

Does The Development of The Country Drive The Consumer Behavior? A Two-Country Study

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Abstract

Consumer behavior varies country by country as it is strongly affected by nationality. Meaning, the groups of people form specific place in a given period of time have similar practices and a common way of thinking. It reflects on their decision-making processes and daily habits, also when purchasing products and services.

The goal of this paper is to investigate if there is a significant difference between the consumer behavior attitudes regarding development level of the countries. Furthermore, the paper seeks to identify the main factors affecting their consumer behaviors.

In order to reach the research aims, this study consists of a survey on 604 consumers of Italian and Georgian populations. The respondents from Italy and Georgia are analyzed separately and compared.

The results obtained from questionnaire are a bit paradoxical in case of Georgia. It seems that, unlikely to Italian consumers, they are not aware of the issues related to food quality, labeling and certification and these consumers make spontaneous decisions non-consciously. Therefore, raising of awareness level and cognitive activities regarding nutrition may affect purchasing behavior.

Keywords: Functional Food, Consumer Management, Awareness, Questionnaire.

1. INTRODUCTION

The populations of the countries with the different levels of development have different characteristics and social and economic attitudes [1; 4; 5; 6]. In general, each population shows its own language, knowledge, laws, and habits [2; 7]. In the context of consumer behavior, Reeves and Baden [8] define the habit as the distinctive element of ideas, beliefs, and norms which characterize the way of life and relations of a society or group within a society. In the broad perspective, beliefs and values are the mental representations that influence a person's attitudes that eventually manifest in his behavior.

Different populations think, feel, and act differently, and there is no scientific standard for considering one group of people to be intrinsically superior or inferior to another [3; 9; 10; 11].

Furthermore, different people might perceive the same situation differently: perception depends primarily on the individual's personality as well as on the environment around them. Society members receive huge amount of impressions from the environment. Some of these impressions disappear or go into the field of unconsciousness, but others remain. These remaining impressions shape the consumers' interest towards the goods [1; 12; 13].

The impact of the "country of origin" on consumer behavior is so natural that individuals are often unaware and unconsciously making purchasing decisions and they are sure of their choice. A number of academic works [14; 15; 16; 17; 18; 19; 20] prove that except to "country of origin" aspect, also social status, education, and personal or family income significantly determine consumer's behavior. Indeed, the work of Bray [69] confirms the complexity of consumers' choices, since they take into consideration the need of the specific product, information about that product and possible alternatives, then the purchase intention is built, the act of purchasing is conduct, consumption and finally disposal. Author describes different models considering the different portraits of the consumers (Economic Man, Psychodynamic, Behaviourist, Cognitive, Humanistic) and wide range of variables for explaining the behaviour. Still, the author ignores the role of ethics, social responsibility and altruism. On the other hand, Professor Stankevich in her work highlights that despite the informative nature of the models of general consumers, their behavior varies from country to country and the same marketing instruments cannot be used for European and Asian countries for instance [70].

The aim of this work is to investigate the similarities and dissimilarities between the consumer behaviors in the countries with the different levels of development. In order to understand the role of the country and environment the people live in, we have identified two countries with the similar population in terms of characteristics, manners and attitude towards food (50) but with different economic and political conditions.

Italy and Georgia are chosen for the research as they are very similar in terms of the food quality produced and consumed but profoundly different in terms of economic development. Investigating the consumers' attitude toward healthy lifestyle, eating habits, and purchase decision-making process has been the object of this study. Thus, choosing a particular product rather than another has its stimulus and studying these stimulus makes possible to understand differentiating factors of the population of these countries.

The research question this study answers is to identify the factors affecting the consumers' purchasing behavior, to determine if these factors are social, demographic, economic, related to the policy of the country or to the education, personal habits and lifestyle of the population.

The contribution that this paper can give to the future academic works is the idea for comparing the behavior of similar kind of people in different environment and conditions, since there are number of studies dealing with the investigation of consumers purchasing behaviors in the specific country or group of countries as well as comparison between different countries but for specific products [66; 67; 68; 71; 72; 73; 74; 75]. To our knowledge, there is no study investigates generally and broadly the purchasing behavior of same kind of people in the different conditions; Moreover, this research can be a basis of the future studies for identifying the main problems of less developed countries and the ways how to resolve the identified problems. Additionally, the Government, policy-makers, food producers and consumers can find useful this study for leading populations healthier lifestyle and for encouraging consumers' better decisions regarding food purchase. Also, this paper can support producers to understand consumers' preferences and to improve their business accordingly.

This content is structured as follows: after the introduction, section 2 deepens the studies' state of art in this field, and section 3 discusses the research design, data collection, and the steps performed with data in consumer behaviors. In section 4, the findings are presented. Section 5 discusses the main results, strengths, and weaknesses of consumer behavior from the different

countries investigated. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for upcoming investigation are shown in section 6.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The amount of scientific literature spent to the study of consumer behavior shows, as a main result, the significant difference between the population from developed and developing countries in daily habits and attitudes toward healthy lifestyle [21; 22; 23]. Nutrition environment influences on the personal decision and makes opportunity to compare healthy and junk food [26]. It is no less important to understand the factors leading different decisions among groups of consumers [26]. These factors are leading also asymmetries in the demand of the high-quality and Functional Food (FF) among these groups. FF is a food received after modification of the initial one by adding new component beneficial for human health, or enhancing the existing one, or eliminating the one with harmful effect [27]. They may not resolve any kind of problems related to human health but they play a crucial role to prevent foodborne illnesses. Together with physical activities, avoiding alcohol, drugs and stress, FF can increase the longevity (life expectancy) of the people.

	socio-economic factors	environment in the country	financial condition and technological development	information	education, awareness	trust	origin, quality	corporate social responsibility	Packaging, design	Policy
[25]	x									x
[26; 27; 65; 81; 82]	x									
[28]	x					x				
[22; 29; 31]		x								
[32; 33]			x							
[34; 35; 37; 38; 42; 83]				x						
[23]					x					
[79]					x					x
[41]						x				
[36]				x			x	x		
[66, 67, 68, 76]							x			
[77]								x		
[39; 40]									x	
[46; 80]										x

TABLE 1: Academic literature regarding drivers for consumers' decision making.

The consumption levels of high-quality, healthy and functional food are varying from country to country. Various researches discuss this topic (Table 1) and most of them conclude that main drivers are cognitive and socio-economic factors such as age, gender, income, education, etc. [27; 28; 29]. Nielsen [32] Global Health & Wellness Survey demonstrates the huge influence of socio-economic factors while making the purchase decisions.

Similarly, Azzurra et al. [33] argue that the reasons of the different demand are mainly caused by cultural diversity and traditions. In some countries, there is a growing interest of the health and alimentation [30]. In these countries people are aware that the objective should not be just to

satisfy the hunger but to feed the organism in a way that the diseases will be prevented. Nowadays this concern has an increasing trend [35].

On the other hand, further researches show the correlation with the financial condition of the countries and population since the healthier nutrition intake costs more [81; 82]. In some cases, consumers have an intention to make healthier choices but actually act in contrast. In their work Todua and Jashi [65] found out that the food market in Georgia is saturated with low-quality products and the reason of this, that the authors highlighted is the consumers' preferences. Thus, Georgian low-income consumers prefer cheap product rather than environmentally friendly and healthy food. On the other hand, Italian consumers are willing to pay premium price for quality and "made in Italy" products [67]. Moreover, despite the lack of the information about fortified food, even in the absence of distinctive labelling and clear definition in the last edition of the Codex Alimentarius, its market in Italy is steadily increasing, fortified foods are widely spread and the willingness to pay for it is high in the Italian consumers [68]. Indeed, the biggest FF markets occur mostly in developed countries and developing ones with high-income. FF markets increase notably in those countries with the high development level in biotechnological field, since it makes opportunity to improve some food by adding different vitamins [36; 37].

Another problem that arises in low-income countries and in Georgia as well, is beliefs. Precisely, consumers perceive domestic goods as lower-quality products rather than imported ones [76]. Mghebrishvili [77] assumes that the way to overcome this challenge is understanding consumers' roles in the development process by making careful purchase decisions and stimulating producers to act in a socially responsible way. At the same time, Todua [78] declares that in Georgia, there is a considerable problem of healthy nutrition and echoed in the consumers' purchasing behavior. Author sees the solution in the rising awareness of the consumers regarding healthy lifestyle, healthy nutrition and relevance of food labeling.

According to other academic articles, the role of information is crucial. A good distribution of the consumer-dedicated messages can promote FF and healthy food in general. Thus, the huge importance has to be given to population education and related campaigns in order to bring the necessary information till final consumers about benefits of healthy food and lifestyle [38; 39]. Gómez et al. [40] in their research, found out the correlation with following factors: awareness, corporate social responsibility, origin, quality, and positioning.

Labeling and nutrition information specifically the provenience, organic certification, as well as ingredients, proteins, sodium and carbohydrates [41; 42; 66; 83], additionally, characteristics of packaging such as color or the presence of images can play an important role in consumer purchase intentions [43]. In fact, packaging became a communication tool between producers and consumers [44]. Still, it is not ensured that consumers will understand the messages delivered by packaging. Todua [27] argues that consumers should be prepared for interpreting and taking into consideration all this information. Similarly, Ball et al [83] considers nutrition knowledge expansion as a powerful tool for stimulation for healthy eating. Another problem regarding labeling and information delivery is the skeptical eye of consumers. Nielsen [32] and Hobin et al. [45] researches show that significant number of consumers do not trust the information they get. Authors suggest educational activities that will result increased awareness of consumers and their ability to understand and trust information. This will motivate the people to purchase high-quality products.

Mghebrishvili and Urotadze [46] assert about the necessity of enforcing the regulation in a way that consumers will have not just a right but they will have a real opportunity of reaching all kind of information about products' safety, protecting economic interests, improving defects, compensating damages. The right of information availability is particularly important as it helps consumers to make informed and healthier decisions. Similarly, Roberfroid [25] suggests to develop the food regulation in order to ensure food security and validity. De Temmerman et al. [80] suggest enforcing the food and labelling policy in order to combat with malnutrition. However, Mghebrishvili and Urotadze [46] argue, that while present international society takes into account

consumers' rights, the country of Georgia does not follow to modern standards yet. Indeed, Todua [79] confirms that implementation of public policy is urgent for improving the availability, affordability, and acceptability of healthy behavior among Georgian consumers.

The literature argues that there is disparity between the countries with the different levels of development caused by different cultural, environmental and socio-economic factors. These reflect also in populations' lifestyle and alimentation.

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research is to investigate the similarities and dissimilarities between the consumer behavior in Italy and Georgia. The authors decided to investigate, on one hand, the socio-economic conditions of consumers in the two countries with a different economic context and, on the other hand, their awareness and attitudes towards a healthy lifestyle.

This paper consists of a two-country study: Italy and Georgia. They reflect the countries with the different levels of development since: Italy has the eighth-highest nominal gross domestic product (GDP) in the world at \$2.001 trillion; the country's per capita GDP stands at \$35,896. Instead, in Georgia, the GDP, in US\$ billion is 17.7, per capita GDP amounts at \$ 4.786 [47]. As already stated, Italy and Georgia have been selected in this study for their similarities in terms of the food quality produced and consumed but profoundly different in terms of economic development. For that, the investigation of possible differences in using food stuff, implementing consumer healthy attitude, and analyzing consumer behaviors is very interesting [15; 48; 49; 50].

To achieve the objectives of this study an online survey was performed. All questions were originally in English. Subsequently, to ensure perfect comprehensibility by the interviewed population, each question was translated into the mother tongue of the individual country.

The questionnaire shown diverse categories:

1. Personal information (age, gender, occupation);
2. Routine (life style, daily nutrition, food consumption, FF use);
3. Buying style (nutritional facts, FF characteristics contemplated for the purchase decision);
4. FF background (level of knowledge of FF);
5. FF distinguishing elements (taste, naturalness, smell, packaging).

Excluding the category of questions relating to personal information (category inserted at the beginning of the questionnaire to anonymously identify the main information of the respondent), the queries included in the categories 2 and 3 were deduced from the Morris [53] study. Those included in the categories 4 and 5 were adapted from the Krystallis et al. [34] and Lin et al. [52] studies.

The online questionnaire has been set up by Google Forms, and, after studying academic literature related to consumers' behavior [34; 51], 28 questions have been designed; taking into account sub-questions, the total number was 50.

In total 604 respondents, 315 and 289 respectively from Italy and Georgia were investigated. Respondents have been collected randomly by publishing the questionnaire online and promoting through University contacts (e-mail) database and social networks. However, answers have been controlling over time and authors intervened and tried to promote in the consumers' groups, where the people were missing from. For instance, to try to collect more answers from little regions, or to identify more men after having majority women respondents from bigger regions.

For the information collection the CAWI technique (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) has been used [54; 55; 56]. The questionnaire has been submitted online and it has been self-filled by the respondents. In some cases, when the respondents were elderly people or citizens of extremely pure regions and they did not have the access to computer or internet, CAPI technique

(Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing) has been used [57; 58; 59]. In this way, an interviewer helped respondents to answer questions and the diversity of people was kept to a maximum.

In order to reduce the risk of error, the questionnaire was tested by 15 experts involved in the analysis. Among the interviewees there were: a university professor, some students, some nutritionists, and consumers from different countries of origin and different ages. It was needed to understand any inefficiency or difficulty related to the technical issues and utilization of the research instruments [60; 61].

Results obtained from the questionnaire were interpreted and to know the main trends between Italy and Georgia, descriptive analyses have been performed. Specifically, all data has been arranged in a database built in Excel. Subsequently, the database was imported into STATA Version 14. Through the software, the data was cleaned, organized, the missing data deleted and, as a part of the survey is made by adapted scales, a reliability check (Cronbach's alpha) was performed.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Sample and Descriptive Statistic

The questionnaire showed that more respondents from Georgia are employed rather than from Italy (Table 3). From Georgian interviewees 289 in total, 235 (217 dependents and 18 self-employed) are workers that generates about 81% of the respondents. While in Italian case, there are 190 interviewees (147 and 43 dependents and independent respectively) employed from 315 in total that generates about 60% of the respondents (Figure 1. a.).

	GEORGIA N (%)	ITALY N (%)	N
Consumers' sample	289 (47.85)	315 (52.15)	604
Gender			
Male	56 (39.71)	85 (60.28)	141
Female	233 (50.43)	229 (49.57)	462
Age			
18-25	47 (42.73)	63 (57.27)	110
26-35	107 (56.61)	82 (43.38)	189
36-45	56 (49.12)	58 (50.88)	114
46-55	59 (51.75)	55 (48.25)	114
56-65	17 (27.87)	44 (72.13)	61
Over 65	3 (18.75)	13 (81.25)	16
Employment status			
Student	19 (20.43)	74 (79.57)	93
Employee	217 (59.62)	147 (40.38)	364
Freelance	18 (29.51)	43 (70.49)	61
Unemployed	24 (60)	16 (40)	40
Never employed	8 (34.78)	15 (65.22)	23
Pensioner	3 (13.04)	20 (86.96)	23
Average monthly income			
No income	0 (-)	12 (100)	12
Less than 200 euro	27 (100)	0 (-)	27
201-500 euro	107 (98.17)	2 (1.83)	109
501-1000 euro	108 (74.48)	37 (25.52)	145
1001-2000 euro	40 (22.47)	138 (77.53)	178
2001-3000 euro	3 (4.29)	67 (95.71)	70
More than 3000 euro	4 (6.35)	59 (93.65)	63

TABLE 3: Sample Characteristics.

On the collected data, a reliability check was carried out. Cronbach's alpha measures internal coherence; how closely related a set of elements is as a group. It is considered to be the best way to measure the reliability of a scale [62]. Alpha coefficient identifies correlations between elements (covariance) and ranges from 0 to 1 and can be used to describe the reliability of factors extracted from dichotomous questionnaires (i.e. questions with two possible answers) and / or multi-point formatted questionnaires or scales (rating scale: 1 = poor, 5 = excellent). The higher the score, the more reliable the scale generated. Nunnally [63] stated that 0.7 is an adequate reliability coefficient. For all the scales used in the study, Cronbach's alpha had a value around 0.7 (Table 2).

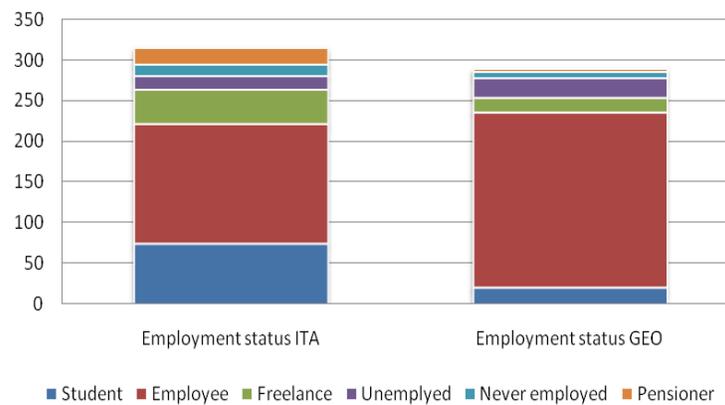
CATEGORIES	DESCRIPTION	CRONBACH'S α (ITA)	CRONBACH'S α (GEO)
Routine	life style, daily nutrition, food consumption, FF use.	0.70	0.72
Buying style	nutritional facts, FF characteristics contemplated for the purchase decision.	0.71	0.74
FF background	level of knowledge of FF.	0.80	0.79
FF distinguishing elements	taste, naturalness, smell, packaging.	0.77	0.75

TABLE 2: Reliability Scale.

The obtained data of average monthly incomes show the different picture (Figure 1. b.). Comparing to Italy, there is a significantly higher number of the respondents in Georgia with less than 500 euros monthly and especially those with average monthly income between 201 and 500 euros. Higher level is in the group of the people with average income of 501-1000 euros as well. Then, the opposite results are in the group of the interviewees with average monthly income of 1001-2000, 2001-3000 and more than 3000 euros.

Figure 1 (.a) and (.b) shows how the social fabric investigated in the two countries, although of the same employment status, presents a clear characterization relative to the country. In other words, while in Italy extremely varied employment statuses are observed (with an important percentage of students and employees interviewed), in Georgia most who expressed a favorable opinion on the interview were employed. Furthermore, this figure presents two main issues; firstly, the average age of the Georgian population is lower than the Italian one (retirees have a low percentage among the interviewees), secondly, access to the network is not so easy for elderly people (especially in Georgia).

Bar chart - Employment status of respondents



Bar chart - Average monthly income of respondents

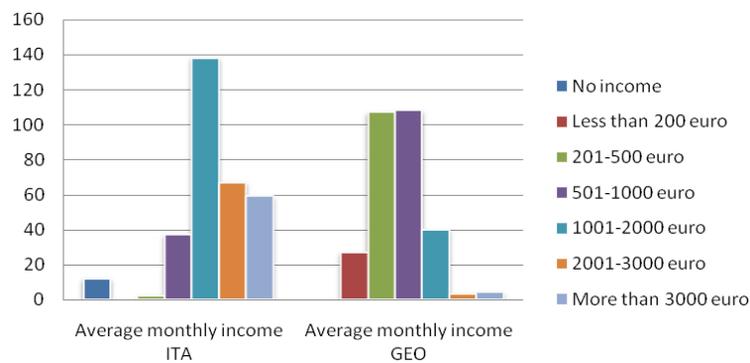


FIGURE 1: (a) Employment status (b) Average monthly income.

4.2 Outputs

In food-related behavior, mostly people are convinced that they are making conscious decisions. However, their opinion may not be always in the line of the real behavior [61].

Healthy eating behaviour is a determinant of overall health. Darmon & Drewnowski [64] stated that people with lower socio-economic status commonly reveal less healthy eating behaviours but, at the same time, assert to follow a right eating life style.

It seems that in the case of this research, the same issue has been appeared. On the question “How healthy is your overall eating habit?” Georgian interviewees gave more optimistic answers than Italians (Figure 2.a). According to the interviewed Georgian consumers, no single person has unhealthy (“poor”) eating habit and only 13% have a “fair” level. All the rest 87% have “good”, “very good” and even excellently healthy eating habits. In regard to Italian consumers, this number is 79%.

In 2004, World Health Organization had suggested that nutritional label was one of the best elements to support the people in making healthier food choice.

Nutrition labeling can significantly influence consumers' buying behavior because some evidence reveals that the provision of nutrition information may allow consumers to more easily shift consumption from unhealthy products into those healthy ones. Nowadays, customer is concerned not only with the appearance of the products but also with the nutritional information in foods sold. Contrary to other studies, in this research 133 Georgian respondents replied that they never or rarely checked the label during the purchase decision process. For the Italian respondents, however, this number was only 43 (Figure 2.b). This result highlights how the belief that a correct purchasing behavior is being taken is not entirely correlated with the attitudes assumed in reality.

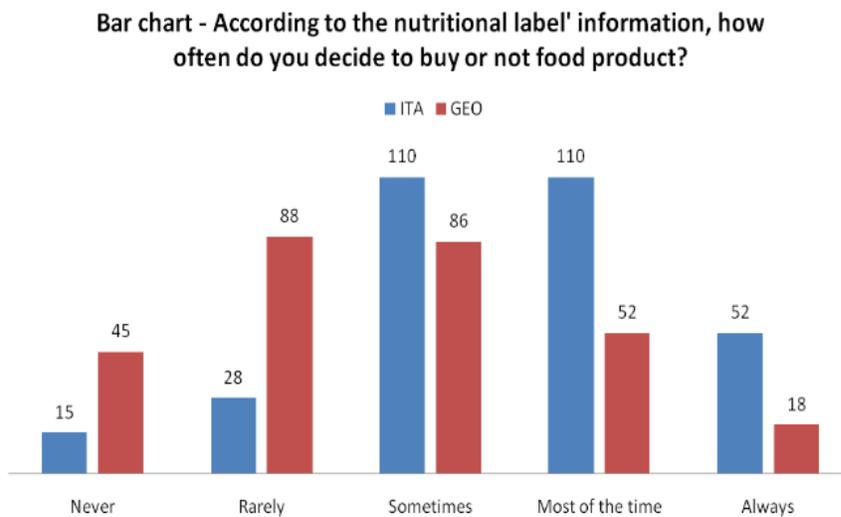
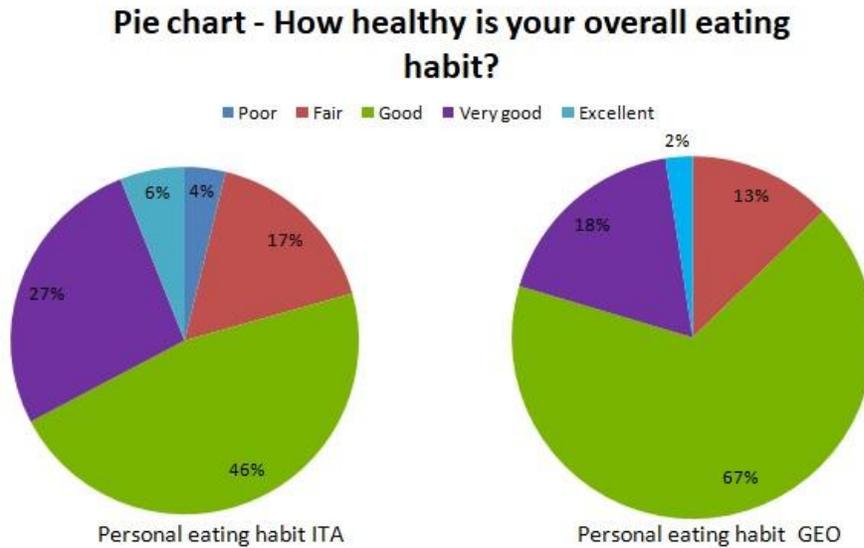


FIGURE 2: (a) Personal eating habit (b) Importance of label.

As the Figure 2.b shows, before choosing one product rather than another, only 70 Georgian people from 289 in total check the label. However, from the same 289 respondents 127 people answered that quality certification is “very important” factor influencing on food choices, contrary to Italians who believe quality certifications are “important” but not “very important” (Figure 3.).

Bar chart - In your opinion, the food choice how much is influenced by the quality certifications (e.g. PDO, PGI ...)?

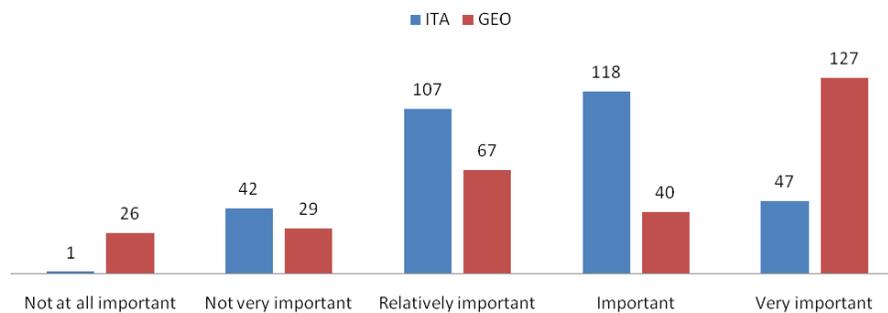


FIGURE 3: Influence of quality certification on food choice.

5. DISCUSSION

The situation after collecting and analyzing the answers, seems to be a bit paradox. Comparing the Figure 2b and Figure 3, it seems that the majority of Georgian consumers never, rarely or sometimes make purchasing decision based on the information given on the label. However, at the same time, majority of Georgian respondents declare that the quality certification is very important for them. There is no way that the answers are correct: if the person never or rarely checked the nutrition label of product, hardly that this person gives high importance to the quality certification. More likely, that interviewees answered non-consciously. They think, that quality should be important factor for choosing one product rather than another, however when they make a decision in reality, personally they do not make a lot attention. These consumers make spontaneous decisions non-consciously. Reversely, Italian respondents maintain the balance between different but related questions, such as personal eating habit, importance of label and importance of quality certification. That gives a possibility to conclude that they act more consciously and they are aware of the issues related to food quality, labeling and certification. In order to overcome the problem outlined in the Georgian case, the populations' educational and awareness rising campaigns can be successful. Then the more accurate answers can be obtained from the consumers and further researches can be carried out.

Different consumers have different reasons that stimulate their behavior while making a purchasing decision. These reasons are mostly coming from their social status. According to Tetrashvili et al. [23], leading positions dictate people to comply with special rules of conduct, impose certain clothing, and purchase expensive items and so on.

Additionally, raising of awareness level and cognitive activities regarding healthy nutrition may affect purchasing behavior of populations in the countries on any stage of economic development [23; 79]. People may be aware about the adequate intake of nutrition by conducting different awareness programs what really represents sufficient FF.

6. CONCLUSION

The deepening of consumer habits and the investigation of the factors influencing the decision-making process should be clarified through an in-depth comparative analysis between Italian and Georgian consumers. Since there are a number of reasons that influence consumer behavior, these reasons should be studied to identify how they affect consumer awareness, as well as to develop programs to support the sale of particular food products.

The performed research provides a new contribution to an active way of identifying new concepts of decision-making among Georgian and Italian consumers. Indeed, the results show that improving health, and preventing the risk of health loss or reduction are among the most important reasons for the rational choices made by consumers. This study also leads to the conclusion that research into the attributes of foods and their benefits that can be an important factor in convincing the consumer to buy the foods should be investigated. This information would be of essential importance for companies deciding which markets in Italy and Georgia they want to understand and penetrate.

This study also suggested some implications for theory or practice. Specifically, from the academic research perspective, this article can lead the further researches to investigate the behavior of the comparable people in the different environment and conditions, likewise our work. Meaning, carry out the research in order to find two or more populations that have similar characteristics, manners and attitudes, but living in different countries with different economic and social conditions, and to compare their factual action regarding food purchase decision-making. This will highlight the role of economic and social factors affecting consumers' purchasing behavior.

Furthermore, this article encourages the interested consumers to pay attention to their lifestyle, eating habits and food purchasing behavior, as well as to get more information about nutrition, its value and intake.

Last but not least, this work has identified the problem of the non-conscious actions in the Georgian consumers. So, it should be the point where the authorized parties need to start the improvements from, thus, to increase the awareness of Georgian population towards the importance of label information and nutrition value of the food product.

The research limitations are: (a) the few number of the respondents – it is obvious that 604 respondents cannot express the situation in two countries precisely, however the general idea can be created, (b) subjective answers on questions that showed kind of “paradox” in the results – in the case of Georgian respondents, the illogical answers are evident. This problem results in unreliable outcomes. Therefore, rising awareness is needed. Meaning, it is crucial to carry out educational and marketing campaigns that will teach the population the essence and the importance of the healthy lifestyle and nutrition intake. Then the further research can be done based on the populations' survey. More likely to get realistic answers in order to better investigate factors for consumers' food purchasing behavior.

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