

Perception of Students from the Public Administration Specialization on Consumers Information and Education Degree in Romania

**Lecturer Oana Matilda SABIE (ABĂLUȚĂ) Ph. D.
Senior Assistant Andreea MARIN-PANTELESCU Ph. D.
*The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Romania***

Abstract: *The present work aims to make a brief overview of the emergence and development of concepts like protection and consumer education to show how they have become an important element of economic, social and environmental sustainability.*

Another objective of the paper is to highlight concerns and increased interest of students, that consumers are at the age of 21 years, on the programs and media for consumer education. In that sense, this paper presents results of a qualitative research conducted without ensuring representativeness of the population from which it was extracted, that on a number of 57 students from the specialization of Public Administration of the Faculty of Management, Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest to demonstrate the level of awareness and education of young students in the area of future administration, students also involved in providing public services and its quality, in this study the article authors applied a questionnaire on a population of 107 subjects who were voluntarily self-selection and completeness response provided.

Keywords: *the degree of awareness and education, consumer protection, consumer rights, the perception of students, consumerism*

1. Introduction

This article aims to preznte current state of knowledge in protecting consumer rights and in particular what was done until now in terms of informing and educating consumers at Romania and internationally level, and the means used and the degree of consumer education and information in this area.

1.1. Protection of consumer rights and education: historical developments

Consumer protection is one of the topics that are every day becoming more and more discussed and that attract attention to all categories of market players, no matter if they are different economic agents, the media or the final consumer.

The shape of consumer rights began to discern in the eighteenth century, but social action and legislative efforts to protect consumers' interests are necessary now more than ever, definitely, until the second half of the twentieth century. (www.anpc.gov.ro).

That is why, a decisive role in this area had the U.S. President John F. Kennedy, who in March 15, 1962, in his speech "On protection of consumer interests" set out the four fundamental rights of the consumers, namely, the right to security, the right to information, the right to choose and the right to be heard.

Starting in 1960-1970, in various European countries, Sweden, Denmark, United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, have been enacted laws aimed at consumer protection.

In Romania after 1989 it was triggered the institutional reform, which incorporated and the consumer protection domain. In the Romanian public space, have emerged and have become known several new institutions with specific roles, which did not exist before 1989.

Consumer institution in Romania was so undersized during the socialism years- from the theoretical, methodological, conceptual and practical-operational perspective- that, inherently, many of the necessary reforming interventions aimed, at various stages, the theory of form without substance - theory with a history quite old in local economic and socio-cultural space.

After 1989, by increasing the complexity of Romanian society and the wider contact of the population from Romania with the realities of western civilization, consumer demands have begun not only to grow but also to express themselves more freely. However, attitudes of broad masses of consumers from our country, for that matter, and those of local businesses have yet to go strides towards achieving a modern and civilized trade. Long years of promoting socialist ideology advocated rather for discouraging of any initiatives to promote quality in various spheres of social life. Even if, after changing communist regime, some radical mutations occurred at institutional level, mindsets and old reflexes of the workers in the field of quality assurance for goods and services as well as that of consumer protection have not changed. (Stanciu M., Mihăilescu A. Preotesi M., Tudor C., 2005).

In Romania, a legislation to regulate this area, we find it after 1990, adopting the Government Ordinance no. 21/1992 on consumer protection as the first act held in this country that reglemented the rights of consumers. Early consumer protection actions in Romania are into finding the best ways to adopt the principles underlying consumer relationship - economic operator (then, the trader) and to adapt the system to the Romanian life. The period of pioneering in this area, for our country, is coinciding with times when countries like France, Britain, Germany had already formed a structured system based on laws which held the rights of consumers.

The "consumer" notion (Ionut Militaru, 2009) is subject to several international instruments such as the Brussels Convention of 1968, the Rome

Convention of 1980, Directive 93/13/EEC from 5 April 1993 on unfair terms in contracts concluded by consumers, Directive 97/7/EC on consumer protection in distance contracts, is generally defined as the individual who ends - outside his trade, his business or his profession - a contract

European Communities Court of Justice as a principle held by the decision of November 22, 2001 rendered in Joined Cases C-541/99 *Cape Snc / Idealservice Srl* and C-542/99 *Idealservice MN RE Sas / OMAI Srl* that "the concept of consumer on unfair terms (...) should be interpreted as concerning only individuals".

Sometimes found in comparative law expanding the scope of the concept of "consumer" but in internal law the Law. 296/2004 republished in 2008 regarding the Consuming Code limited the scope to use for any individual or group of individuals formed in associations, that are acting outside their commercial, industrial or production activities, craft or liberal (section 13 of Annex law).

By decision no. 1129 in Romania 16.10.2008 The Constitutional Court held that the author of how critical writing of art. 2. 1 of Law no. 193/2000, arguing that the definition of "consumer" should include legal person when it is part of the conclusion of commercial contracts may fall field criticized the normative act. The exception was rejected as inadmissible, the reasoning that the alleged unconstitutionality is inferred from a regulatory failure on the Constitutional Court can not complement, whereas, according to art. 61 of the Constitution, "Parliament is (...) the sole legislative authority of the country", amend or supplement the legal rules as its exclusive powers.

The concept of "*consumer education*" appeared as a result of its evolution, of diversification and the complexity of needs and expectations of the customer for various products and services.

Consumerism occurred in mid 1970 and was taking into consideration the sale of safer products, a better informed consumer, an appropriate selection and a better access to redress mechanisms for consumers. This movement was characterized by cases and legal debate and numerous demonstrations and boycotts. Consumerism has made its mark on the development of consumer education and the International Organization of Consumers Unions - IOCU (now Consumers International) has played a leading role. One of the stated aims of IOCU was promoting the international cooperation in consumer education.

The main concepts of consumer education in the 1970s included:

- IOCU: consumer education is done to help it become critically aware of when purchasing a good or service, to take action, to get involved, to be socially interested, to be jointly and aware of the implications of actions on the environment.
- According to Gordon and Lee (*Economics for Consumers, 1972*) the aim of educating the consumers is to make him to contribute fundamentally to a market economy.

- Bloom (*How Will Consumer Education Affect Consumer Behavior?*, 1976) argues that consumer education is the process by which people learn how to use market functions so as to improve their ability to act as the purchaser or consumer of goods and services which they considered would increase their well-being, living standards.

Green consumerism has become important in 1980, moment at which consumers have become aware of the environment and then they become increasingly concerned about it. As a result, social and environmental concerns were key issues in consumer education.

In the 1990s, environmental concerns have become part of the broader concept of "sustainability", which takes into account not only environmental sustainability but also the social and economic sustainability.

The main concepts of consumer education in the 1980s were:

- Bannister and Monsma (*Classification of Concepts in Consumer Education*, 1982) argued that consumer education is a process of accumulation of knowledge and skills necessary for the management (administration) of consumer's resources and who is acting to influence factors that affect consumer decisions.
- Bannister (*Classification of Concepts in Consumer Education*, 1983) noted that consumer education as a process is multidisciplinary. Consumer education may influence consumer behavior through questions, planning, procurement, consumer participation as citizens in decisional process and influence change.
- According to Green (*The role of consumer education in the general education of all students*, 1985) the main objectives of consumer education are: to develop competent buyers and users of goods and services, to create competent financial managers, to achieve an understanding of the economy by consumers, generate consumer acceptance of responsibility with an assertion of their rights, and to help people assess their values. Buckets development of a philosophy that will allow to obtain satisfaction given the resources they have.

Since the 1990s the emergence of consumers with higher expectations and criticism has become an important part of consumer policy.

According to Soujanen (*Theoretical foundation of consumer and entrepreneurial education*, 1994) consumer education require a conscientious consumer and a critical reflection. In particular, consumers assume responsibility only by critical reflection.

1.2. The purpose of this approach is presented in the article

This article is a brief overview in the development of concepts like the consumer protection and consumer education in order to illustrate the connection between them, this being the *first objective* of the paper.

A *second objective* of the paper is to highlight the concerns and the increased interest of students, for consumers that are around the age of 21, on the programs and means of consumer education and information.

In that sense, this paper presents results of an initial investigation, a pilot research on a number of 57 students from the specialization of Public Administration of the Faculty of Management, Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest in order to demonstrate the level of awareness and education of young students in the field of public administration, students who will be involved in a near future in delivering public services and ensuring their quality at the highest standards.

The conclusions of this paper identifies the issues that show that young consumers are little informed on their rights as consumers, and that their information and education should be done differently depending on their consumption structure, and to start at an early age, specifically in middle school and primary school.

2. Study on the perception of students from the specialization of Public Administration on awareness and education of consumers from Romania

2.1. Research methodology

The instrument used in this research work was a *pilot questionnaire*, which will be changed (improved) in the near future in order to obtain most edifying results. It was distributed in December 2009 to the students from Public Administration specialization so to identify the degree of information and consumer education among young people of 20 years old and the means by which they are informed or educated. 107 questionnaires were distributed, of which only 57 were validated as being properly completed and therefore considered for further analysis.

2.2. Research results

Questionnaire design. The questionnaire includes 11 questions with only one correct response option. The first five questions were designed to obtain information as good and varied structure about the sample. Of the 57 students who participated in this qualitative research study - 44 are female, 13 are male and 54 were under 23 years.

Regarding area of residence - 43 have said that living in a big city, 7 in a middle city environment, 3 in a small town and in rural area other 3. The environment from which they come, or more correctly said the area that they are living now helped us to see exactly what means of information and education they have access to a greater degree depending on the environment they live (urban or rural). (Fig. 1).

Regarding question 6 (Usually when you use a product / service do you carefully read the information on the pack, or the instructions?) 70% of the respondents said that they are partially reading the information on packaging of products purchased and only 28% of respondents read all this information. The percentage of those who do not read at all the information on the packaging of products is 2%. This indicates an increased concern of consumers on being informed about the contents of products purchased. (Fig. 3).

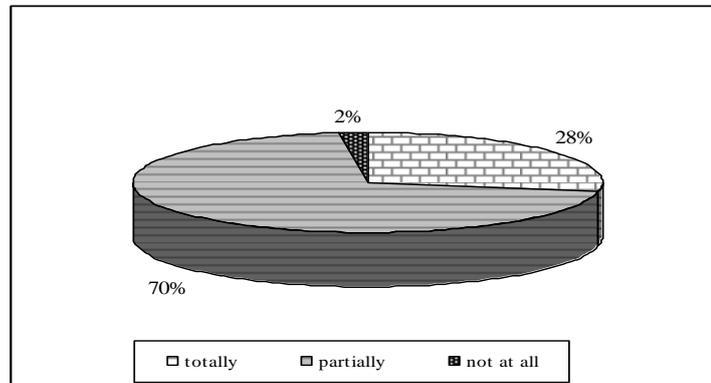


Figure 3. The extent to which students from Public Administration specialisation carefully read the instructions on packaging before buying a product/service

Source: processing of data collected by authors

For the interpretation of question 7 (At what level do you think you are informed on consumer protection?) we used Likert's scale for interpreting the results. The score of minus 1.32 indicates that the respondents are little informed on consumer protection. The severe shortage of information on consumer protection brings long-term dissatisfactions that are also being felt in the answers given by respondents.

In question 8 (How you informed of consumer rights?) Most students (34 in number) responded that their main source of information is the "Internet" followed by "TV ads" - 14 students, "family" - 5 students, "Consumer Protection Association" - 3 students and "friends" - 1 student. (Fig. no. 4)

The responses to this question were not at all surprising to the research team. Given the fact that students studying in an academic environment with an infrastructure for research and training very well developed and modern, it was expected that most of them (over 50%) to choose the Internet as a primary information source.

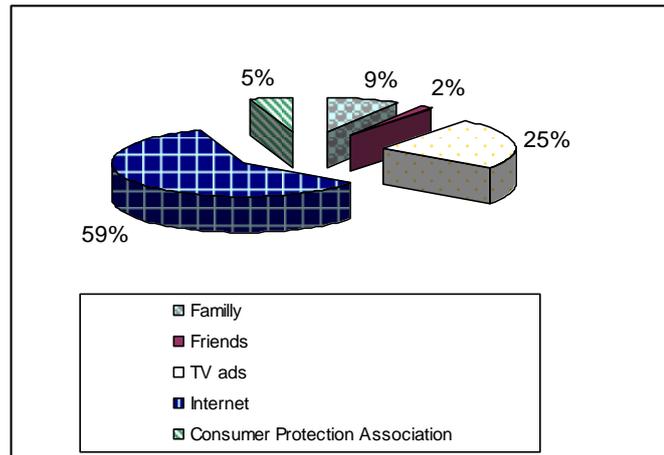


Figure 4. The main sources of information for students on consumer protection

Source: processing of data collected by authors

With regard to question 9 (What organizations do you know that are dealing with information and education of the consumers?) students had to choose from six variants.

Most of them (40 in number) have chosen the first variant of the response (Consumer Protection Association) as the organization best known for its dealing with information and education of consumers, the organization ranked second is variant c) County Offices Consumer Protection (11 respondents), followed by the European Consumer Center in Romania (2 respondents) and the Regional Inspectorates for Consumer Protection (1 respondent). Graphic distribution of responses can be seen in figure 5 below.

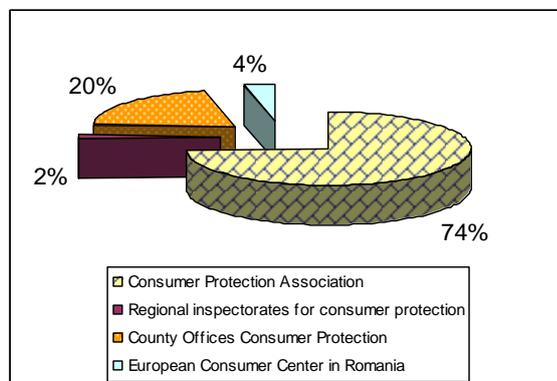


Figure 5. The main organizations dealing with consumer information and education

Source: processing of data collected by authors

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For question 10 (From what level do you think the consumer education should start?) 49.1% of the respondents admit that it must begin in secondary school (classes V-VIII), 38.6% think it should start right from primary classes (I-IV) and only 12.2% believe that consumer information should start in high school (grades IX-XII). There is a major concern for consumer information in their capacity as beneficiaries of various products and services they purchase directly from manufacturers or from different vendors. It is interesting that none of the respondents do not believe that consumer education should start at university and this would explain the willingness of consumers to be educated from an early age, so to be formed a consumer culture. (fig. 6)

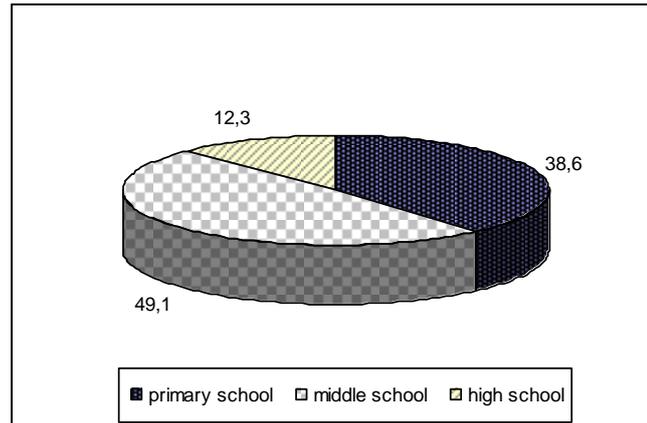


Figure 6 The level from which the consumer education should start

Source: processing of data collected by authors

In connection with this aspect the Association for Consumer Protection in Romania and the Network E-CONS (European Thematic Network established in September 2004 and that activates in the education of consumers) have collaborated to achieve a "Basic Manual" on the topic in Consumer Education. This guide is aimed for teachers and students from high schools with an economic profile. At the european level is emphasising on educating consumers at younger age so that we needed to develop an educational base in this area (<http://www.gandul.info/consumatorul/educarea-consumatorilor-scoli-1015671>, CONSUMATORUL - 28 ianuarie 2010, Manual Educarea consumatorilor în școli). Also, according to research conducted there is a major concern for consumers to be educated from elementary school, middle school and high school. Consumer education is included in the program as optional, primarily in times of co-ordination. Similarly there is a matter of education for healthy nutrition, which is included in Consumer Education. The introduction of Health Education as a field in Romanian schools is a very important step after considering the previous lack of

a comprehensive educational program, coherent and integrated (Educarea consumatorilor în sala de clasă-Manual de bază, Rețeaua E-CONS, Comenius 3, [http://www.e-cons.net/tools/pdfmatdidsocios/20Rumania_ManualDidactico .pdf](http://www.e-cons.net/tools/pdfmatdidsocios/20Rumania_ManualDidactico.pdf)).

Answers to last question, the number 11 (Which of the following forms of information and education, do you consider would be useful to you as a consumer?) were surprising to the research team, whereas 34 of the students surveyed chose alternative C) response, mass-media (advertising, TV, radio, newspapers), that in conditions in which to question number 8, 59% of students chose as a main source of information "Internet" and not "TV ads" which came in second place at a rate of 25%. (Fig. no. 7)

Interpretation of these responses led the research team to the following conclusion: for students would be much easier, cheaper and easier to obtain information through the media rather than through various means of ICT. Impact of the media channels is faster than that achieved by means of ICT, which are means whit results on long term, in terms of the authors of this article would have a greater impact on consumers.

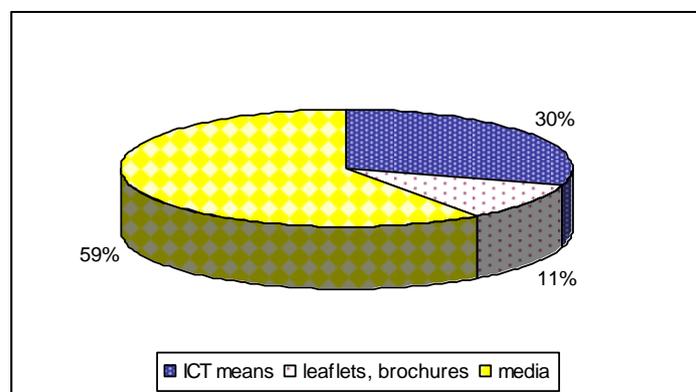


Figure 7. The main means of information or education of the consumers

Source: processing of data collected by authors

Regarding the results of this pilot research, they will be after a deeper and thematic investigation more serious and edifying. We can say that currently we are working on a comprehensive questionnaire, which will help us to identify new relevant issues specific to this theme, and also to identify factors for a potential modelling of the subjects investigated behaviour. The new research will be rigorous and will respect the statistical-mathematical principles. The research will be selective and we will organize a statistical survey among students from the public administration specialization at the national level. We will identify all universities at the national level that have this specialization and we will find out their students number. Method of information collection will be the one specific for

a survey, to the selected students we will distribute the same questionnaire in classrooms with the help of interviews, operators who will be selected from the heads series from this specialization. Sample size will be determined as for an exhaustive survey, based on several formula described in the book "Cătoi. I, Bălan. C, Onete. B, Popescu. I.C., Vegheș. C, 1997. *Cercetări de marketing. Probleme și studii de caz*, Editura Uranus, București, p. 69-73. Also based on formula in this book, will be calculated *error due to sampling* and *sample validation* p. 73-76.

The new questionnaire will remain one of opinion (Chelcea S., 2001, p. 217-221), more complex, and will include a set of 22 questions divided into several categories (Chelcea S., 2001, p. 253 -284). Centralization and data processing will be following the example of Project. 3 presented by Hapenciuc. C.V, ,Condratov. I, Stanciu. P, Cioban. G, 2008, in *Cercetarea selectivă, studii de caz, proiecte.*, Third edition, revised and supplemented, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, p133-141.

The authors of this paper considers the theme of "consumer protection" should be better understood by graduates from the public administration at the national level, because we can observe in public service sector, unfortunately, a lower quality of their provision and the civil servants indifference, a lack of ethics and morals in their relations with citizens, customers, as can also name them „consumers of public services”.

Conclusions

A first conclusion of this work is given by the result on the research literature and the present stage, revealing a concern about consumer rights in early twentieth century and the development of terms of *consumer, consumer protection, consumer rights and education consumer*.

Although the institutional framework of consumer protection in Romania is well developed on some dimensions (with reference to certain chapters of consumption) - for example, in consumption, consumption of durable goods, etc. - there are chapters poorly or not at all covered by institutions. In this situation there are many of the services on which the state held and still holds control on offer (services for the collection of taxes, road signaling services, police, social welfare, etc.), but also for some services provided by private initiative. This is where graduates from public administration specialization that will be involved in public service need to understand the role they play in enhancing the quality of these services, with better information and education of them on protection of consumer rights services.

Another conclusion reveals the link between the concepts of "consumer protection" and "information, education of the consumer" result of society concerns, the society in which we are living and the continuing development of

market goods and services in a fast and a dynamic rhythm. For the consumer to feel protected they must first know their rights, that is to be informed and educated in this regard.

As can be seen from the first part of the article, "introduction", the authorities are trying through various legal means to protect consumers and diverse educational programs, whether it is consumer education classes conducted in schools, or done it in a non-institutionalized framework. Fortunately the modern consumer society can enjoy the offer of many goods and services, but also faces the risk of falling victim to dishonest deals, of a misleading marketing, or simply be mistaken his expectations (Academician Ionel Haiduc, 2006).

Starting from student answers to the questions in the questionnaire, it results that they are concerned about the rights of the consumer, consumer education and the means by which they are informed and educated in this area.

In conclusion there should be designed new programs to educate consumers and developed training and educational strategies that involve them both, parents, educators and media professionals in the formulation and application of communication ethics. As a result, educators and parents need to make an easy and timely access to information on the harmful effects induced violent messages disseminated through electronic media. Moreover, education and training of media professionals, either in higher profile, or in special courses designed for this purpose (professional ethics courses) should focus on awareness of the positive / negative media and the need to assume responsibility for producing these effects. The development and acceptance of a code of ethics, to support self-discipline and self-field, must have knowingly place. Conceptualization and adoption of the ethics of communication must take place based on specific knowledge and harmonize interests of different social groups and common social objectives.

In Romania only by initiating educational programs and strategies from early ages is the only way to guarantee the greatest effect. School is the place where children can train their abilities for taking responsible decisions and to adopt healthy lifestyles in long term.

As it resulted from this pilot research, as well from the answers given by students of Public Administration specialization, ideally is like consumer education to begin to be carried starting with I-VIII classes. Why? Because at such a young age and in a proper and well organized framework, as is school, the results will be much better and also on long term.

Study limits

In the beginning of the paper we specified that the dimension of our research group of students who gave valid answers, and also the specificity of this research can not lead to generalized results. Even in these circumstances the present pilot qualitative research we have done can be considered a starting point for further more detailed researches and conducted on a larger scale, in this way the present

paper makes the connection between the present work investigations in the field and what can be run in the future from this study. This research is particularly interesting, since this issue was not sufficiently studied and developed in literature or in practice in Romania.

Informing and educating consumers in Romania on their rights and use of modern means for informing and educating the consumers is at the beginning of the road in Romania's practice, in particular. Thus any study in this area can be considered useful and at the same time can be an incentive for any organization in Romania (no matter if it is a public authority, private companies or NGOs) to engage in the accurate information and education of Romanian consumers of all ages.

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