

THE CHOCOLATE MARKET IN ROMANIA: BETWEEN SENSORY APPEAL AND MARKETNG REALITIES

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Abstract

The paper analysis the chocolate market in Romania, offering insights into personal consumers' preferences. The objective of the research is to analyze the purchasing behavior and consumers' options using quantitative methods for gathering and analyzing the data. The main results show that chocolate is purchased based on taste, at least once a week, usually from supermarkets, and the preferred type is milk bar chocolate. Consumers spend, on average, 10 euros per week to purchase chocolate. The results are relevant to be used by producers in underpinning their marketing strategies.

Keywords: chocolate consumption, consumer behavior, consumption determinants

Clasificare JEL: D12, M31, Q56.

1. Introduction

Chocolate, a product that blends the pleasure of taste with the comfort of emotion, continues to hold a privileged position in the dietary habits of Romanian consumers. Beyond simple gustatory satisfaction, chocolate represents a symbol of personal reward—an accessible indulgence often associated with moments of relaxation, nostalgia, or celebration (Del Prete and Samoggia, 2020).

The perception of chocolate has evolved alongside the growth of consumer society. Once reserved for festive occasions, chocolate is now a part of daily life for many Romanians, integrated into shopping routines and becoming a stable consumption habit (Vicente et al., 2016). This apparent normalization does not diminish its importance; on the contrary, it reinforces its role as a central element of modern food culture.

The determinants of chocolate consumption are multiple and often subtle. Organoleptic qualities—taste, texture, aroma—remain essential (Del Prete and Samoggia, 2020). However, more sophisticated factors increasingly influence purchase decisions: brand positioning, company reputation, packaging design, price, and the image the product conveys (Kozelová et al., 2014; Thaichon et al., 2018). Choosing a premium brand may reflect a desire for prestige or pampering, while opting for a mass-market product may signal value orientation or familiarity.

Advertising plays a significant role in shaping the emotional relationship between consumer and product. Emotional campaigns, commercials evoking childhood memories, or those associating chocolate with family happiness create a symbolic link between the product and well-being (Rousseau, 2015). As such, chocolate becomes more than just food—it becomes a message about comfort, care, affection, or escapism.

Research Objectives

- O1: To identify the frequency of chocolate consumption.
- O2: To determine consumer preferences regarding types of chocolate.
- O3: To assess the main determinants influencing chocolate purchasing decisions.
- O4: To explore new consumption trends, such as health consciousness and digitalization.

Research Hypotheses

- H1: Chocolate is regularly consumed by Romanian consumers.
- H2: Milk chocolate is the most preferred type.

- H3: Taste and price are the primary determinants of chocolate purchase decisions.
- H4: Young consumers are more likely to be influenced by health trends and digital branding strategies.

2. Literature Review

The topic of chocolate consumption has been widely investigated, with literature focusing on both personal preferences and broader socio-economic and cultural factors. According to Del Prete and Samoggia (2020), four main categories structure the academic research on chocolate consumption: consumer preferences, product characteristics, socio-demographic variables, and economic attributes.

Among these, personal preferences play a critical role. It has been demonstrated that taste and health-related motivations significantly influence consumer behavior (Del Prete and Samoggia, 2020; Prestwich et al., 2011). Consumers often seek sensory pleasure (e.g., flavor, aroma, texture), emotional satisfaction, or health-related benefits when purchasing chocolate (Senese et al., 2015; De Pelsmaecker et al., 2017).

At the global level, Europe and North America are the largest producers and consumers of chocolate (Candy Industry, 2024). The European chocolate market has been analyzed in terms of sustainability (Vecchio and Annunziata, 2015), ethical labeling (Rousseau, 2015), and health-oriented innovations (Senese et al., 2015). A cross-country segmentation study by Januszewska et al. (2001) underlines the cultural dimensions that affect chocolate choice in Belgium and Poland.

In Romania, the chocolate industry reflects a hybrid model, where international brands and local producers coexist and compete. The top global companies—Ferrero, Mondelez, and Mars Inc.—have adapted their strategies to local tastes and consumer expectations.

Ferrero Romania is strongly associated with premium quality and celebratory occasions. Its portfolio includes Ferrero Rocher, Raffaello, and Kinder, which are positioned as high-end products through symbolic advertising and refined packaging (Mai, 2014).

Mondelez Romania, through its brands Milka and Poiana, targets a broader demographic. Its strategy is centered on emotional branding (“tenderness” theme), everyday accessibility, and mass retail presence. According to Kozelová et al. (2014), brand familiarity and emotional resonance are key in shaping purchase intentions in this segment.

Kandia Dulce, a major local player, leverages national identity and nostalgia. Brands like Rom, Măgura, and Primola are deeply rooted in consumer memory, fostering loyalty through cultural association and competitive pricing (Lybeck et al., 2006).

Heidi Chocolat operates in a premium niche, focusing on artisanal production and unique flavor assortments. The company addresses consumers with refined tastes, offering a value proposition based on quality, exclusivity, and storytelling (Vicente et al., 2016).

Roshen and RAP Confectionery serve price-sensitive consumers. These companies focus on optimizing the price–quality ratio, making chocolate accessible without fully compromising on diversity or product satisfaction (Prestwich et al., 2011).

3. Methodology

Research Design

This research was designed as a quantitative, descriptive study, aiming to investigate chocolate consumption behavior among Romanian consumers. The study employed a structured questionnaire as its primary data collection tool, featuring both single-choice and multiple-choice questions related to socio-demographic information and purchasing behavior.

Data Collection

The data were gathered using a self-administered online questionnaire, distributed via social media platforms and messaging application. The sampling method used was non-probabilistic, based on convenience, targeting consumers who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

The questionnaire comprised 12 main questions and was divided into two sections: (1) demographic profiling and (2) chocolate consumption behavior and preferences.

Sample Characteristics

The survey was completed by 144 respondents, with the following structure:

- Gender: 68% female, 32% male
- Age: 15–25 years (46.5%), 26–35 years (25%), 36–45 years (15.3%), over 46 years (13.2%)
- Monthly income: Under 2500 RON (36.8%), 2501–4000 RON (33.3%), over 4001 RON (29.9%)

While the sample is not statistically representative at the national level, it provides relevant insights into the perceptions and preferences of active chocolate consumers in urban and peri-urban environments.

Variables Measured

The study analyzed a variety of independent and dependent variables, including:

- Demographic: gender, age, income
- Behavioral: frequency of chocolate consumption, purchase location, amount spent
- Preference-related: favorite brands, preferred type of chocolate, key product attributes (taste, packaging, price, ingredients)

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

- O1: Identify the frequency of chocolate consumption
H1: Romanian consumers include chocolate in their diet regularly (at least weekly).
- O2: Determine consumer preferences regarding types and formats of chocolate
H2: Milk chocolate in bar format is the most preferred option.
- O3: Assess the importance of product characteristics in purchase decisions
H3: Taste and price are the most influential factors in choosing chocolate.
- O4: Explore emerging market trends in consumption, such as digital influence and healthy eating
H4: Younger consumers are more inclined toward healthier options and are more responsive to digital marketing.

4. Results

The findings of the survey confirm that chocolate is a frequently consumed product in Romania. According to the data collected:

- 85.4% of respondents consume chocolate at least weekly, with 32% doing so daily.
- The most preferred types of chocolate are milk chocolate (65%) and flavored chocolate with nuts or fruits (25%). Dark and white chocolate are less common choices.
- The bar format is the most popular (71%), followed by pralines and chocolate sticks.
- Supermarkets are the main purchase location (63.2%), followed by hypermarkets (22.9%), while online shopping remains marginal.
- Regarding budget, 76% spend under 50 RON per week on chocolate, showing consistent yet moderate purchasing behavior.
- The top factors influencing purchasing decisions are:
 - Taste (92.4%)
 - Price (73.6%)
 - Brand familiarity (51.4%)
 - Packaging design (48.6%)
 - Ingredient list / health claims (36.1%)

These results confirm H1, H2, and H3, indicating regular consumption, preference for milk chocolate, and a strong influence of taste and price in purchase decisions.

5. Discussions

The consumption behavior of Romanian chocolate buyers aligns with broader European trends, where chocolate remains both a comfort food and a routine indulgence (Del Prete and Samoggia, 2020). The frequency of weekly or even daily consumption mirrors findings from studies by Vicente et al. (2016), which highlight the emotional gratification provided by chocolate.

The dominance of milk chocolate and flavored variants is consistent with the results of Kozelová et al. (2014), who noted that consumers prefer varieties with added sensory complexity. The low popularity of dark chocolate supports findings from Lybeck et al. (2006), which suggest it appeals primarily to niche, health-conscious audiences.

The fact that most purchases are made in supermarkets rather than online reflects chocolate's role as an impulse product, often bought in-store rather than planned in advance. This behavior is also reported by Cameron et al. (2013), who found a strong correlation between physical retail exposure and chocolate buying.

Taste remains the dominant determinant, as emphasized by Thaichon et al. (2018) and Rousseau (2015), who underline the multisensory experience as central to chocolate's appeal. Price is a secondary but decisive factor, especially for routine buyers, confirming the dual market structure: premium-seeking consumers vs. price-conscious ones.

Interestingly, younger respondents placed a higher emphasis on packaging and health indicators. This observation aligns with findings from Mai (2014) and Senese et al. (2015), showing that younger demographics are more responsive to visual identity and nutritional labeling.

These trends support H4, highlighting the need for companies to innovate in both product composition and marketing channels.

6. Strategic Development Directions

1. Digital Transformation and E-commerce

Digitalization is no longer optional for chocolate producers. The emergence of digital-native consumers, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, has reshaped how brands interact with buyers. Chocolate, traditionally considered an impulse purchase, is increasingly ordered online for gift-giving, seasonal occasions, or premium experiences.

Companies must therefore adapt their strategies to include:

- User-friendly e-commerce platforms
- Engaging social media content
- Influencer marketing
- Personalized email campaigns and QR-based interactions

According to Thaichon et al. (2018), consumers are more likely to buy products that they see promoted by relatable digital figures. Furthermore, Rousseau (2015) suggests that authentic brand storytelling online can significantly increase consumer trust.

Brands like Ferrero and Mondelez are already capitalizing on these tools. Local producers need to catch up or risk losing visibility in an increasingly virtual marketplace.

2. Healthy Lifestyle Trend

There is a rising consumer preference for “better-for-you” chocolate products. This includes:

- Sugar-free, low-calorie, or gluten-free options
- Organic, raw, or vegan formulations
- Ingredient transparency and clean labels

This trend is supported by findings from Senese et al. (2015) and Prestwich et al. (2011), who report an increased association between food choices and perceived well-being, particularly among urban consumers.

Producers should explore:

- Reformulating recipes with natural sweeteners or high-cocoa content
- Highlighting health claims on labels (e.g., “no palm oil”, “high in antioxidants”)
- Launching dedicated product lines for health-conscious segments

Such efforts must be genuine and scientifically backed to avoid consumer skepticism and “greenwashing” backlash.

3. Packaging, Labeling, and Market Segmentation

Packaging plays a critical dual role: it attracts attention on the shelf and communicates values. According to Kozelová et al. (2014) and Vicente et al. (2016), packaging influences the decision of over 40% of consumers—especially if they are unfamiliar with the product.

Key strategies include:

- Eye-catching designs and sustainable materials
- Clear, honest labeling about ingredients and origin
- Segment-specific packaging (e.g., family packs vs. elegant gift boxes)

In terms of market segmentation, the “one-size-fits-all” model is becoming obsolete. Chocolate producers must differentiate their approach across:

- Traditionalists (focused on nostalgia and familiar brands)
- Young professionals (interested in innovation and experience)
- Parents (concerned about nutrition and safety)
- Health-conscious and ethically minded consumers

Accurate segmentation enables better targeting and positioning, resulting in stronger brand loyalty and reduced marketing waste.

7. Conclusions

This research investigated the chocolate consumption behavior of Romanian consumers, revealing several consistent patterns and emerging trends. The results confirm that chocolate is a frequently consumed product, with most respondents including it in their weekly routines. Milk chocolate in bar format remains the dominant choice, primarily due to its taste, accessibility, and emotional value.

The study also highlights the main determinants of consumer choice: taste, price, packaging, and brand familiarity. These findings are in line with prior studies, reinforcing the importance of sensory appeal and trust in shaping purchasing behavior.

In parallel, new consumer trends are emerging, particularly among younger and urban populations:

- a growing preference for health-conscious products, including sugar-free or organic options;
- increasing influence of digital channels in brand visibility and purchase behavior.

These trends demand strategic responses from producers, including product innovation, targeted segmentation, and digitally enhanced communication.

While the Romanian chocolate market appears mature and stable on the surface, it is undergoing structural shifts that require companies to adapt rapidly. Brands that embrace transparency, personalization, and sustainability are more likely to remain competitive in this evolving environment.

The study is based on a convenience sample of 144 respondents, predominantly gathered through online channels. This may have introduced demographic bias, especially toward younger and digitally connected individuals. Additionally, some respondent categories (e.g., older adults or rural residents) may be underrepresented. Future research should consider larger, stratified samples and possibly include qualitative insights to deepen understanding.

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