ASPECTS REGARDING FOOD SAFETY AND CONSUMER PROTECTION ON THE MARKET OF PUBLIC FOOD SERVICES

Nicoleta Andreea NEACŞU[1]

Abstract: *The market of public food has developed and diversified considerably lately, increasing the interest of the population in spending their free time and satisfying certain needs through the services offered by restaurants. Thus, the concepts of food safety and consumer protection have developed and gained special importance on this market.*
The paper analyses these concepts on the restaurant market; for this purpose, a quantitative market research study was carried out, which aimed to identify and analyse consumer opinions on food safety and consumer protection on the market of public food services.

Key words: *consumer protection, food safety, public food, restaurants, quantitative research*

1. Introduction

For traders, the restaurant market is becoming more and more a real business. The emergence of so many restaurants has led to a diversification of this market, a branching of restaurants in several areas. The most widespread and frequented area is the tourist one, hence the emergence of a new HoReCa concept (Hotel-Restaurant-Accommodation). When choosing a vacation, consumers evaluate a stay, a service, a tour package by location and restaurant. Therefore, most hotels and guesthouses have a restaurant on the premises, specific to the area and to the type of service offered.

In Romania, the restaurant market has developed considerably over the last 20 years, increasing consumers' interest in spending their free time and in satisfying certain needs through the services offered by restaurants. This development shows that the involvement of the authorities in consumer protection, the protection of their rights, a greater interest in the traders' seriousness and the respect for the principles of food safety should increase.

The preferences evolve, consumers go out to the restaurant not only for lunch, but also for experience. Restaurants must keep up with the consumers' needs and

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[1] *Transilvania* University of Braşov, andreea.neacsu@unitbv.ro

customize their offerings. Consumers give more confidence to restaurants that meet their needs, offer them tasty food, atmosphere in the restaurant, but also to those which comply with all the rules for preparation and marketed. As Madar (2018) states, besides the satisfaction caused by the consumption of products and services, the costumers' experience during the buying act has become very important and influences their purchasing decision.

2. Literature review

The public food falls within the sphere of commercial services provided to the population and consists of the production and marketing of culinary products and drinks through specialized units. This service activity includes restaurants, pensions, canteens, catering establishments, fast-food restaurants, children's camps and other public food units, in which food is prepared, served and marketed (Pentea, 2016). Besides supplying the population with culinary preparations, the public food offers consumers different possibilities to spend their free time, also fulfilling a function of leisure, recreation, rest.

The restaurant is the public premises that combine the production activity with the serving one, offering the client a diverse range of culinary preparations, confectionery-pastry products, drinks and some items for smokers (Lupu, 2010). The restaurants provide public catering services for both individual consumers and for different groups. Individual consumers can order their favourite foods and beverages according to the "à la carte" system, by consulting the menu lists, which contain the culinary preparations prepared for that day, but there is also the possibility of preparing such dishes "on the spot", at the customer's request. In the case of consumer groups, public food services are provided on the basis of previously agreed menus. Restaurants can be found both in the leisure and entertainment area, as well as in the tourist area (Lupu, 2010).

The development of the human society has increased the interest of consumers to serve meals in the city, which meant the development of the public food industry. This development of the restaurant industry determined the emergence of the concept of food safety on this market, in order to provide consumers with safe and high quality dishes.

Food safety means engaging all the factors and applying all the norms that support and ensure the realization of food products whose nutritional value and consumption are the basis of a healthy diet. The main purpose of food safety is to ensure the protection of human health at the highest level, and the objective is to represent the interests of consumers in relation to food (Productis, 2019). According to Thompson (2014), the term food security is associated with a variety of techniques and mechanisms that aim to minimize the risk of morbidity and mortality related to human food consumption.

The concept of food safety mainly refers to three important characteristics that a food product containing bioavailable nutrients must fulfil (Oancea, Bănăduc, Oprean, 2012):

• be safe, i.e. there are no toxic, antinutrient, radioactive, pathogenic microorganisms, excess additives;

• have nutritional value, expressed by the quantity and quality of the main macronutrients (carbohydrates, proteins, lipids) and micronutrients (biominers, vitamins, biologically active substances);

• to have energy value - the bioavailability of a food is influenced by the physiological state of the organism, the nature of the food and the contaminants, the way of processing the food and the interactions between the components of the food.

Mainly, the exogenous factors of aggression on food are the following: factors of aggression from the environment (air, water, soil), product recipes, manufacturing technologies, food packaging, biodegraders (bacteria, moulds, insects, rodents), the environment of fixed and mobile storage spaces.

Within the policy of the European Union, food safety occupies a central place and is based on the concept "from the farm to the consumer's table", which requires careful verification of the products and preparations starting from the raw materials, from the health of plants and animal welfare, continuing with the production process, with the packaging, storage and delivery and ending with their final sale. In accordance with the legislative regulations, "The Union contributes to the protection of the health, safety and economic interests of consumers, as well as to the promotion of their right to information, education and organization in order to defend their interests" (European Commission, 2012 / C 326/01). Consumer protection policy is a strategic element of the European Union, improving its citizens' life quality (Epuran, Brătucu, Bărbulescu, Neacşu, Madar, 2018).

Ensuring consumer protection, food safety and quality of products on the public food market is accomplished by observing the preparation techniques, the quality of the raw materials, by completely covering the customer's requirements and by permanently verifying the products within the production cycle.odd.

3. Methodology

The research carried out and presented in this article was quantitative in nature and aimed at identifying and analysing consumer opinions on food safety and consumer protection in the market of public food services.

The main objective of the paper is to create a clear picture of how customers of public food services perceive the concepts of food safety, quality and consumer protection.

The sampling method used was non-random sampling and resulted in a sample of 228 persons, structured as shown in Table 1.

The data collection technique called CAWI - Computer Assisted Web Interviewing was used, a method by which the questionnaire is displayed on a web page, the respondent completing the answers directly in the browser. The period in which this study was conducted was March 2019 - May 2019. The data collection was performed on the basis of a questionnaire containing 22 questions, of which 5 are demographic

and 17 regard the opinions and attitudes of the population investigated with reference to food safety and consumer protection on the market of public food services.

In terms of gender distribution, 56% of the people surveyed were female and 44% male. The information concerning the environment the respondents come from can be found in table 1.

Descriptive information of survey participants   **Table 1**

Environment	Urban	Rural
Number	155	73
(%)	68	32

4. Results

After the information was transcribed, the data processing took place. The most important results are presented below.

The first question considered the type of restaurant the subjects prefer and go to. Thus, 57.9% of the respondents prefer to dine at a restaurant with classic service (a la carte), which emphasizes the atmosphere and the lived experience, and where they can spend more time, 22% of the respondents prefer fast- food and 20.1% prefer self-service when they decide to eat, because the rates are more convenient (Figure 1).
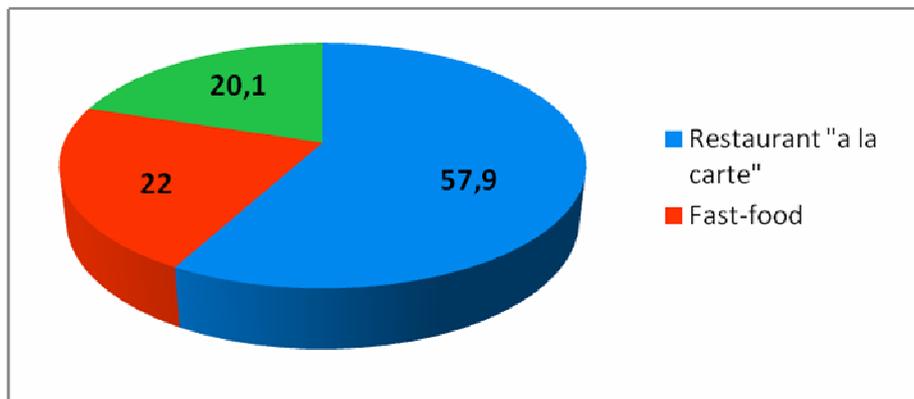

Fig.1. *The type of restaurant preferred by the respondents*
Source: Author own research

Most of the subjects, 36.8% of them, occasionally eat at a restaurant, followed by those who eat in the city once a week (31.6%). None of the subjects served daily meals at a restaurant or have never been at a restaurant. 13.2% of the respondents eat twice a week at a restaurant, 10.5% find this opportunity to eat only once a month, and only 7.9% of the respondents said they rarely eat at the restaurant (Figure 2). None of the respondents serve breakfast in a restaurant, 47% of them serve lunch and 53% serve dinner, which is a relaxing time after a day's work.
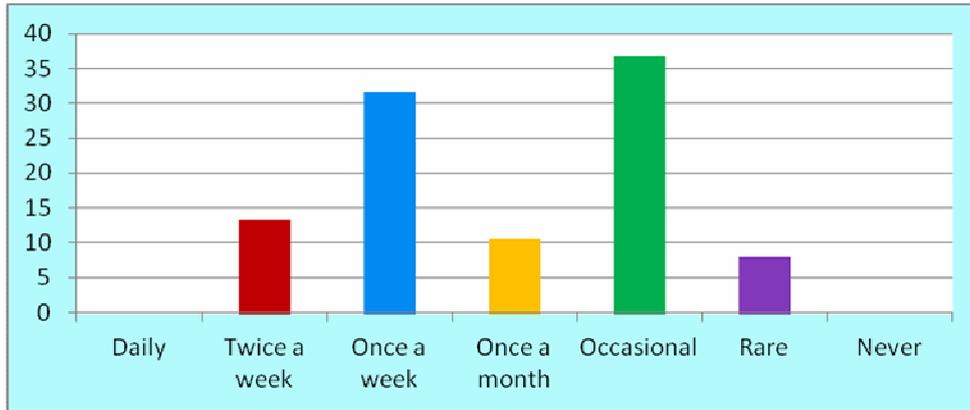
Fig. 2. *Frequency of serving meals in the city*
Source: Author own research

Asked about the level of satisfaction offered by the last meal taken at a restaurant, 10.5% of the subjects declared themselves neutral, 26.3% of the consumers were dissatisfied, 17.5% were very satisfied and most, 45.7%, declared themselves satisfied. No respondent declared himself totally dissatisfied with the services and products offered by the last restaurant where they served lunch (Figure 3).
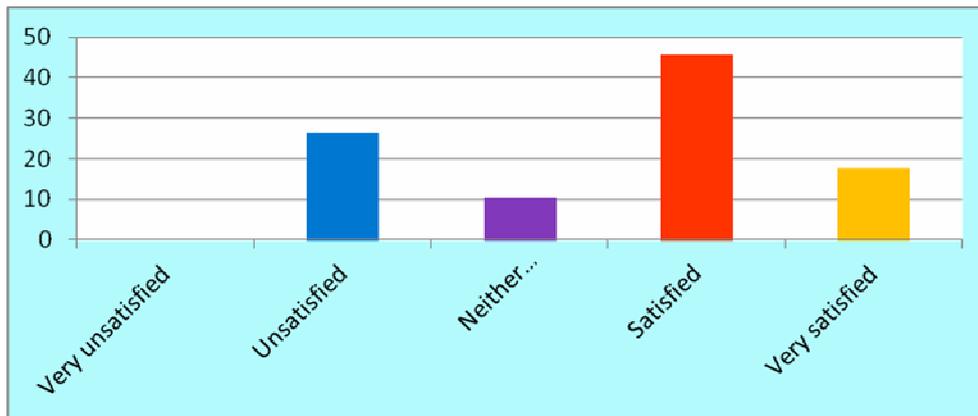

Fig.3. *The respondents' level of satisfaction regarding the services of the last restaurant they went to*
Source: Author own research

The research aimed to identify if the subjects consider that the legislation in force, the activity of the authorities and the controls that are carried out on the market of the public food services are efficient and sufficient and offer them security. The respondents' opinions were divided as follows: 55.3% consider these controls to be effective and sufficient, 13.2% do not consider them to be efficient and sufficient, requiring legislative changes and greater involvement of the authorities, and 31, 6% do not know if they are efficient and sufficient (Figure 4).
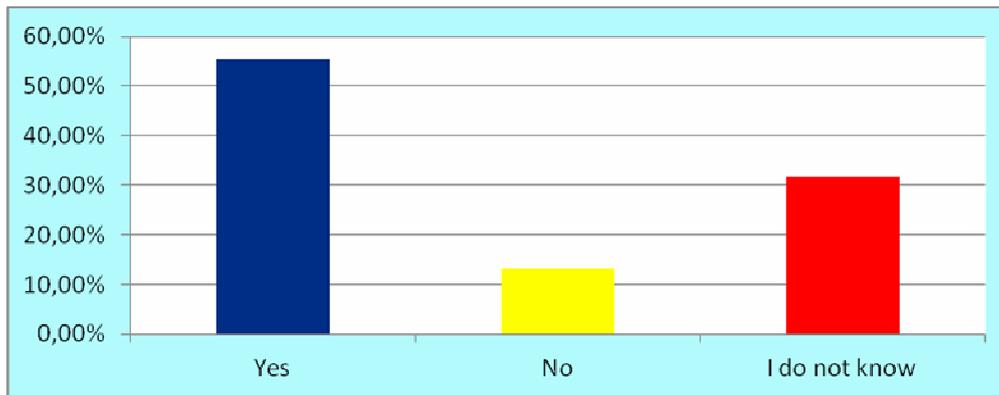
Fig. 4. *Respondents' opinion on the involvement of the authorities*
Source: Author own research

To see how the activity and involvement of the National Consumer Protection Authority in the market of public food services are regarded, the subjects were asked to express their opinion on different aspects regarding the National Consumer Protection Authority (Figure 5).
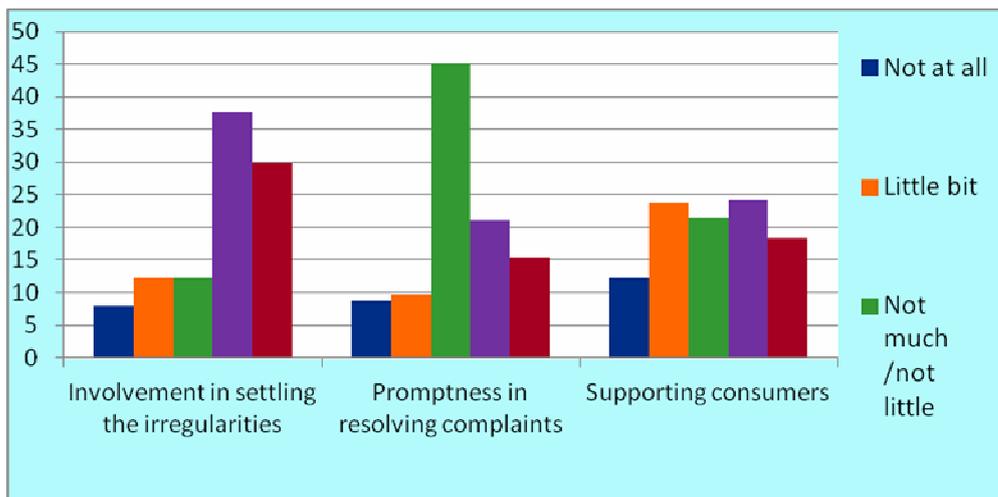

Fig. 5. *The perception of the respondents regarding the National Consumer Protection Authority activity*
Source: Author own research

Regarding the involvement of the National Consumer Protection Authority in solving the problems and irregularities that exist on the market of public food services, 7.9% of the subjects consider that they do not exist, 12.3% that it is low, 12.3% not much / not less, 37.7% that it is present to a large extent and 29.8% of the subjects consider that it occurs to a very large extent. It should be noted that the vast majority of respondents (67.5%) are satisfied with the involvement of the National Consumer Protection Authority in solving the problems and irregularities that exist in restaurants.

From the point of view of the promptness with which they resolve the complaints, 8.8% of the subjects do not perceive this promptness at all, 9.7% perceive it as little, 45.1% neither much / nor little, 21.1% significant and 15.3 % very significant.

Another aspect of the research carried out was the activity of the National Consumer Protection Authority on consumer support and assistance. Thus, 12.3% of the subjects do not perceive this activity at all, 23.7% of the subjects perceive it as little, 21.5% neither more nor less, 24.1% of the subjects consider that the National Consumer Protection Authority is significantly involved in the support and help of consumers and 18.4% of the subjects consider that they are very involved.

Most of the respondents (93.4%) have never complained about the quality and safety of the products they served in restaurants, and they were mostly satisfied. Only 6.6% of the subjects filed a complaint with the National Consumer Protection Authority regarding various irregularities in the restaurants where they served lunch. Of these, 20% do not know if these notifications have been checked and if the issues they reported have been remedied, 20% consider that their notifications have had no effect, while 60% of the subjects who have completed the complaints clearly found that following these notifications they made positive changes and modifications in the respective restaurant (Figure 6).
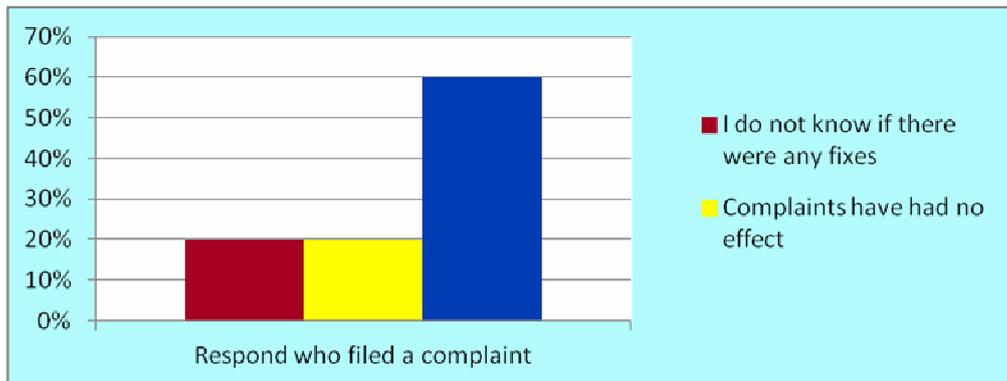
Fig. 6. *The effects of complaints*
Source: Author own research

Due to the development of society and technology, the opinions of other people regarding the quality and services offered by restaurants are present in the virtual environment and help consumers orient themselves when they want to choose a restaurant. Of those surveyed, 84.2% consider that reviews and opinions about a particular restaurant are important to them when choosing a restaurant (Figure 7) and they take them into account. On the other hand, 15.8% of consumers surveyed consider that reviews are not decisive in choosing a restaurant.
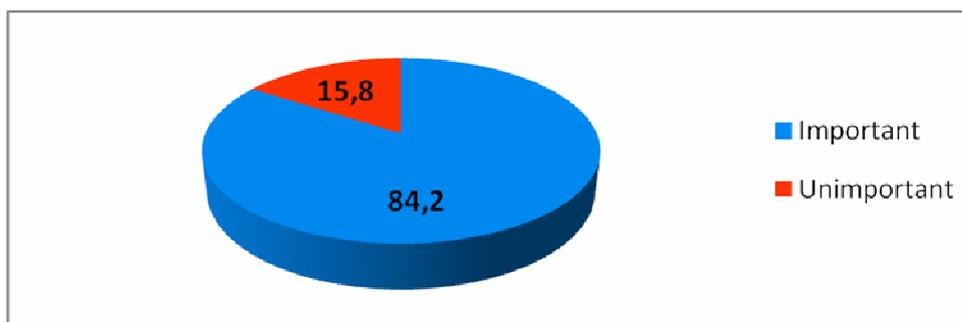
Fig. 7. *The importance given to reviews when choosing a restaurant*
Source: Author own research

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