APPROACHES REGARDING FOOD SAFETY ADMINISTRATION AND INSURANCE PRACTICES IN THE MARKET OF FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Consumers have become increasingly aware of the hygienic aspects of food. The Romanian fast food restaurant market is dominated by several international names and a number of local entrepreneurial businesses. To attract and satisfy customers, restaurants apply various management strategies and food safety practices. The study analyses the management strategies of fast food restaurants in Romania and food safety practices applied in this industry. In order to achieve the objective of the paper, a qualitative marketing research was carried out, such as the in-depth interview.*

Key words: *management strategies, food safety, restaurant, fast food, customer satisfaction*

1. Introduction

Against the background of the evolution of the society, of the trade and tourism activities, the public alimentation sector has experienced and continues to experience increased development. Lately, the restaurant industry is marked by significant transformations and mutations, which further highlights its economic and social importance.

Today, consumers are increasingly aware of the hygienic aspects of food. It is mandatory that all players in the food market comply with technological requirements based on an exceptional managerial strategy. In a competitive market, in order to be successful, producers are obliged to take the requirements and needs of consumers into account, to gain consumer trust (Neacşu, 2020) and to offer safe products and preparations.

A qualitative research was conducted in order to survey the opinions and perceptions of Romanian consumers regarding the management strategies and food safety practices adopted by managers in fast food restaurants.

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2. Literature Review

As a component of the economic sector, public alimentation is a complex activity, which is not limited to satisfying the consumer's needs exclusively. The dynamics of the public alimentation sector is influenced by several factors, especially by the evolution of the tourist circulation (Petroman, Petroman, Popescu, Caba, 2006). This justifies its association with tourism activities, which can be considered as an important component of the tourist service (Turcu, Weisz, 2008). Tourism experiences and tourists' satisfaction depend, on a high degree, on the local gastronomy offer, being one of the factors which contributed to the rapid growth of the restaurant industry (Băltescu, 2020).

The activity of public alimentation (restoration) is based on the direct contact with the client, therefore it is crucial to underline the importance of human resources in this industry (Madar, 2014), and production at the moment of consumption and sometimes even the participation of the client. One of the factors that determines the business success of a food unit is its location. A favourable location allows the unit to benefit from consistent customer flows. This is important, but the restaurant management must consider other aspects to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty. Thus, another important aspect is the diversification of the restaurant's offer, in order to satisfy as many tastes and requirements as possible.

The restaurant is a complex unit that combines production with serving, this structure providing consumers with a rich and diverse assortment of food, culinary preparations, confectionery and pastries and alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages (Baltescu, Neacsu, 2012). The activity of restaurants (considering the typology of customers) is grouped in two sectors: restaurants with a commercial vocation and collective restaurants with a social vocation. Fast food has many similarities with social restaurants, respectively, no sophisticated products are offered, the customer's choice is limited, the price is relatively low, and the menu is made directly by the customer, without influences from the staff.

Food safety is a global concern of various aspects of daily life and includes handling, preparing and storing food in a way that effectively reduces the risk of people becoming ill from food consumed (Santacruz, 2016). It is a heterogeneous concept, and can be interpreted in different ways, and consumers have formed an individual perception about this term (Petrescu, Petrescu-Mag, Bran, Rădulescu, 2018). A definition of food safety states that it is the probability of not being harmed as a result of consuming a particular food (Henson and Traill, 1993). Safety in the food industry includes standards and programs that imply: various hygiene, cleaning and sanitation practices, processing space zoning, supplier control, storage, distribution and transportation, personnel hygiene and work capacity assessment, and all basic conditions and activities necessary to maintain a hygienic environment for food processing (Order 1051, 2011). In public alimentation, standards such as ISO 22000 and HACCP have been implemented.

HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) is based on the principles of hazard analysis and critical control points to manage food safety risks and to prevent their contamination (Şteţca, Mocuţa, Pop, 2012). Business risk can be defined as the relationship between the firm's sales and its earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT). In

general, the greater the firm's operating leverage – the use of fixed operating cost – the higher its business risk (Keul, Drumea, 2009).

In Romania, fast food restaurants appeared in the '90s and were easily accepted by consumers, gaining ground against classic restaurants. Successful access to fast food restaurants was due to several aspects: the changing habits and lifestyle of the population in large cities, increased purchasing power of consumers, the development of modern trade and the emergence of hypermarkets and malls (Voinea, 2013).

The staff of the company can be an element of differentiation, being of great importance as companies realize the determinant role of the human factor in the organisation of the activity (Bălăşescu, 2019).

According to the data provided by the Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment (MEEMA, 2020) in Romania there are over 8000 tourist reception structures with public alimentation functions, of which around 200 are fast-food specific structures (McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hot, Subway, Taco Bell, Spartan, Mesopotamia, Dabo Doner, etc).

3. Strategies and Practices for Managing Fast food Restaurants in Romania

The purpose of management strategies is to streamline daily tasks, to increase customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and increase the company's competitiveness on the market. The way tasks are worked and planned influences various aspects of companies, from food quality to employee behaviour and the reliable image of their business (Anton, 2009).

Currently, there is a change in the eating behaviour of the population in favour of a healthy diet worldwide. This change has led fast food restaurants to introduce new, healthier menus based on fish, salad or fruit dishes to offer customers alternatives to classic menus and fatty and high-calorie foods.

An administration strategy regarding the development of the franchise fast food restaurant network is represented by the location of the future restaurant. Before opening a fast-food restaurant, the company's representatives analyse aspects such as traffic and other rival restaurants in the area, the specifics of the neighbourhood and the profile of people circulating in it. These aspects are criteria to ensure a large flow of customers. So far, the most profitable have been the transit restaurants and drive thru recently opened, bringing the highest revenues and profits (Matei, 2014).

Another strategy is represented by the varied and rich menus, as well as by the provision of the delivery service.

In terms of staff management strategy, franchise fast food restaurants offer many advantages: motivating salary, meal vouchers, performance bonuses, flexible schedule, performance training program and career plans.

Another strategy applied in fast food restaurants in the franchise system is the open kitchen that allows customers to see how the order is prepared, unlimited Wi-Fi access and USB sockets for charging mobile devices.

The management strategies applied by local entrepreneurs are represented by:

• reduced prices compared to those charged by fast-food restaurants in the franchise system;

• some local fast-food restaurants ensure home delivery both through their own system and through partnerships with platforms (Glovo, Foodpanda, Takeaway);

• in the case of local fast-food restaurants with their own delivery system, upon reaching a certain value of the order, no delivery fees are charged;

• choosing the location is another strategy applied by some local fast food restaurants, as they are located in central areas or with easy access.

In conclusion, both the franchise restaurants and the local restaurants implement a wide range of management strategies for the proper development of the services offered by them.

4. Research Methodology

In order to determine consumers' perceptions and opinions on food safety management and administration practices in fast food restaurants, a qualitative research was conducted.

The research objectives were:

• Consumers' perceptions of fast food restaurants;

• Consumers' opinions on the management strategies adopted for fast food restaurants;

• Consumers' perceptions of food safety practices adopted in fast food restaurants.

The qualitative research method chosen was the interview, and the qualitative research technique was the in-depth interview. The procedure used in the research was the semi-structured interview, and the interview guide was used as a tool (Epuran, Brătucu, Bărbulescu, Neacşu, Madar, 2018).

The sample included a number of 16 people (table 1), frequent customers of fast food restaurants.

Age of survey participants   Table **1**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Under 25 years	4	25	25	25
25 – 35 years	5	31.3	31.3	56.3
36 – 45 years	4	25	25	81.3
46 – 55 years	2	12.5	12.5	93.8
Over 55 years	1	6.2	6.2	100.0
Total	16	100.0	100.0	

Source: Author's own research

The semi-directive in-depth interview was conducted between January 15 and February 15, 2021. The subjects' answers were recorded and the information obtained was processed by the technique known as content analysis.

5. Research Results

After transcription and centralization, the interviews were analysed under two aspects:
- • vertical analysis, by the individual approach of each interview, respectively the opinions of each consumer;
- • horizontal analysis, by synthesizing the approach of each topic subject to analysis by all 16 consumers.

▪ **Theme 1:** *Consumer perceptions of fast food restaurants*
The interviewed subjects mentioned that they frequent the following types of restaurants: "fast-food" (40%), "traditional" (26.7%), "Italian" (20%), "Asian" (13.3%) .
The interviewees listed a number of reasons that lead them to eat in fast food restaurants, so one of the most specific reasons was "location" (28.6%) and also "menu diversity" (23.8%). Other aspects mentioned by consumers were: "taste" (19%), "cleanliness" (14.3%), "offers" (9.5%) and "advantageous prices" (4.8%) (Figure 1).
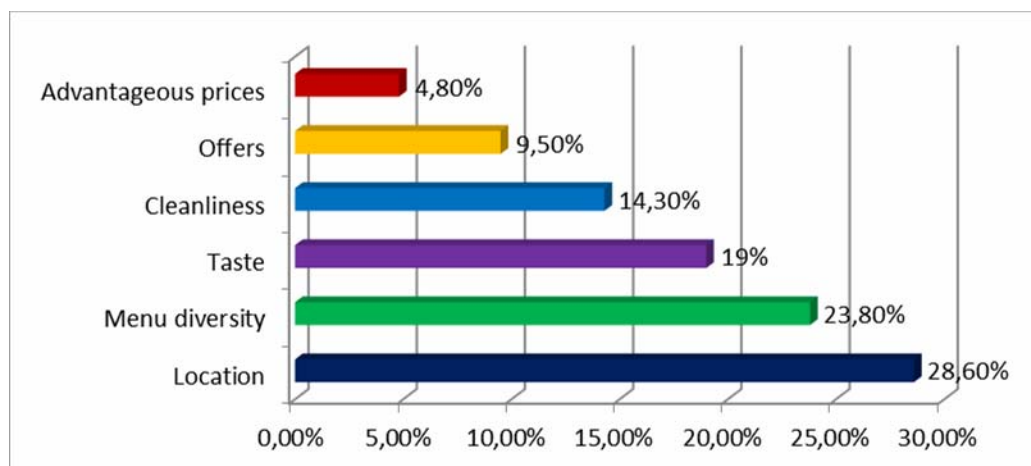

Fig.1. *The reasons that determine the subjects to eat at a fast-food restaurant*

Referring to the monthly attendance of fast-food restaurants, 10 of the 16 respondents specified that they choose fast-food restaurants "4 times / month", and 6 of them attend this type of restaurant "twice / month".
Subsequently, the main dishes chosen by consumers were highlighted, thus one of the most mentioned being "shaorma" (38.9%). This was followed by "hamburger" and "French fries" (27.8%), "chicken schnitzel menu" (22.2%) and "breaded cheese" (11.1%).
In terms of identification of the best fast food restaurant from their consumer perspective, most of the respondents chose "McDonald's restaurant" (66.6%), "KFC restaurant" (16.7%) and "Subway restaurant" respectively (16.7%). Consumers specified these restaurants for the following reasons: "taste", "diversity of dishes and sauces", "advantageous prices", "speed of serving" and "presentation of dishes".

- **Theme 2: *Management strategies adopted for fast food restaurants***

In the context of improving the current offer of fast food units, most of the respondents suggested "offering discounts depending on the number of menus purchased" (50%), "enriching the offer with vegetable-based dishes" (28.6%), "A larger weight of portions" (14.3%) and "diversification of children's menus" (7.1%).

Regarding the attitude of the staff within the fast food units, the respondents claimed that the staff is friendly, sociable and offers help and suggestions. Regarding the inconveniences caused by the behaviour of the staff, most of the respondents noticed that the staff is hurried, arrogant and inattentive to commands.

The changes suggested by consumers regarding the management practices of fast-food restaurants refer to: "more parking spaces" (34.8%), "extension of drive through services" (30.4%), "arrangement of playgrounds for children"(17.4%),"supplementing the number of meals "(13.1%) and" creating spaces for smokers"(4.3%).

The pandemic has forced fast food restaurants to adopt new management strategies. Thus, the most frequent administration strategy that was observed by the subjects is the home delivery service.

- **Theme 3: *Food safety practices adopted in fast food restaurants***

Referring to the concept of food security, 12 of the 16 respondents defined it as "access to safe, sufficient and nutritious food so that consumers can satisfy their food preferences", while 4 respondents stated that they used the concept, but do not know what this refers to.

Food safety practices observed by respondents in fast food restaurants referred to "accurate presentation of nutritional information" (ingredients and allergens) (54.5%), "compliance with food hygiene standards" (27.3%), "zoning of spaces food processing"(18.2%).

Respondents consider that food safety in restaurants is generally applied and supported by: "fresh raw materials" (40%), "knowledge of suppliers" (26.7%), "use of appropriate cooking techniques" (20%) and "adequate hygiene standards" (13.3%) (Figure 2).

Given the current situation created by the pandemic, the subjects were interviewed about the measures taken to prevent the spread of the SARS-COV2 virus in the fast food restaurants they frequented. The most common measures observed by respondents are: "changes in table positioning to allow social distancing" (45%), "temperature control and disinfectant provision" (30%), "indicators for maintaining social distance" (15%). %), respectively, "staff equipped with gloves and masks" (10%).
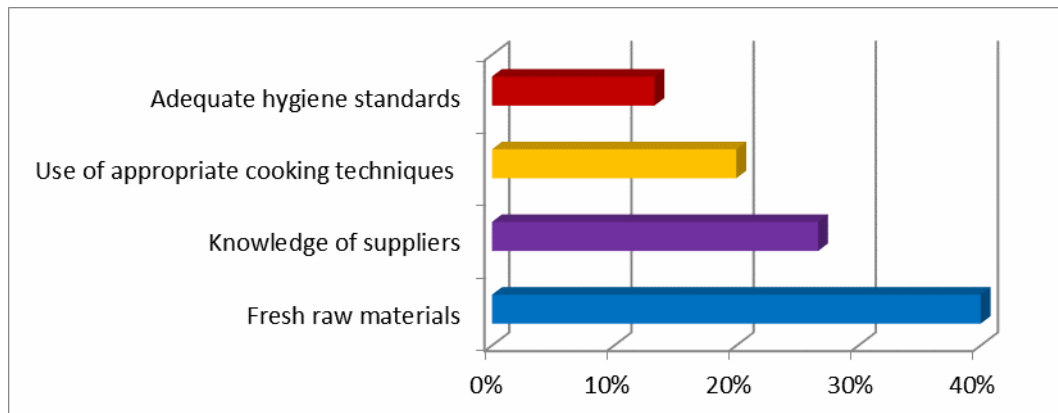
Fig.2. *Food safety practices applied in restaurants*

The study aimed to identify consumer perceptions regarding the management practices of fast food restaurants in Romania and the importance given to food security in this industry.

6. Conclusions

Fast food units are increasingly attaching importance to the administration and relevance of the concept of food safety. Currently, given the situation created by the pandemic, both franchise and local food units have implemented new procedures to adapt to special market conditions, in order to increase consumer satisfaction and also other stakeholders (such as suppliers and employees).

In order to provide quality services in restaurants, their representatives attach great importance to methods and ways of ensuring food security, and currently, to the measures taken as a result of the epidemiological situation.

The market of fast food restaurants in Romania has high potential, given that during the pandemic it is among the few areas that have made profit.

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