference for both quality and price, something that
can be interpreted as reflecting their ‘gatekeeper’ role in connection with food, i.e. women are the most important agents of household food-related practices and seem to be concerned about food not only in terms of selecting fresh, tasty, and healthy products for their close ones, but also in terms of planning a reasonable food budget [cf. Counihan 1999; Terragni 2007].

Another interesting finding relates to the role of place of residence. In the more urbanised context of the EU-15, place of residence has no significant influence on food preferences. In the less developed context of the EU-11 countries, residence in a rural setting decreases the preference for quality but increases the likelihood of a preference for price. This contrasts with the Romanian data, where residence in less urbanised settings seemed to act as a protective factor (probably due to the higher rate of self-supply) against limited household budgets. The EU-11 group is, indeed, less urbanised than the EU-15, but it is equally true that there is a much smaller share of self-supplied food obtained from small-scale agriculture than in Romania. Consequently, in the EU-11, to reside in a less urbanised place means to be a less quality- and more price-conscious (i.e. constrained) consumer.

What we can conclude about Romania in this comparative context is that the socio-demographic profile of the types of consumers who prefer the two criteria studied here is not clear cut. Except for their cultural and economic capital, those who place greater importance on quality and price are quite similar in outlook, while in Europe, not only do the cultural and economic forms of capital make a big difference, but also the age and gender of the respondents come into play. In Romania, one of the most economically constrained countries in the EU, both in terms of macro- and micro-level economic indicators, it seems that food-related preferences are most of all a matter of budget-related constraints and less connected to other status variables.

Conclusion

As the above analyses indicate, the criteria for food choice in Romania are divided into two latent structures: on the one hand, the product’s quality and its other extrinsic aspects, and on the other, the price benchmark. This division or schism—underlined by the factor analysis—confirms the initial insight gained from the scholarly literature [e.g. Olson and Jacoby 1972; Olson 1977; Zeithaml 1988; Ding, Ross and Rao 2010] according to which price stops acting as an indicator of quality when other extrinsic factors of the products are displayed for consumers to notice. Looking at the Romanian economic context, this character of food choice practices truly stands out: separating price from the corresponding quality criteria actually reveals the reverse of the so-called low-cost hypothesis [Koos, 2012] And shows that, because households dispose of limited resources for acquiring food products, they take into account not only their quality but also their price.
Therefore, the quality of products appears to be a burdensome, almost unaffordable luxury (cf. the luxury good thesis; Baumol and Oates [1979]). The subsequent analyses, which envisaged the establishing of variables that favour quality criteria and price respectively, furnished further arguments in support of this. The two preferences are structured according to the economic and educational status of respondents, and indicate, *apud* Bourdieu’s theory [1984], a certain specific habitus. Quality represents an option exerted within a superior socio-economic status, whereas price is an option that can model itself significantly according to low socio-economic status. Consequently, the preference for price denotes in fact a preference for cheap products, accessible within limited budgets. These findings re-confirm not only the validity of Bourdieu’s thesis [1984] and of other ulterior approaches [e.g. Warde 1997; Warde and Martens 2000] concerning the role of social classes in the building of taste, preferences and, ultimately, food behaviours, but also the empirical findings attested not long ago in European countries [e.g. Lennernas et al. 1997; Lappalainen, Kearney and Gibney 1998]. These latter studies showed, in their turn, that, although at a macro level the price of products is not a major criterion of food preferences, it is nevertheless a paramount concern for those under-privileged social categories who struggle with limited budgets (e.g., unemployed, retired, lower educated, etc.). Therefore, economic factors should not be overlooked when explaining food-related preferences and consumption patterns, even in advanced countries.

The comparative analyses brought to light interesting findings concerning the influence of other socio-demographic variables on preferences. If, for both groups of countries, there was confirmation of the theoretical model from the perspective of the influence of age and gender upon preferences, for Romania only the economic-educational under-layer of these two preferences was outlined, which emphasises the utter economic embeddedness of these preferences and which sets Romania apart from the European pattern, where these preferences depend upon other individual characteristics beyond available economic resources. In this sense, the role of the residence variable seems interesting: in the Romanian context, where the self-supply consumption model is widespread, especially in rural areas, but also in urban ones through inter-generational and inter-kinship transfers, residence in a rural environment seems to be a sort of protective factor against the price-constraint in connection with food products. The research that I undertook here has no doubt several limitations, some of which ensue from the limited nature of the source of data for the study. The Special Eurobarometer, which the data are drawn from, although it focused on food consumption issues, was quite restricted thematically since the questionnaire contained only items for which respondents could indicate their preferences, items checked quality knowledge about logos, and items about whether or not they checked quality labels. Likewise, the data base was limited with regard to individual variables, not taking into account, for example, those items for the axiological orientation of respondents, which would certainly provide additional informa-
tion and explanation about the roots of the food preferences for one criterion or another. The fact that dependent variables reference only discursive preferences in a general way, like the fact that they do not express a connection with concrete products, nor are they embedded in specific behaviours, warns us against any potential extrapolation of the customary data to the actual, concrete consumption behaviours. Nevertheless, starting with the analyses of these preferences and the socio-demographic factors behind them, I am able to formulate some hypotheses that might be taken up in future research on actual purchase preferences. Thus, if we place value on the theory of planned behaviour [Ajzen 1985], according to which concrete behaviours stem also from the individual’s preferences, it follows that research on attitudes and preferences is very important because attitudes and opinions about food choices and purchases are crucial for the acceptance or rejection of food products [Costelli, Tárrega and Bayarri 2010; Urban, Žvěřinová and Ščasný 2012]. Therefore, in the paradigm of reflexive consumption centred on ethical and organic food products with high prices, one can easily expect that high socio-economic status determines the adoption of this type of conduct and that, in Romania, social class plays an almost exclusive role in influencing which consumers prefer or reject these practices. Finally, as this paper tried to show, in Romania more than in the EU in general, the adoption of this new consumption paradigm is expected to take place in the harsh context of economic shortage and budget constraints.

LAURA NISTOR is a sociologist and a university lecturer at the Sapientia–Hungarian University of Transylvania, Romania, and a research fellow at the University of Bucharest. She holds a PhD in environmental sociology, and in her dissertation she investigated Romanians’ environmental attitudes and behaviours. Her post-doctoral research specialises in the study of food-related sustainable consumption in Romania.

References


