

Consumer Resilience in Romania within a Dynamic Food Consumption Context

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Abstract. *Facing unseen global challenges, it is necessary to understand how individuals maintain stability in their basic needs, especially in an emerging economy such as Romania. This paper investigates consumer resilience within the Romanian food market, a sector currently defined by high volatility, fast pace rising prices, and shifting supply chain dynamics. A review of the current scientific literature reveals a growing interest in consumer resilience, yet much of the existing research focuses on Western economies, and approaches the issue from a general sustainability perspective, rather than as a direct focus on how consumers adapt to market changes, overlooking the specificity of Eastern European economies. This research aims to offer some insights that can contribute to fill this gap by presenting theories of adaptive capacity and proactive consumer behavior. A structured survey was developed and circulated online to obtain relevant and up-to-date data on the main factors that influence food choice in times of crisis and coping mechanisms by different income, residence and education groups. The most important findings show some categories of consumers manage to adapt better to inflationary pressures, for example, while some tend to lean more on digital technology as a tool to create resilience. This study offers an image of how Romanian consumers adapt their habits to inflation by applying saving strategies. The survey results confirm that in hard times, Romanians choose cheaper products and brands, to maintain their financial stability, and this finding could offer local producers' informational resources to build strategies that strengthen their relationship with consumers in the long term.*

Keywords: consumer resilience, food consumption behavior, economic uncertainty, household adaption, coping strategies, sustainable consumption, adaptive strategies

This paper was co-financed by The Bucharest University of Economic Studies during the PhD program.

Introduction

This paper aims to evaluate the resilience capacity of the Romanian consumers, and to identify adapting strategies regarding food consumption behavior in an economic and social dynamic context.

DOI: 10.2478/picbe-2026-0188

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This research is structured as follows: in the Literature review chapter, we highlighted some important findings about consumer resilience, this topic becomes more important to researchers.

In Methodology chapter, we detailed the way data was collected. We used quantitative and qualitative data gathered from a structured survey, along with a bibliometric analyze.

In the Results and discussions chapter, we presented the main findings of our study, conducted after the Government applied a series of fiscal measures leading to rising prices. By the end of 2025, inflation has risen up to 9,7%, fueled by rising energy, services and food prices. (NSI, January 2026) In December 2025, compared to December 2024, food prices have risen by 7,75%. All these price increases have directly impacted the entire supply chain, from the consumer, who has adapted by identifying cheaper products or using digital technology like online applications to find the cheapest products, and also by buying less, to producers, processors and sellers, that saw their income running low. For Romania, all these meant a GDP drop of 2%. (NSI, February 2026)

Taking all into account, our research approach came as a natural step to assess the level of resilience of the Romanian consumer, within such a dynamic food consumption context, proving that the 55–64 age group is a pillar of stability and resilience during times of economic turbulence. If manufacturers and retailers would recognize these customers as a strategic group that sustains steady consumption, they could rely on their loyalty in order to design new marketing strategies that would promote a simple message based on value and quality. The consequences of our scientific approach were presented and explained in the Conclusions chapter.

Literature review

As a consequence of the many crises that the world has seen in recent times – economic, social, environmental – academics have started to pay close attention to the concept of consumer resilience. Originating from the fields of psychology and ecology, the initial definition of the term resilience was the capacity of individuals or systems to absorb shocks and revert to a functional state. (Wul et al., 2013) As consumer resilience was incorporated into the socio-economic sciences, and into consumer research, specifically, the understanding of what began as a static notion of resistance, started to include concepts such as behavior flexibility and adaptation to socio-environmental limitations like misinformation and volatility. (Shakani et al., 2024) What has become increasingly apparent as the concept of resilience gained more traction in the research world is that it is not necessarily an outcome, but rather a process. (Azam et al., 2025)

Resilience, as a concept in consumer behavior research, tends to be defined around a fairly simple idea: that individuals and households can absorb economic shocks while holding onto some acceptable standard of living (Szmigin et al., 2020). Where the literature gets more complicated is in how it explains why people manage this. A substantial portion of existing work treats resilience as something produced by systems - institutional frameworks, market structures, policy environments - rather than by people themselves, and consumer behavior in this view emerges largely as a response to inflation, supply disruptions, or regulatory change (Stanciu & Sârbu, 2015; Bumbac, 2019). The individual, with their particular circumstances and daily choices, tends to fade into the background of that kind of analysis.

Following a process-oriented approach to resilience (Lake, 2009), what this study focuses on is how individuals continuously adapt their consumption practices when they perceive economic or market conditions as unstable. Not bouncing back to some pre-crisis baseline - that is not really the point here. The point is ongoing adjustment, the strategies people develop and the flexibility

they accumulate when uncertainty stops being an exception and starts being a more or less permanent feature of everyday life.

Romania offers a telling empirical case. Pandemic-era studies paint a consistent picture: shopping habits changed, dietary choices shifted, and the criteria people used to evaluate food were renegotiated under the dual pressure of economic constraint and uncertainty (Ion et al., 2022; Mureșan et al., 2022; Dumitraș et al., 2021; Mititelu et al., 2021). Some of this was straightforwardly about survival - food security concerns, nutritional trade-offs - but researchers have also documented something more deliberate, namely consumers actively reorganizing what and how they buy in order to protect their financial footing and preserve some sense of a decent quality of life (Balan et al., 2022; Voinea et al., 2020). Collapsing the two into each other misses something important about how resilience actually works at the individual level.

Price comparison, brand switching, substituting cheaper ingredients - these show up repeatedly in the food consumption literature, and among Romanian consumers specifically the evidence points to a sharp sensitivity to price, a noticeably warmer attitude toward private-label and domestic products, and a practical redefinition of what food quality even means: less about prestige or taste associations, more about what you actually get for the money (Dumitru et al., 2023; Ungureanu et al., 2023). Consumers themselves often describe these shifts as temporary, as things they are doing for now rather than permanent changes to who they are, which suggests that resilience involves a kind of narrative self-management running alongside the behavioral adjustment - something macro-level frameworks are not well-positioned to capture.

Growing attention has been paid to how resilience intersects with sustainability, and a body of work argues - plausibly enough - that adaptive consumption behaviors often align with environmentally beneficial outcomes: less waste, simpler diets, more locally sourced food (Petrescu-Mag et al., 2025; Chereji et al., 2023; Moroșan et al., 2024). Doing something for economic reasons and doing it for environmental ones are not the same thing, though, even when the behavior looks identical from the outside, and in emerging economies the evidence is fairly clear that financial pressure drives adaptive food decisions while sustainability remains at best a secondary consideration (Voinea et al., 2019; Szentesi et al., 2025). The convergence narrative flatters the data more than it describes it.

Several gaps in the existing research are worth naming. Western economies continue to dominate the empirical literature, leaving Romania and comparable Eastern European contexts comparatively underexplored, while the tendency toward macro-level framing means consumer behavior frequently appears as an outcome variable rather than something worth examining on its own terms. Few studies have also tried to hold together perceived market instability, the specific strategies consumers use, and socio-demographic variation within a single analytical frame (Manolache, 2025; Pop, 2025).

What this study does is treat consumer resilience as a micro-level behavioral process and ask how people in Romania actually adjust their food consumption when economic and market conditions feel unstable - an emerging economy with a history of volatility where resilience is less an academic abstraction than a practical necessity. Drawing on both bibliometric analysis and original survey data, the aim is a more grounded picture of consumer resilience: adaptive, context-bound, and deeply ordinary.

Methodology

The study uses quantitative data collected through a survey used as a main instrument to evaluate Romanian consumers' capacity to adapt to the uncertainties that influence food sector, from price

rising to using new digital technology to save money. The survey was structured so that the participants' answers would offer some indicators specific to resilience and dynamic behavior, such as the capacity to anticipate market volatility, including by using digital technology, flexibility in adapting the diet and choosing more affordable products, and sustainable consumption. Questions were calibrated to reflect the socio-economic reality, allowing us to collect data that revealed not only vulnerabilities, but also coping strategies that individuals alone and households use to survive a more and more volatile consumer environment.

The first 7 questions regarded demographic data, such as age, sex, education level, income, residential environment, type of household. The following 12 questions were elaborated in order to evaluate consumers resilience, along with their capacity to use new technology such as digital application to search for cheaper products. The answers were calibrated using the Likert scale, that offered the possibility to measure the consumers' resilience, by using items evaluated in gradual steps, from "strongly agreement" to "strongly disagreement". (DeVellis, 2016) The respondents had to answer to each question in order to step to the next one. There were no questions with open answers.

The survey's questions were based on the following research questions:

- 1) What are the main strategies that Romanian consumers adopt to maintain their food security during periods of instability?
- 2) How demographic factors influence the level of consumer resilience?
- 3) Consumers adopt sustainable consumption patterns in order to protect themselves against negative market volatility?
- 4) Can resilience strategies help consumers to mitigate the negative effects of market instability on the perceived life quality?
- 5) Do the current shifts in Romanian food consumption patterns reflect a structural reconfiguration of long-term consumption perspectives or a short-term response to the crisis?

The survey was conducted online during February 2026, and 395 persons answered. The respondents have different sociological profiles, as they could be drawn from the responses regarding age, gender, income, education or residential environment.

The research met the internationally ethical standards for studies involving human participants, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent. (World Medical Association, 2013; Resnik, 2018)

In order to create a complete image of Romanian consumer resilience, our research approach also included an in depth bibliometric analyse, that helped us to map the evolution of the concept within specialized academic literature. A preliminary bibliometric search strategy was implemented in the Web of Science Core Collection data base, using the following keywords: consumer resilience, food consumption and dynamic, for the 2016-2026 period. As a result, only a few relevant publications were identified. The search was extended, and results included 188 documents. This allowed for a structural and thematic bibliometric analysis illustrated by VOSviewer.

The limitations of the research are shaped by subjectivity of the respondents, and by the fact that the survey was conducted online, which might affect the external validity of the results. Also, Romanian consumer environment is dynamic and, in the long run, it might produce contextual differences that a cross-sectional questionnaire is unable to capture.

Results and discussions

Bibliometric analysis results

To get a better handle on how consumer resilience holds up in today's fast-changing market, we ran a bibliometric analysis. We started with a targeted search in the Web of Science Core Collection—using keywords like "consumer resilience" and "food consumption" from 2016 to 2026 — but quickly found that actual research on this intersection is surprisingly thin. To help make sense of what's out there, we've mapped out the key studies in Table 1, noting their focus, where they were published, and why they matter to our work.

Table 1. Publications identified in the preliminary bibliometric analysis (Web of Science)

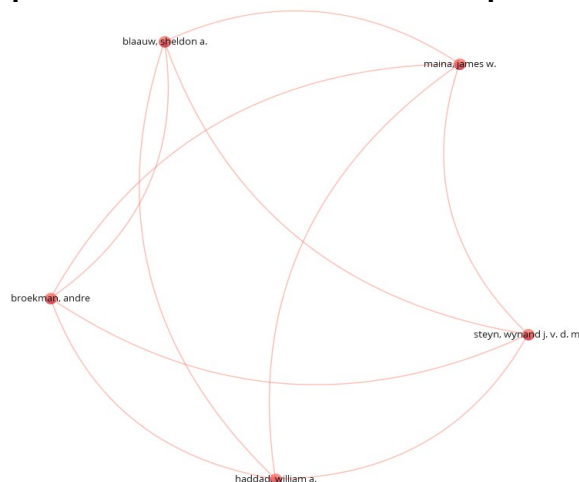
No.	Article Title	Year of Publication	Journal	Main Field	No. of Citations	Relevance to the Research Topic
1	After the COVID-19 pandemic: changes and continuities in the food supply chain	2024	Food Quality and Safety	Food systems, supply chains	5	Addresses the adaptation of food systems in the post-crisis context, providing indirect background for consumer resilience
2	Exploring the effect of climate change on food supply chain in Africa: a systematic review with a focus on South Africa	2025	Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems	Sustainability, climate change	1	Highlights the vulnerability and adaptive capacity of food systems under climatic uncertainty
3	Meeting the challenges of food-energy-water systems in typical mega-urban regions from final demands and supply chains: A case study of the Bohai mega-urban region, China	2021	Journal of Cleaner Production	FEW systems, urban sustainability	12	Examines the interaction between demand, uncertainty, and supply chains
4	Life Cycle Assessment of an Avocado: Grown in South Africa – Enjoyed in Europe	2020	Environmental Management	Life cycle, assessment, environmental impact	2	Reveals the global dimension of food consumption and the systematic implications of consumer choices

Source: Authors' own research results/contribution.

The research summarized in Table 1 largely views the connection between resilience and food consumption through a systemic lens. However, there is surprisingly little focus on consumer resilience as a behavioral trait in its own right. While these studies provide a helpful foundation, they leave a notable gap in our understanding of how individual consumers actually adapt—a gap that prompted us to expand this bibliometric analysis.

To get a better sense of how researchers in this field are working together, we mapped out co-authorship patterns using data from Web of Science. The resulting network and its various connections are shown in Figure 1.

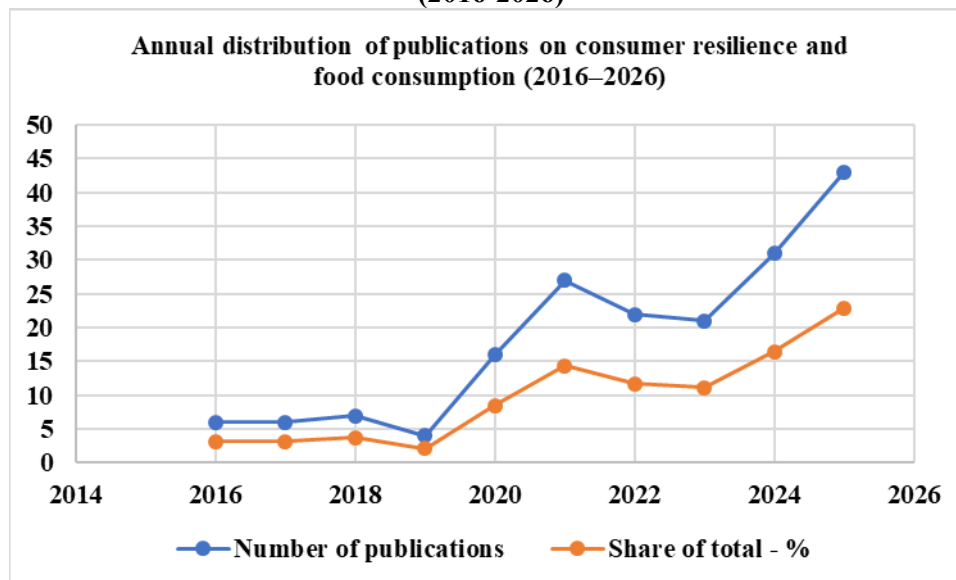
Figure 1. Co-authorship network of authors identified in the preliminary bibliometric analysis



Source: Authors' own research VOSviewer.

The co-authorship map in Figure 1 reveals a dense but narrow research landscape. While the connections are strong, they are limited to a small circle of scholars, highlighting a lack of broader scientific diversity in the field of food resilience. By searching the Web of Science for the decade leading up to 2026, we identified 188 key papers. This collection provides a solid foundation for a bibliometric analysis, illustrating how the topic has evolved from a niche interest into a more established area of study.

Figure 2. Annual distribution of publications on consumer resilience and food consumption (2016-2026)



Source: Authors' own research results/contribution.

The timeline of these publications shows a clear surge in interest over the last few years. While research was relatively sparse before 2019, output began to climb steadily after 2020, eventually peaking in 2025. This sudden spike suggests that the academic community is scrambling to keep up with recent global shocks—specifically the fallout from COVID-19, broken supply chains, and the growing climate pressures on our food systems. Because most of the literature is so recent, the field feels like it's in a "gold rush" phase: it's expanding rapidly, but it hasn't yet settled into a solid theoretical framework.

Looking at how these documents align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it's clear that the literature is heavily focused on sustainability. Two goals stand out in particular: SDG 03 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 02 (Zero Hunger), appearing in 53.72% and 53.19% of the publications, respectively. This data underscores a vital link between food security, consumer resilience, and the overall health of the population.

Overall, the data shows that this field is expanding, but most of the focus is still on systems rather than people. Our research fills that gap by looking at the behavioral side of things. We're looking at how sustainability acts as a buffer, helping us move past "band-aid" solutions and toward the kind of structural reorganization that can actually withstand a volatile global market.

Empirical research results from Romania

Considering the increasing importance given to consumer resilience, as derived from the bibliometric analysis, we developed and distributed a questionnaire addressed to Romanian consumers. From the analysis of data collected from the responses provided by the 395 participants in the survey, we can conclude that Romanian consumers' resilience during times of crisis mainly manifest through optimizing the budget and carefully planning food acquisitions. Over 75% of the respondents carefully analyse and put in balance the price with the product's weight, and over 44% of them are willing to change their diet in order to save money (Figure 3).

This represents a coping strategy that authors like Dabija et Bejan (2022) consider to be a normal reaction when an individual is faced with economic incertitude. This kind of behavior gives an individual the feeling that he or she still controls his or her resources (Dabija et Bejan, 2022)

Also, the data gathered from the respondents showed that people don't stick to a brand, they search for promotions, buy cheaper products like retailers' own brands. This ability to choose low-cost alternatives, more affordable emphasizes the fact that consumers have the capacity to adapt, to change personal preferences depending on market constraints. (Folke et al., 2010).

Moreover, we extended the analysis of the data gathered by examining the socio-demographic profile of respondents, the way they perceive their level of resilience, and the specific mechanisms through which they adjust their food-related behavior within a context of economic instability characteristic.

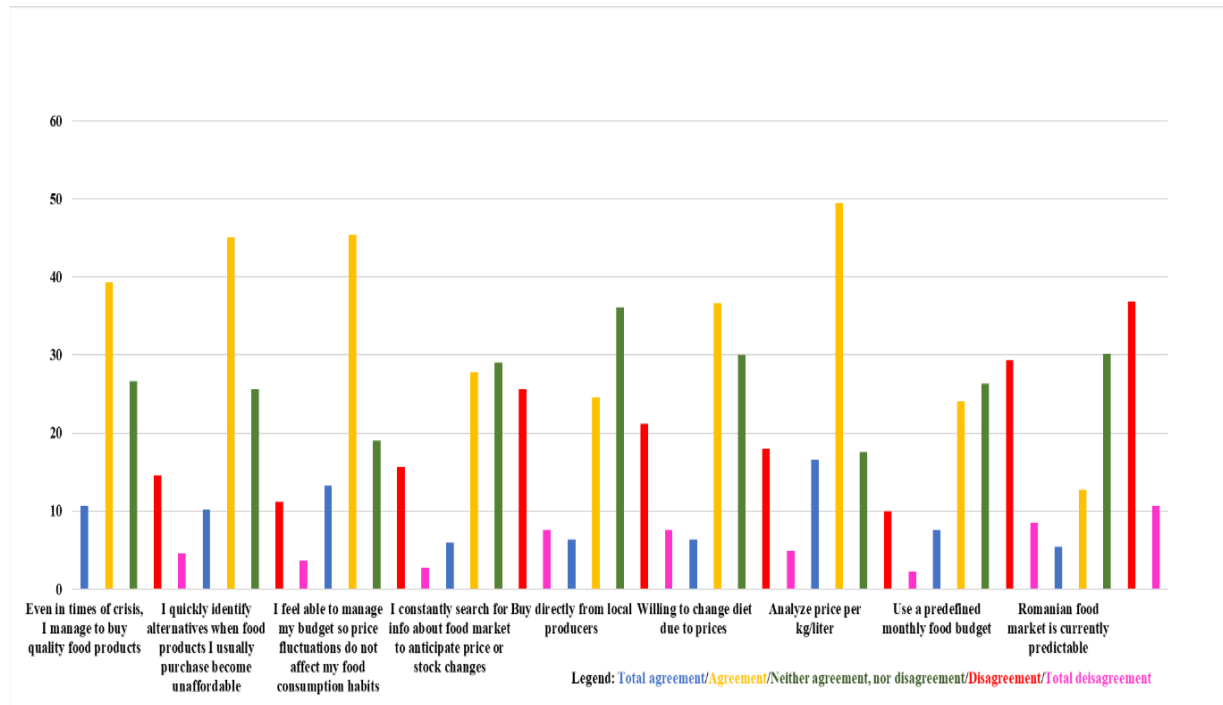


Figure 3. Perceived Resilience and Adaptive Food Consumption

Source: Authors' own research.

The data summarized in Figure 4 show that the respondents were mainly urban citizens, well-educated, and with a higher than average income. All these elements form the foundation for a favourable context for adopting adaptive strategies as those analysed in the following sections. Table 2 offers a comparative overview of respondents' perceived resilience.

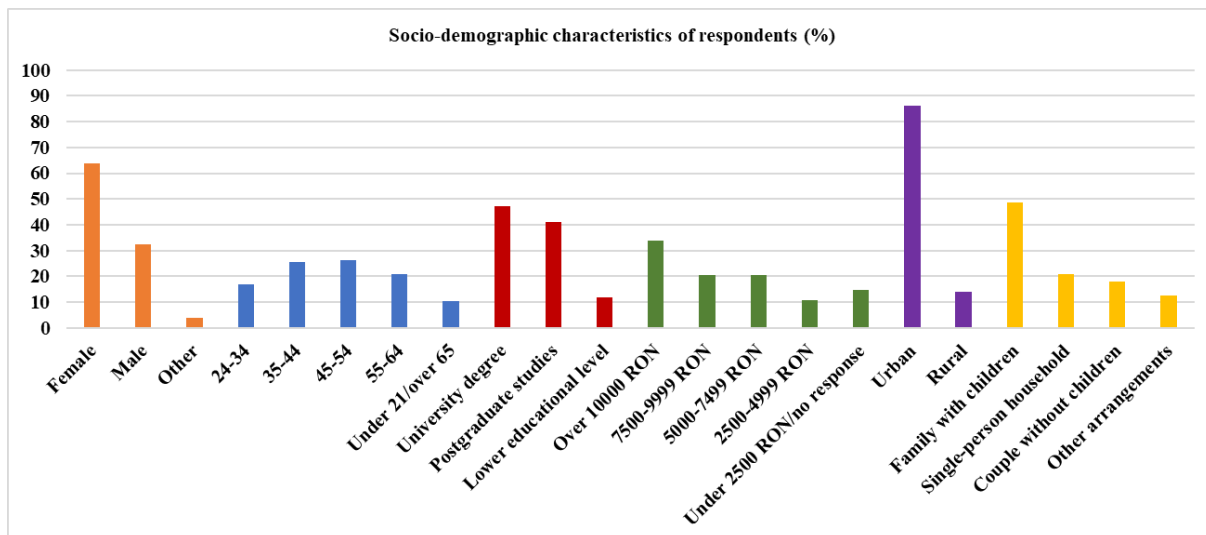


Figure 4 - Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (%)

Source: Authors' own research results.

Consumers in emerging economies are used to having to cope with crises. This is why they adapt to new contexts by using pragmatic mechanisms and gradual changes in their behavior. (Castaño et. Flores, 2019). The collected data provide a wide picture of the Romanian consumers' behavior. Most of the respondents were women, and this finding is consistent with the results of numerous studies, which show that women are the ones who make the most decisions about buying food (Wang et al., 2014; O'Meara et al., 2025), as they are more involved than men in price comparison, budget planning, or adjusting the diet in hard times.

Data collected regarding age and education show that most respondents are active adults, over 35 years of age, with a university degree, creating the profile of a consumer that already has a professional status that provides better payment compared to younger respondents (under 35 years of age). Also, those over 35 years of age might have already experienced episodes of economic instability, meaning that they could have developed relatively stable adaptive mechanisms, like product substitution. More than that, Hanushek & Woessmann (2008) associate higher education not only with higher income, but also with better information-processing and evaluating market offers capacity. These instruments help explain efficiency-oriented consumption strategies. (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008)

Moreover, most of the respondents live in cities, so they have easy access to modern retail, a multitude of products and several brands to choose from, and use digital price-comparison tools. Also, nearly half of the respondents belong to households with children. Consumers that have to raise children typically face additional budgetary pressures and are more motivated to optimize their food consumption behavior.

Even if the majority of respondents have a high level of education and life experience, only a relatively small proportion of them consider themselves capable of managing economic crises by adjusting their behavior. For example, only 10.7% of the respondents totally agree that they can manage to buy quality food products even in time of crisis, and only 10.2% consider themselves able to quickly identify cheaper alternatives when the products they usual buy become too expensive. This characteristic indicates that they have an adaptive capacity based on diversification of options. Besides that, only 6.3% totally agree that they would change their diet due to prices raising too high, while 36.6% affirmed that they agree with that statement. This form of food consumption behavior flexibility allows the consumers to somehow not perceive it as deterioration in life quality. While stringent expenditure management through predetermined budgets is less common, 49.5% of respondents often use price-per-quantity comparisons, which supports this adaption.

More than that, 28.5% of respondents occasionally use mobile applications for price comparison, while only 25,1% frequently use this kind of digital tools (Figure 5). These findings demonstrate that pragmatic changes and accumulated experience are more important in building resilience than systematic market monitoring. Also, Romanian consumers continue to lean on traditional adjustment mechanisms, while digital solutions or sustainable behaviors remain secondary instruments.

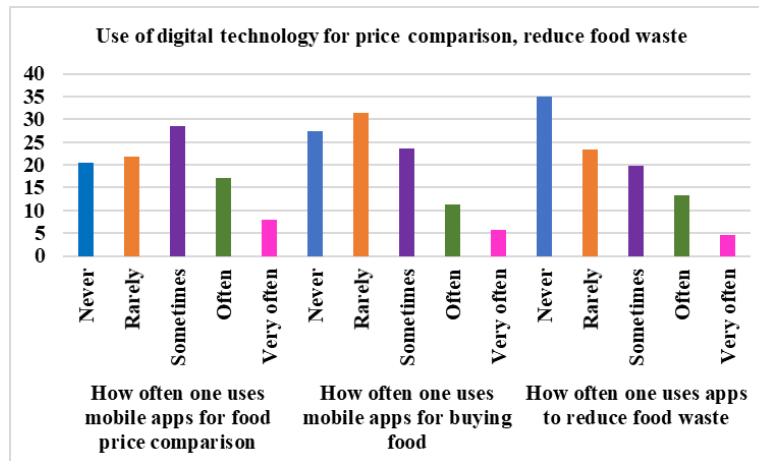


Figure 5 – Use of digital technology as an adjustment mechanism

Source: Authors' own research.

The general perceptions of the Romanian food market are predominantly negative, with 36.8% of participants considering it unpredictable and 30.2% evaluating it as moderately predictable. This spectrum of uncertainty explains why consumers rely on a multitude of adaptive strategies to mitigate the impact of volatility of food prices and one's well-being. Yet, the results suggest that this changes in food consumption pattern are more pragmatic adaptations to the current context of instability, instead of a significant structural reorganization of long-term consumption trends.

Conclusion

At the beginning of our research, we stated 5 research questions. The first one referred to the main strategies that Romanian consumers adopt to maintain their food security during periods of instability. The collected data show that Romanian consumers adopt pragmatic strategies aimed to optimize their budget and acquisitions planning, analyse the price-weight ratio, and show flexibility towards brands, to maintain control of resources during crises.

The second question regarded the extent to which the demographic factors (age, income, area of residence) influence the level of consumer resilience. Data show that age has a significant impact on resilience. Due to their cumulative economic experience, which is supported by their income and educational attainment, the 55–64 age group has a greater potential for adaptation. Rational efficiency tactics are favoured by high wealth and education (Glick et Miller, 1956), and the metropolitan setting makes a variety of products and digital price comparison tools more accessible.

The third question aimed to identify significant trend of reorientation towards sustainable consumption as a protection mechanism against negative market dynamism. Collected data show that Romanian consumers tend to be more frugal, reduce food waste and buy local products, more from economic necessity, not necessarily from ecological beliefs. Although over a third of the participants are willing to change their diet to save money, the adoption of digital solutions to reduce food waste remains limited.

This leads to the fourth question, that was orientated upon resilience strategies adopted to mitigate the negative impact of market instability on the perceived quality of consumer life. Consumers tend not to perceive that rising food prices severely affect their life quality as long as they can

apply resilience strategies like finding cheaper products or replace unaffordable products. However, adaptation is rather reactive, based on on-the-moment adjustments.

Nonetheless, the last question helped us evaluate to what extent current changes in food consumption behavior represent a temporary adaptation to the crisis versus a structural reconfiguration of long-term consumption perspectives. The data demonstrate that the current changes represent rather a pragmatic adaptation mechanism to crisis and instability. Although there is a maturation of behavior, demonstrated by shopping planning, price comparison, and price-quantity ratio, the results suggest rather on-the-moment adjustment, not a deep structural reconfiguration of long-term consumption patterns in Romania.

In the context of European strategies that emphasize sustainability and in the face of current challenges, dominated by climate change, price volatility and the reconfiguration of the status of great powers, consumers must develop strategies to adapt to new realities, marked by complex dynamics.

Acknowledgements: During the preparation of this work, the authors utilized ChatGPT 4 to enhance readability and language clarity. Following the use of this tool, the authors meticulously reviewed and revised the content as necessary and assume full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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