

Romanian consumers and ethical choices: exploring attitudes, actions, barriers and demographic disparities

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Abstract. *Based on the climate crisis and the growing global interest for sustainability, ecological behavior of consumers has become a central theme for economic and social research. In Romania, although the awareness of environmental impact is growing, there still are discrepancies between consumers` stated attitudes and their actual practices. This study explores the determinants for adopting ecological behaviors, focusing on the relation between attitudes towards ecological products and the perception of economic barriers, using the data provided by MKOR Research & Consulting from the Ethical Consumer Report in Romania. The research methodology, quantitative in nature, is based on the application of a structured questionnaire to a representative sample of 1,084 respondents, selected by stratified sampling according to relevant demographic and economic variables. The statistical analysis uses Pearson correlation to assess the relation between ecological attitudes and behaviors and Chi-square test to identify differences in the perception of price barriers between income segments. The results show a significant positive correlation between pro-environmental attitudes and environmental behaviors ($r = 0.463$, $p < 0.001$), as well as important differences in the perception of price as a barrier between income groups ($\chi^2 = 1086.567$, $p < 0.001$). This study contributes to the specialty literature by highlighting a complex dynamic between ecological values and economic constraints in adopting sustainable behavior. The results of the research offer valuable implications for public policies aimed at reducing economic barriers by subsidizing green products, as well as for the development of inclusive marketing strategies to facilitate the access of lower-income consumers to sustainable products. The study not only addresses a gap in the specialty literature, but also offers concrete solutions to promote green consumption adapted to the economic and social context in Romania, thus contributing to the understanding of the transition process towards a green economy.*

Keywords: circular economy, sustainability, ecological behavior, green products, responsible consumption.

Introduction

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In the context of the worldwide climacteric crisis and the increased interest for sustainability, green behaviors of consumers have become a central focus subject for economic and social research.

In Romania, although the awareness of environmental impact is increasing, there are discrepancies between the declarative green attitudes of consumers and their real green actions. This study investigates the factors influencing the adoption of green behavior focusing on consumers' attitude towards green products and their perception of price barriers, according to consumers' income. The data used was provided by Market Opportunity Research from the Ethical Consumer in Romania 2024 - Report (Market Opportunity Research, 2024). The research methodology, quantitative in nature, is based on the application of a structured questionnaire to a representative sample of 1,084 respondents, selected by stratified sampling according to relevant demographic and economic variables. During the interview with the Mkor team, we analyzed the sources for the literature based on which the questionnaire was designed.

This research is postulated on two main hypotheses. The first hypothesis supposes the existence of a positive correlation between the attitudes towards green products and the environmental protection behaviors, starting from the premise that green principles encourage responsible actions towards the environment. The second hypothesis suggests that the perception of price barriers significantly varies according to the consumers' income level.

The approach of these three hypotheses offers a perspective on the barriers and motivators which may guide the marketing experts and strategist and could be a basis for governmental regulation programs in Romania.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

Consumers are one of the main factors that play a crucial role in the support of responsible consumption, and they should be aware of their responsibility for the environment. Green purchase behavior is seen as a remedy for unsustainable consumption (Ogiemwonyi et al. 2023).

The European Union citizens' green attitude behavior differ according to the contextual drivers that they have at country level. More environmental patterns are associated with good social positions and the developed countries have higher green environmental levels (Aral,O., Lopez-Sintas, J. 2023).

There is an important influence of customer sustainability consciousness on a consumer's desire to buy ecological products. Effective marketing and awareness campaigns that influence perception and attitude can make meaningful changes in consumer purchasing behavior (Shehawy, Y.M., Faisal Ali Khan, S. Md. 2024). This is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals 12 and 13 of the Climate Action.

Ogiemwonyi stated that the relationship between green culture, price sensitivity, perceived behavior control and green behavior is mediated by the consumers' attitude. The results of Ogiemwonyi's study highlight the importance of promoting environmental awareness amongst the population in order to encourage and develop green behavior towards nature (Ogiemwonyi, 2024).

Although global consumption of green products is increasing, the predictors of green behavior are not yet clear, especially in developing countries, where green products are not widely produced or consumed. (Aljanabi et al., 2023).

Globe Scan's Healthy & Sustainable Living Report from 2023 found that almost all consumers are interested in buying healthy and sustainable products. After the increase during the pandemic, environmental attitudes remain largely unchanged, indicating a stronger integration of

environmental consciousness. The study shows that people clearly recognize that health and sustainability are intertwined.

Marschlich and Danesh validated a measurement model for identifying socially responsible consumers and identified five dimensions of hypermodern individualism considered relevant to the discussion of corporate social responsibility: focus on self, experiential consumption, autonomy, and the need for constructing identities, the obsession with hyper spectacles, and the focus on present and future (Marschlich, S., Danesh, G.,2024).

Toti and Moulins (2016) consider ethical consumption to be consistent with ethical principles and standards. Motivations for sustainable consumption can be purely economic. The behavioral scale proposed by the authors is based on “small” daily actions that do not require significant investment in terms of commitment or financial investment and is based on consumer ethical beliefs and coincides with current issues related to sustainability.

Antecedents of environmentally and socially responsible sustainable consumption are similar in their effect on consumer behavior, where personal norms, concern and ethical ideologies have the strongest impact on the responsible sustainable consumer behavior (Hosta, M., Zabkar, V., 2020).

Bock et al. (2024) demonstrated that gratitude was a powerful driving force behind consumer ethics. Companies can mitigate each of these problems by inculcating gratitude to their customers; by doing enough for consumers so that they feel grateful for the company’s action, a company can influence consumers’ ethics (Bock, D.E. et al.,2024).

Suárez-Perales et al. (2021) conducted an experiment with 222 students from the European Union, to examine whether and how environmental education determines the adoption of positive environmental behaviors. They found out that environmental education affects pro-environmental behavior through the model knowledge–concern–willingness. The emancipatory perspective of higher environmental management education was confirmed by their results (Suárez-Perales et al., 2021).

Young people support sustainability in many ways, from low-effort personal practices to highly dedicated sustainability actions. These actions and behaviors reflect the youth's concern for sustainability. The distinction between actions and behaviors is more about the level of effort, commitment, and promotion than about the sustainability aspect (Oinonen, I., Paloniemi, R., 2023).

Woo & Kim (2019) used functional value, conditional value, social value, and emotional value to explain the consumers’ attitudes and their intention to choose green products and found that all four variables have a significant impact on consumers’ attitudes towards purchasing green products (Woo, E., & Kim, Y. G., 2019).

The results of Gleim et al. study (2013), indicated that consumers face many barriers to the purchase of green products. The perceived high price of green products was the noted most frequently noted barrier followed by the perception of poor product quality. Some of the respondents had poor product quality experience with a previous purchase and were reluctant to make a new purchase. The lack of expertise among participants was the next most frequent response category and trust was another frequently identified barrier.

Green consumers in Romania

At the level of Romanian private energy consumers, the rising prices of renewable energies do not make it a choice for most of the population, the reason for the Romanian population's lack of interest in alternative renewable energy in the energy supply market seems to be the price of non-renewable energy, as the price is high (Șerbănescu et al. 2021).

The transition to the Romanian capitalist market unfortunately was not supported by a solid public policy that should have guided the economic development and should have made a coherence between the commercial and the social sectors. (Luca, 2021).

Romania's consumers, while aware of the importance of environmental protection, are not convinced of their own responsibility in this process and tend to believe that it is a responsibility of companies to ensure the transition to a green economy (Șerbănescu et al. 2021).

One of the studies on green consumer's profile in Romania was carried out in 2015 by Roman et al. and found out that the typical green consumer was educated and influential, was between the ages of 30 and 49 and had children. Green consumers were seen as having the education and intellectual orientation to appreciate value and to understand the evidence presented in support of environmental claims (Roman et al., 2015).

Back in 2015 the study of Roman et al. identified that Romanians were accustomed with the notion of green consumption. There was the high price problem for ecological products, and they also identified the lack of information. There were identified attempts to save energy, to use common transport more frequently, to reduce the degree of environment pollution caused by personal actions and the intention to protect the environment, but things were not positive about the green products purchase. The first conclusion of the study being that Romanians were not very involved in the purchase of green products (Roman et al. 2015).

In 2024 the study of Nicolae identified many barriers to the adoption of sustainable consumption: high prices, limited availability, the lack of awareness, and conflicting priorities. It also mentioned the impact of socio-demographic factors: age, gender, education, and income.

More recent studies on the values that matter most to Romanian consumers and on green attitudes and communication which could impact the buying behavior developed by Corboș et al. confirm the important direct effect of functional values on green buying behavior and that emotional factors have an important role in green perceived behavior. (Corboș et al. 2024).

According to Purcărea's et al. research, Romanian consumers demonstrate increased awareness of the important role they play in influencing sustainable consumption through green purchasing behavior. Their study mentioned that retailers were both interested in targeting consumers with personalized messages to strengthen their brand's perception of sustainability issues, while paying attention to sustainability as a personal value accepted by consumers (Purcărea et al.).

Methodology

The study adopts a quantitative approach, using a structured questionnaire applied to a representative sample of 1,000 respondents, aged between 18 and 55 years, residing in Romania. Sample characteristics are representative at national level, stratified by gender, age and geographical distribution. Data collection was conducted in August 2024, through the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method, using the MKOR Panel.

The questionnaire used in the research was developed based on a rigorous literature review, adapted to ensure relevance in the Romanian context and to enhance the ecological validity of the results. The selection of the variables included was based on a critical analysis of the literature,

considering their relevance to the aimed behavioral, attitudinal, and socio-demographic dimensions, as well as their ability to reflect the specificity of the local market.

In order to avoid the use of clinical or technical jargon, the items were formulated in an accessible and natural language, considering the specificity of the local market and local consumption behaviors. The length of the questionnaire was optimized by consolidating the measured dimensions, applying logical filters and display conditions, thus contributing to a fluid completion experience. Also, the questions included concrete examples from everyday life in order to facilitate accurate self-reporting of behaviors.

The research instrument utilized a seven-point Likert scale to measure attitudes, in concordance with the recommendations from the specialty literature regarding optimal response granularity. In addition, concrete behaviors were investigated using multiple-choice questions limited to three options to encourage prioritization. To minimize the order bias, the items were presented in a randomized succession. At the same time, the questionnaire included a mix of attitudinal and behavioral questions, which allowed cross-validation of the measured constructs. The investigated dimensions covered three main areas: healthy lifestyle and eating behaviors, ethical and sustainable consumption (including barriers and facilitators), and the detailed socio-demographic profile needed for segmentation.

Statistical analysis was performed using Pearson correlation to assess the relationship between attitudes towards green products and environmental protection behaviors (H1). Regarding the perception of price barriers, differences between income groups were analyzed using Chi-square test (H2). This complex methodological approach facilitated a detailed comprehension of the relationships between the analyzed variables and provided relevant empirical confirmations well adapted to the Romanian market context.

Results and discussions

Data analysis supports both research hypotheses. Pearson correlation reveals a positive moderate connection and significance from statistical point of view between the attitudes towards ecological products and the ecological behaviors ($r = 0.463$, $p < 0.001$).

This result suggests that the persons who appreciate the benefits of green products are more inclined to adopt pro-active behaviors such as recycling, the reduction of plastic consumption or to use public transportation.

With regards to price barrier perception, the Chi-square test indicates significant differences between the income groups ($\chi^2 = 1086.567$, $p < 0.001$). The lower income respondents perceive the price of ecological products as a stronger barrier as compared to higher income respondents. This result highlights a structural problem: although green products gain popularity, their price limits the access for a significant part of the population.

The results of this study confirm and fill in a gap in the existing findings in the literature, highlighting the interdependence between environmental attitudes, environmental protection behaviors and economic barriers. The positive correlation between attitudes towards green products and pro-active behaviors ($r = 0.463$, $p < 0.001$) reflects trends observed in GlobeScan's Healthy & Sustainable Living Report (2023), which highlights the increasing integration of environmental consciousness into consumer lifestyles. This relationship supports the idea that personal values play a central role in the adoption of sustainable behaviors, as also argued by Corboş et al. (2024).

The finding that lower-income respondents perceive the price of organic products as a stronger barrier is in line with the study by Gleim et al. (2013), which identified high costs,

perceived low quality and lack of confidence in the benefits of organic products as the main barriers for consumers. At the same time, these findings highlight a Romania specific context, suggesting the need for better-targeted subvention and green education policies to address structural barriers and facilitate people's access to sustainable products and to encourage sustainable behavior.

Moreover, the current study underlines the importance of integrating health and sustainability, complementing observations in the GlobeScan report (2023) that these two agendas are seen by consumers as closely interconnected. Also, the findings on the adoption of behaviors such as reducing plastic consumption or the use of public transport align with global trends of increasing engagement in sustainable everyday practices as described by Toti and Moulins (2016) and Oinonen and Paloniemi (2023).

Table 1. Correlations between sustainable consumption behaviors

		I rather buy ecologically labelled products. Where: 1 = totally disagree, 7 = fully agree	I avoid the products/ brands which indirectly use children`s work. Where: 1 = totally disagree, 7 = fully agree	I contribute to environment protection by daily actions. Where: 1 = totally disagree, 7 = fully agree
I rather buy ecologically labelled products. Where: 1 = totally disagree, 7 = fully agree	Pearson Correlation	1	.416**	.463**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001
	N	1033	874	1009
I avoid the products/ brands which indirectly use children`s work. Where: 1 = totally disagree, 7 = fully agree	Pearson Correlation	.416**	1	.386**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001
	N	874	896	889
I contribute to environment protection by daily actions. Where: 1 = totally disagree, 7 = fully agree	Pearson Correlation	.463**	.386**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	
	N	1009	889	1054

Source: Authors' own research

Table 1 presents Pearson correlations between three sustainable consumer behaviors by evaluating the relations between the preferences for green products, the avoidance of products which imply children`s work, and daily contributions to environment protection.

The correlations are significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed), which means that there is a positive significance between these behaviors. The results indicate a significant correlation between the preference for ecological products and the avoidance of products which indirectly use the work of children ($r = 0.416$) and between the preference for ecological products and the daily contribution to environment protection ($r = 0.463$), suggesting that the persons which adopt a green behavior are more likely to also manifest other sustainable behaviors.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of income types

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	INCOME	123	11.3	11.3	11.3
	1 (very high)	51	4.7	4.7	16.1
	2 (high)	200	18.5	18.5	34.5
	3 (medium)	454	41.9	41.9	76.4
	4 (low)	256	23.6	23.6	100.0
	Total	1084	100.0	100.0	

Source: Authors' own research

Table 2 presents the distribution of answers frequency referring to sustainable consume behaviors, with values corresponding to different levels of income (Very high income (> 10001 RON), High income (6001 - 10000 RON), Medium income (3001 - 6000 RON), Low income (<= 3000 RON). This is a frequency table indicating the number and the percentage of the persons who answered at each category of behavior. The table suggests that most of respondents (41.9%) answered with level 3 (medium income), indicating a positive moderate attitude towards sustainable behaviors, followed by those who chose level 4 (low income) (23.6%), who probably manifested a sustainable and stronger behavior.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of price as a barrier to sustainable consumption

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	620	57.2	57.2	57.2
	0	464	42.8	42.8	100.0
	Total	1084	100.0	100.0	

Source: Authors' own research

Table 3 presents the distribution of answers frequency regarding the price perception as a barrier for the sustainable consumer. The results are presented in the form of frequency and percentage and the table indicates the proportions of respondents who consider the price as being a barrier (value 1) or not (value 0). The table indicated that 57.2% of the respondents consider the price as a barrier for sustainable consumption and this suggests that for a major part of the participants the cost of sustainable products is a significant factor for adopting this consumer behavior.

Table 4. Chi-square test results for price perception as barrier to sustainable consumption across income groups

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5.
The minimum expected count is 5.79.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1086.567 ^a	8	<.001
Likelihood Ratio	769.091	8	<.001
N of Valid Cases	1084		

Source: Authors' own research

Table 4 presents the result of Chi-square test used for assessing the association between the perception of price as a barrier in the sustainable consumption and the income groups. Chi-square tests verifies whether there is a significant difference between the observed frequencies and those expected based on the analyzed variables. The significant p values ($p < 0.001$) suggest that there is a significant relation between these variables. The results indicate that the perception of price as a barrier for sustainable consumption significantly varies between different income groups, which suggests that the price is perceived in a different manner as being an obstacle, according to the level of income.

Discussion and contributions

This study contributes to a better understanding of Romanian consumers' green behaviors from many perspectives. First, the study confirms the importance of green attitudes in influencing the behaviors, underlining the need for awareness campaigns meant to transform the pro ecological values into concrete actions. Second, it highlights the economic barriers as a limitative factor for a large part of the population. This result supports the conclusions of previous research, such as the research of Șerbănescu et al. (2021), and it adds an economical dimension to the discussion based on the accessibility of green products.

Alongside the above-mentioned points the study offers an empirical basis for developing more inclusive marketing strategies such as launching new ecological products more accessible for lower income consumers. Also, the conclusions may inform public policies meant to reduce the discrepancies between actions and behaviors by measures such as subventions for green products or ecological education programs.

Limitations and risks of the research

This study has some limitations that are worth emphasizing. First, the sample used is not completely random, and data collection was done exclusively online, which excludes people with no internet access from the analysis. Second, the distribution of the questionnaire through social networks may influence the sample structure, representing mainly active users of these platforms. This distribution method may explain certain characteristics of the sample, such as age or education structure. Therefore, generalization of results should be made with caution, taking these aspects into account.

Future directions and research

Future research can be extended and improved by including additional variables, as well as by applying the methodology in other countries at different levels of development on different continents. One direction of exploration could be to analyze the behaviors of both consumers and companies towards specific green products. For example, it would be interesting to see whether the results obtained in this study are similar for sustainable products (such as household appliances), non-sustainable products (such as clothing) or services (such as eco-hotels). Another aspect that could be investigated is the influence of sales channels (online versus offline) on consumers' choices when purchasing green products.

Also, the topic of ethical and sustainable consumption is constantly changing and evolving, in the context of the increasingly active involvement of the state through measures such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We recommend that future research should examine the effectiveness of the main online advertising tools used by Romanian companies, given their role in promoting green products. Also, extending the demographic profile studied to other age groups and regions may contribute to a more complete understanding of this phenomenon.

As consumer profiles may change from one year to the next, and identified barriers may become less significant, investments in organic agriculture and sustainable food may become more frequent. We therefore look forward to future studies and research to complement and update, as the domain of responsible ethical consumption is a dynamic and growing one.

Conclusions

Research on green consumer behavior in the Romanian market is important, mainly because of the increasing awareness of environmental sustainability and the significant changes in sustainable consumer behavior noticed in Romania.

The findings of this study make a valuable contribution to the literature, highlighting the need for integrated interventions combining economic and educational measures to promote sustainable consumption. The study confirms the observations of Marschlich and Danesh (2024), who emphasize that a strong environmental literacy is a stronger predictor of environmental behavior than mere attitudes. Thus, the results can serve as a basis for the development of public policies to support the transition towards sustainable consumption through economic incentives and stricter regulations on unsustainable products.

These conclusions complement previous findings by validating the positive relationship between environmental attitudes and pro-environmental behaviors, supporting the idea that personal values play a key role in determining environmental actions (Corboş et al., 2024). However, the study differs in its emphasis on the significant influence of financial barriers on green behaviors, reinforcing the work of Gleim et al. (2013), which highlights perceptions of price and affordability as major barriers to green product purchases.

Moreover, the study makes a unique contribution by analyzing the specificities of the Romanian context. For example, Şerbănescu et al. (2021) highlighted that although Romanian consumers are familiar with concepts such as carbon footprint, they do not fully understand the practical actions needed to reduce emissions. Similarly, Roman et al. (2015) showed that although there is an awareness of the importance of environmental protection, the responsibility for the transition to a green economy is perceived as belonging mainly to companies. This study extends these insights by demonstrating that economic barriers and the lack of coherent public policies significantly limit proactive consumer engagement.

At the same time, the findings provide an additional nuancing of the relationship between personal health and environmental behaviors, complementing the observations in the Healthy &

Sustainable Living Report (2023). Although globally health and sustainability are perceived to be closely linked, in Romania this connection is less evident, often overshadowed by economic concerns and limited access to sustainable products.

In a broader context, the study opens the path for further supplementary investigations on the influence of social norms, technological innovations and access to information on sustainable consumption. It would also be of interest to analyze regional and demographic differences in order to identify interventions better adapted to the needs of Romanian communities.

This study not only reinforces the interdependence between environmental attitudes and affordability, but also provides clear directions for concrete actions to accelerate the adoption of more sustainable consumption. It also highlights the impact of information deficits and perceptions on environmental responsibility, providing a solid basis for public policy and educational strategies to contribute to the development of a more equitable and environmentally responsible society.

Within the Romanian national context, these conclusions underline the need for subvention policies and for a better targeted green education.

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