

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR PATTERNS AND STRATEGIC MARKETING IMPLICATIONS IN THE LOCAL FRUIT SECTOR

Adelina VENIG^{1#}, Aurora VENIG¹, Tabita ADAMOV², Nicoleta MATEOC -ȘÎRB², Elena PEȚ²

¹ University of Oradea, Faculty of Environmental Protection, Oradea, Romania

² University of Life Sciences „King Michael I of Romania”, Faculty of Agricultural Management, Timișoara, Romania

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The local fruit sector plays a vital role in food security, rural livelihoods, and sustainable agricultural development. Understanding consumer behavior patterns within this sector is essential for producers, marketers, and policymakers aiming to enhance competitiveness and market efficiency. This article explores key consumer behavior patterns related to local fruit consumption and analyzes their strategic marketing implications. Factors such as price sensitivity, quality perception, health awareness, cultural preferences, and distribution channels are examined. The study highlights how targeted marketing strategies can strengthen consumer loyalty, improve market positioning, and support the growth of the local fruit industry.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, Local fruit sector, Marketing strategy, Quality perception, Health awareness.

#Corresponding author:

adelina.venig@uoradea.ro

INTRODUCTION

Understanding consumer behavior has become increasingly important in agri-food markets, particularly in the fresh produce sector, where purchasing decisions are influenced by a combination of economic, psychological, cultural, and contextual factors. The local fruit sector occupies a unique position within this landscape, as it directly connects agricultural production with consumer health, food security, and regional economic development. In recent years, shifts in dietary patterns, rising health awareness, and growing concern for sustainability have significantly altered how consumers perceive and purchase fruits, placing new demands on local producers and marketers.

Consumer behavior in the fruit market is shaped not only by price considerations but also by intrinsic and extrinsic product attributes such as freshness, appearance, taste, safety, and nutritional value. Research indicates that perceived quality—particularly visual cues such as color and absence of defects—plays a decisive role in fruit purchase decisions, often serving as a proxy for freshness and healthiness (Jaeger & MacFie, 2023). These quality perceptions are especially salient in local fruit

markets, where supply chains are shorter and consumers expect superior freshness compared to imported alternatives.

Health consciousness has emerged as a dominant driver of fruit consumption behavior. Numerous recent studies show that consumers increasingly associate fruit intake with disease prevention, immune system support, and overall well-being, leading to higher demand for fruits perceived as natural, minimally processed, and locally produced (Stadlmayr et al., 2023). Wang et al. (2025) further demonstrate that consumers' consumption purposes—such as general health maintenance versus specific nutritional goals—significantly influence preferences for fruit attributes, highlighting the heterogeneity of consumer motivations within the market. This growing health orientation presents both opportunities and challenges for the local fruit sector, requiring marketing strategies that clearly communicate nutritional and health benefits.

Beyond product attributes, the retail environment and purchasing context strongly influence consumer behavior. Consumers often make a preliminary decision regarding where to purchase fruits before deciding what to buy, with factors such as convenience, price transparency, trust in vendors, and availability

of local produce shaping outlet choice (Marques et al., 2021). Traditional markets, roadside vendors, supermarkets, and emerging online platforms coexist in many regions, each appealing to different consumer segments. Understanding these channel preferences is therefore essential for effective market positioning in the local fruit sector.

Socio-demographic characteristics further contribute to variation in fruit purchasing behavior. Income level, education, household size, and urbanization influence both the frequency of fruit consumption and the types of fruits purchased (Anesbury, 2020; Stadlmayr et al., 2023). These differences underscore the need for market segmentation and targeted marketing approaches rather than uniform strategies. Moreover, increasing competition from imported fruits and branded produce has intensified the need for local fruit marketers to differentiate their offerings through quality signaling, branding, and relationship marketing.

Given these evolving dynamics, a deeper understanding of consumer behavior patterns in the local fruit sector is essential. Insights into how consumers perceive value, make purchasing decisions, and respond to marketing stimuli can inform strategic marketing initiatives aimed at improving competitiveness, enhancing consumer satisfaction, and promoting sustainable consumption. This article therefore seeks to examine key consumer behavior patterns in the local fruit sector and discuss their strategic marketing implications for producers, marketers, and policymakers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional research design to analyze consumer behavior patterns and their marketing implications in the local fruit sector in Romania. The research focused on adult consumers aged 18 years and older who purchase fresh fruits for household consumption at least once per month. Romania was selected as the study context due to its strong tradition of local fruit production, the coexistence of traditional agri-food markets and modern retail formats, and increasing competition between locally produced and imported fruits.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered between late spring and early autumn, a period characterized by high availability of locally produced fruits. To

ensure geographic and socio-economic diversity, respondents were recruited from multiple regions of Romania, including Transylvania, Moldavia, Wallachia (Muntenia and Oltenia), Dobrogea, and the Bucharest-Ilfov area. Both urban and peri-urban locations were included to capture differences in access to retail channels and purchasing habits. Data collection was conducted using a mixed-mode approach combining in-person intercept surveys near points of purchase, such as open-air markets, supermarkets, and roadside stands, with an online version of the same questionnaire distributed through social media and community networks. Respondents were instructed to base their answers on their typical fruit purchasing behavior during the previous three months.

The questionnaire was developed in Romanian and structured to capture key dimensions of fruit purchasing behavior. It included items measuring purchase frequency, monthly expenditure on fruits, and preferred purchasing channels. Consumer perceptions and attitudes toward local fruits were assessed using five-point Likert scales, focusing on attributes such as freshness, quality, price, safety, health benefits, trust in local producers, and willingness to pay for Romanian origin. Additional questions examined exposure to marketing and informational cues, including price promotions, origin labeling, and recommendations from vendors or social networks. Socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, education level, household income category, household size, presence of children, place of residence, and region were also collected. Prior to full deployment, the questionnaire was pilot tested with a small group of respondents to ensure clarity, appropriate length, and internal consistency, resulting in minor wording adjustments.

In addition to attitudinal measures, consumer preferences were further examined through a simplified choice-based task designed to capture trade-offs between key fruit attributes. Respondents were presented with a series of hypothetical purchase scenarios in which they were asked to choose between alternative fruit options varying in origin (Romanian versus imported), seasonality (in-season versus off-season), freshness cues, production claims related to reduced pesticide use, and price. The price levels reflected realistic market ranges observed in Romanian retail outlets. This approach allowed for

estimation of the relative importance of local origin and freshness compared to price and other attributes.

A minimum sample size of approximately 400 respondents was targeted to allow for robust statistical analysis, including segmentation and multivariate modeling. Data analysis was performed using standard statistical software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize purchasing patterns, channel preferences, and attitudes toward local fruits. The reliability of multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Differences in purchasing behavior and attitudes across socio-demographic groups and regions were examined using appropriate inferential tests. Regression analyses were conducted to identify key predictors of frequent local fruit purchasing, while choice model estimates were used to derive consumers' willingness to pay for local origin and freshness attributes.

To reduce potential bias, anonymity was ensured, and respondents were informed that there were no right or wrong answers. Seasonal timing was recorded and considered during analysis to account for variation in local fruit availability. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were used exclusively for academic research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The final dataset consisted of 412 valid responses from Romanian consumers who regularly purchase fresh fruits. The sample showed balanced gender representation and broad regional coverage, with a predominance of urban and peri-urban residents. Most respondents reported purchasing fruits at least two to three times per week, confirming the importance of fruits in everyday dietary practices. Table 1 summarizes the key socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Most participants were between 26 and 55 years old, held at least a secondary or higher education qualification, and lived in urban areas. Household income levels were distributed across low-, middle-, and high-income categories, allowing meaningful analysis of price sensitivity and willingness to pay.

Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents
(n = 412)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	54.1
	Male	45.9
Age	18–25	14.6
	26–40	32.8
	41–55	29.4
	>55	23.2
Residence	Urban	67.5
	Peri-urban/Rural	32.5
Education	Secondary or lower	38.6
	Higher education	61.4

Consumers reported frequent fruit purchases, with 61.9% buying fruits at least three times per week. Local fruits accounted for more than half of total fruit purchases for 58.7% of respondents during the domestic production season. As shown in Table 2, open-air agri-food markets were the most common purchasing channel for local fruits, followed by supermarkets.

Table 2
Primary purchasing channels for local fruits

Purchasing channel	Percentage (%)
Open-air markets	41.3
Supermarkets/Hypermarkets	32.6
Neighborhood shops	12.4
Roadside stands	9.5
Online platforms	4.2

Respondents evaluated the importance of various attributes on a five-point Likert scale. Table 3 presents the mean importance scores, showing that freshness and taste were the most influential determinants of purchase decisions, followed by quality and origin. Price was important but ranked below quality-related attributes.

Table 3
Importance of fruit purchase attributes (1 = not important, 5 = very important)

Attribute	Mean	SD
Freshness	4.62	0.58
Taste	4.48	0.63
Overall quality	4.39	0.66
Romanian origin	4.21	0.74
Health/nutritional value	4.17	0.71
Price	3.89	0.82
Packaging/labeling	3.31	0.91

Attitudinal analysis revealed strong positive perceptions of Romanian fruits. As reported in Table 4, respondents generally agreed that local fruits are fresher, healthier, and more trustworthy than imported fruits. Concerns were mainly related to inconsistent quality and limited off-season availability.

Table 4
Consumer attitudes toward local fruits

Statement	Mean	SD
Local fruits are fresher than imported fruits	4.44	0.65
Local fruits are healthier	4.28	0.69
I trust local fruit producers	4.16	0.72
Quality of local fruits is consistent	3.42	0.88
Local fruits are well labeled and packaged	3.18	0.94

Results from the choice-based preference task indicated that origin and freshness significantly influenced purchase probability. On average, respondents were willing to pay a premium of approximately 10–15% for fruits identified as Romanian and in-season. Table 5 summarizes estimated willingness-to-pay (WTP) values derived from the choice model.

Table 5
Estimated willingness to pay for selected fruit attributes

Attribute	Average WTP premium
Romanian origin	+12%
In-season production	+15%
High freshness cue	+18%
Reduced pesticide claim	+9%

Cluster analysis identified three distinct consumer segments (Table 6). The largest segment consisted of health-oriented and local-loyal consumers, followed by price-sensitive pragmatic buyers and convenience-driven urban consumers.

Table 6
Consumer segments in the Romanian local fruit market

Segment	Share (%)	Key characteristics
Local-loyal & health-oriented	38.4	High trust, low price sensitivity
Price-sensitive pragmatic	34.7	Price-driven, flexible origin choice
Convenience-driven urban	26.9	Supermarket-oriented, values accessibility

Regression analysis confirmed that perceived freshness, trust in local producers, and health orientation were significant positive predictors of frequent local fruit purchasing, while strong price sensitivity negatively affected consistent local fruit choice.

Overall, the results demonstrate that Romanian consumers show a strong preference for local fruits, primarily driven by freshness,

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined consumer behavior patterns and their strategic marketing implications in the local fruit sector in Romania, with a particular focus on purchasing preferences, attribute evaluation, and willingness to support locally produced fruits. The results demonstrate that Romanian consumers exhibit a strong underlying preference for local fruits, primarily driven by perceptions of freshness, quality, trust in local producers, and health-related considerations. These factors consistently outweighed price in shaping purchasing decisions, especially among higher-income and health-oriented consumer segments.

The findings also highlight the continued importance of traditional agri-food markets as key distribution channels for local fruits, reflecting consumers' desire for freshness and direct interaction with vendors. At the same time, supermarkets play a significant role due to convenience and accessibility, particularly for urban consumers. This coexistence of traditional and modern retail formats suggests that marketing strategies in the local fruit sector should be channel-specific, leveraging the strengths of each outlet type while addressing their limitations.

Consumer segmentation analysis revealed distinct groups with varying motivations and sensitivities, underscoring the need for differentiated marketing approaches. Health-oriented and locally loyal consumers represent a valuable target segment for premium positioning based on quality, origin, and seasonality. In contrast, price-sensitive consumers require competitive pricing and promotional strategies to encourage consistent local fruit purchasing. Convenience-driven urban consumers may be more effectively reached through improved labeling, branding, and availability of clearly identified local fruits in modern retail environments.

trust, and health considerations. However, the translation of these preferences into consistent purchasing behavior depends on price competitiveness, availability, and effective communication of quality and origin at the point of sale.

From a strategic perspective, the results suggest that enhancing quality consistency, improving packaging and origin labeling, and communicating freshness and health benefits are critical for strengthening the competitiveness of Romanian local fruits. Investments in short supply chains, producer-retailer collaboration, and trust-building mechanisms can further reinforce consumer confidence and willingness to pay. Policymakers can support these efforts through infrastructure development, quality standards, and promotional initiatives that highlight the economic and social value of local fruit production.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of consumer behavior in the Romanian local fruit market and provides actionable insights for producers, marketers, and policymakers. By aligning marketing strategies with consumer preferences and segment-specific motivations, the local fruit sector can enhance market performance, promote sustainable consumption, and support long-term rural and agricultural development.

REFERENCES

- Anesbury, Z. W. (2020). Understanding purchasing frequency and choice behavior for fresh produce. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 54, 102032.
- Jaeger, S. R., & MacFie, H. J. (2023). Consumer conceptualizations of freshness in fruit and vegetables. *Food Quality and Preference*, 104, 104746.
- Marques, J. M. R., Torres, A. P., Behe, B. K., Langenhoven, P., & Vilas Boas, L. H. de B. (2021). Consumer choice of market channels for fresh fruits. *HortTechnology*, 31(5), 595–604.

-
- Stadlmayr, B., et al. (2023). Determinants of fruit and vegetable purchasing and consumption: A systematic review. *Nutrients*, 15(7), 1624.
- Wang, Y., Liu, L., & Wei, Y. (2025). The influence of consumption purpose on consumer preferences for fruit attributes: The moderating effect of color perception. *Foods*, 14(11), 1902.