TRENDS IN COFFEE CONSUMERS' PREFERENCES

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Abstract
This paper aims to investigate trends in coffee consumers' preferences in Romania, based on a marketing research survey conducted on a sample of 224 respondents. The main objective is to highlight consumption habits and the key factors influencing purchasing decisions, in a context where the coffee market is undergoing significant transformations driven by digitalization, the rise of specialty coffee, and an increasing interest in sustainability. The results show that most respondents drink coffee daily, prefer espresso, and mainly purchase coffee from hypermarkets and supermarkets. Quality and brand are the main determinants of choice, while price and promotions play a secondary role. Young consumers show a growing preference for coffee capsules, premium products, and online purchases, confirming the emergence of new consumption segments. The conclusions emphasize the need for producers and distributors to adapt their marketing strategies to a more informed, demanding, and experience-oriented consumer.

Keywords: *coffee consumption, preferences, buying behavior, trends*

Clasificare JEL : *D12, M31, Q56*

1. Introduction

Coffee is one of the most popular beverages in the world and the second most traded commodity after oil (Daviron & Ponte, 2005), playing an important economic, social, and cultural role. According to the International Coffee Organization (ICO, 2023), global coffee consumption exceeded 170 million bags in 2022, with the world market estimated at over USD 460 billion (Statista, 2024). Over the past two decades, the coffee industry has been reshaped by several factors: the growth of specialty and premium segments, the expansion of e-commerce, and increasing concern for sustainability and ethical production (Euromonitor, 2023). Consumers are also showing a rising preference for personalized, traceable, and fair-trade-compliant products, transforming the coffee market into a space of continuous innovation (Vecchio & Annunziata, 2015).

At the European level, a trend toward premiumization and diversification of purchasing channels can be observed. Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway) continue to lead in per capita consumption, exceeding 10 kg annually, while Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, record growth rates above the continental average (ICO, 2023). According to Euromonitor (2023), the coffee market in Eastern Europe is increasingly oriented toward capsules, "to go" products, and sustainable options, alongside a growing number of specialty coffee shops.

In Romania, coffee consumption has doubled over the last two decades, reaching approximately 2.5 kg per capita (INSSE, 2023). The market is dominated by international brands such as Nespresso, Lavazza, Jacobs, and Starbucks, but local brands like Doncafe and Fortuna remain competitive through a favorable price–quality ratio (TopFirme, 2024). Romanian consumer behavior reflects a process of cultural hybridization, where traditional habits (home or workplace consumption) coexist with modern trends such as specialty coffee, online shopping, and interest in eco-friendly and fair-trade products.

In this context, the present study aims to investigate current trends in Romanian coffee consumers' preferences, seeking to understand how global market transformations are reflected locally. The research objectives include identifying the main frequency and timing of consumption, preferred types and forms of coffee, evaluating selection criteria and commonly used brands, and analyzing emerging trends such as orientation toward capsules, premium coffee, and online purchasing.

The research tests the following hypotheses: most Romanian consumers drink coffee daily; espresso is the most preferred type of coffee; quality and brand are the main selection criteria; and young consumers display a stronger inclination toward capsules, premium coffee, and digital purchasing channels.

By addressing these aspects, this study contributes to understanding the evolution of coffee consumption behavior in Romania and provides strategic insights for companies seeking to adapt to the expectations of an increasingly informed and demanding consumer.

2. Literature Review

International studies show that coffee consumers' preferences are primarily determined by sensory factors (taste, aroma, texture) as well as emotional and social motivations (Samoggia & Riedel, 2018). Coffee consumption represents both a physiological need (stimulation through caffeine) and a cultural or social habit (Mussatto, 2011).

At the European level, the coffee market is moving toward premium, single-origin, and eco-friendly products, with greater emphasis on traceability (Vecchio & Annunziata, 2015). Euromonitor (2023) reports an increase in capsule and "to go" coffee consumption, especially in urban areas.

In Romania, research highlights a strong preference for espresso and cappuccino, influenced by Italian café culture and the expansion of international brands such as Starbucks and Nespresso (TopFirme, 2024). Meanwhile, local brands like Doncafe and Fortuna maintain significant market shares due to their advantageous price–quality balance.

Recent studies also emphasize emerging factors such as digitalization of sales channels (Thaichon et al., 2018), orientation toward sustainability (Rousseau, 2015), and interest in healthier alternatives (Senese et al., 2015).

3. Methodology

The research followed a quantitative, descriptive design, conducted through an online questionnaire distributed to a sample of 224 respondents.

Sample characteristics:

- **Gender:** 63.4% female, 36.6% male
- **Age:** majority between 20–30 years old
- **Environment:** predominantly urban

Instrument: structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions regarding frequency of consumption, preferred types, purchase locations, brands used, and selection criteria.

Limitations: The sample is not nationally representative, as participation was voluntary and conducted online. However, it provides a relevant insight into the behavior of young and urban consumers.

4. Results

The findings provide a clear overview of coffee consumption behavior among respondents, confirming most of the proposed hypotheses. Data were analyzed as percentages, and descriptive charts were produced for each key variable to aid interpretation of trends.

Frequency of consumption: 70% of respondents drink coffee daily, confirming H1. This high frequency highlights coffee's role as a daily ritual, associated with morning routines and social moments. About 15% drink several times per week, and 10% less frequently, showing an almost universal product penetration.

Preferred types of coffee: Espresso (40%), cappuccino (25%), and latte (15%) dominate preferences, confirming H2. These results reflect the influence of Italian coffee culture and the growing appeal of barista-style beverages. Instant (7%) and Americano (10%) are less favored, indicating declining interest in conventional options.

Place of consumption: Coffee is mainly consumed at home (55%), followed by the workplace (30%) and cafés (10%). This distribution suggests that for many, coffee remains a domestic experience, though the 10% café consumption rate highlights the consolidation of coffee-to-go culture and urban social spaces.

Place of purchase: The main purchase channels are hypermarkets (45%) and supermarkets (30%), followed by minimarkets (15%) and online shops (7%). This confirms the dominance of modern retail formats and points to the early stages of a transition toward digital purchasing, especially among young consumers.

Selection criteria: Quality (40%) and brand (25%) are the main factors, while price (15%) and promotions (12%) play secondary roles, confirming H3. Packaging and design influence only 8% of respondents, reflecting a rational, experience-based decision process.

Emerging trends: H4 is confirmed: younger respondents show a marked preference for capsules, premium coffee, and online purchases. The 20–30 age group is the most active in adopting these behaviors, indicating a generational shift. Capsules offer convenience and consistency, while premium coffee is associated with refined taste and social status.

5. Discussions

The results confirm the convergence of the Romanian coffee market with European and global trends. The high daily consumption rate (70%) reflects the integration of coffee into modern lifestyles, while preference for espresso and cappuccino indicates the influence of Italian café culture (Mussatto, 2011; ICO, 2023). The strong home consumption (55%) suggests that consumers replicate the "coffee shop" experience domestically, facilitated by automated machines and capsule systems.

Age differences are significant. Younger consumers (<30 years) are more receptive to innovation, online shopping, and premium products, confirming Thaichon et al. (2018) regarding digitalization in brand–consumer relationships. Mature consumers remain loyal to ground coffee and traditional retail, suggesting a dual market balancing tradition and modernity.

Selection criteria centered on quality and brand reflect market maturity and a more educated consumer interested in taste, origin, and ethics. These findings align with Vecchio & Annunziata (2015), who note a growing interest in traceability and sustainability.

Overall, the Romanian coffee market is undergoing transformation and segmentation: on one hand, it maintains traditional habits (daily home consumption), while on the other, it embraces innovation through convenience, digitalization, and premiumization. This dual dynamic provides companies with multiple positioning opportunities — from accessible, high-volume coffee to specialty, eco-certified, fair-trade products.

Strategic Development Directions

1. **Digitalization and e-commerce:** investment in online platforms, mobile apps, and personalized marketing.
2. **Premiumization:** development of specialty and single-origin coffee segments.
3. **Sustainability:** promotion of eco-certified, fair-trade coffee and biodegradable packaging.
4. **Format diversification:** capsules, pods, cold brew, and innovative alternatives.
5. **Segmentation and targeting:** tailoring offers to distinct groups — traditionalists, young urban consumers, premium buyers, and price-sensitive customers.

6. Conclusions

Coffee consumption in Romania is daily and stable, but preferences are diversifying. Espresso remains dominant, while capsules and specialty coffee are gaining ground. Quality and brand drive purchase decisions, but digitalization and sustainability are emerging as new factors.

Producers must respond to these shifts through innovation, transparency, and adaptation of distribution channels. The study's limitations relate to its relatively small, urban-focused sample; future research should include nationally representative samples and mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative).

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