

CONSUMERS' AWARENESS OF THE TERM SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Elżbieta Goryńska-Goldmann¹ Michał Gazdecki²

University of Life Science in Poznań ^{1,2}

Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences Department of Economics and

Economics Policy in Agribusiness

ul. Wojska Polskiego 28, 60-637 Poznań,

Poland, Poznań

e-mail^{1,2}: gorynska-goldmann@up.poznan.pl, gazdecki@up.poznan.pl

Abstract

In this publication the authors focused on consumers' perspective. The aim of the article is to define consumers' awareness and knowledge of the term of the sustainable consumption. The awareness of that term is a necessary condition for changes of consumers' behaviours and consumption model. The publication was prepared on the basis of primary materials from the questionnaire survey conducted via direct interview technique in 2017. Respondents were selected by quota and purposive sampling method. Structure of the sample corresponded with the structure of Wielkopolska citizens in terms of age and sex. There were total 433 interviews conducted. Consumers have limited knowledge of the sustainable consumption concept. Most of the respondents came across terms related to the concept of sustainable consumption, but it was difficult for them to identify these links. Fewer than half of the respondents were able to interpret sustainable consumption on their own. However, it is worth to add that the range of behaviours declared by the respondents proves that they correctly identify this concept. Respondents referred mainly to the reduction of food intake, the optimization of household food supply and the reduction of food waste. Less frequently, they have addressed topics related to the positive impact on the environment, which may be an indirect effect of the indicated behaviours.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, food products, trends, awareness, consumers

JEL Classification: E21, D12, D83, Q01

1 Introduction

Over the centuries the demography, diets, demand structure, fashion, traditions, time and family budget management methods have changed. The pace of changes taking place in the world has an impact on individuals' (micro scale) as well as social groups' (macro scale) way of life. The changes of societies and economic systems indicate that past things not necessarily have to end however they undergo changes.

Under changing economic conditions a change of values is one of the drivers of consumption development. Due to overvaluing of ways of thinking about satisfying needs (consumption), the term "consumption" evolves (Seyfang, 2004, Kiełczewski, 2008). In the scientific circles there are discussions over the definition of consumption. In the contemporary world the consumption is becoming something more than buying, using, eating or possessing. The consumption is becoming the way of creating an own identity and it builds foundations for further development (Figiel, 2004, Comim, Tsutsumi & Varea, 2007). When referring to creating consumers' own identity in the age of globalization, Mróz (2013) indicates "the redefinition of traditional connotations assigned to the consumption" (p. 106) and at the same time emphasizes the fact that for a small number of consumers, the consumption is a method of communicating their separateness and uniqueness to their environment, in the world where unification processes are taking place. A mundane act of consumption is becoming an opportunity to demonstrate the value system, views and attitudes as well as to emphasise the independence. These elements are reflected in consumers' contemporary behaviours characterised by individuality, novelty, excitement, experience, renaissance of consumers' virtues, digital abstinence, co-sharing, cooperation, responsibility and sustainability. Consumers are more and more demanding and critical, and when they satisfy their needs, they attach less importance to primal (i.e. physiological) aspects and more importance to higher needs. However do they always bring higher quality of life for a consumer?

Consumers judge products by expected benefits, so called added value that can be provided by these products or services. Facing a diverse product assortment, they choose between cheaper offer of discount stores and more luxury, highly ranked goods, taking into consideration value for money. As emphasized by e.g. Kiełczewski (2008) and Olejniczuk-Merta (2007) until recently Polish society was considered as rather conservative about nutrition. At present Polish consumers' attitudes evidently evolve towards ecology, acceptance of global products, regionalisation, ethnocentrism (acceptance of domestic products), tradition, interest in high quality, healthy and low-processed food. Also a concern for the environment

(often related to the level of ecological awareness, demand for ecological products, preferred consumption model) is becoming an important element. Consumers are getting hungry for knowledge that they can use for e.g. making decisions, selection of goods of a minimal harmfulness for an organism and the environment, rational approach to a price and a quality or critical approach to a market offer and marketing messages (informational, promotional, educational) published by producers and salesmen.

Over the last decades, all over the world, in Europe and in Poland the consumption defined as sustainable and as the concept being the response to ecological and social problems gains in importance (Jackson & Marks, 1999, Comim, Tsutsumi & Varea, 2007, Degallaix & Klemola, 2008, Chesson, 2013). Sustainable consumption is the subject for studies of various fields of science, e.g. philosophy, sociology, psychology. In the economic approach it is defined as the direction for changes in consumption determined by innovations and their effects observed in the social and economic sphere. Popularity and legitimacy of sustainable, responsible consumption is one of the main trends that have impact on practice of companies, including the ones connected with food market. The sustainable consumption is manifested not only in consumers' ecology- or justice-orientation, but also in the intergenerational responsibility. The sustainable consumption concept objects to producers' unfair treatment of consumers. Companies operating on the food market get more or less voluntarily involved in activities supporting the sustainable consumption and development. The reflexion of that approach is defining objectives of the social policy, action strategies that are beneficial for consumers. The studies of Delpal and Hatchuel (2007), Gonzalez, Korchia, Menuet, and Urbain (2009) show that in many cases at least one out of two consumers is ready to pay more in order to respect social or environmental issues. **Other interesting studies that are worth mentioning are the results of "2010 Cone Cause Evolution Study" that shows that the group of consumers who require their favourite brands to be engaged in social issues, is growing. In over 15 years, the number of American consumers preferring engaged brands doubled, from 20 up to 41%. Two out of five respondents said they had bought a product because of engagement in social or ecological issues, and four out of five admitted they had changed their favourite products to those brands that were involved in crucial social issues. However in these situations the condition was the fact that the products had similar price and quality. On the other hand the results of the report of 2016 "Cone Communications Employee**

Engagement Study” indicate that every second respondent does not want to work for a company that does not have strong social and environmental commitments¹.

Kielczewski (2008) postulates different way of thinking of the ways of satisfying needs, aiming at the consumption that does not generate unnecessary environmental and social costs. Szwacka-Mokrzycka (2015) underlines globalisation process as well as unification of consumers' behaviours in the global perspective. In author's opinion the consumption should be considered as the process encompassing popularisation of products available on the global markets. That situation leads to unification of consumption and tendencies in changes of consumers' behaviours. It is supported by the willingness to create a modern style of life as well as by consumers' interest in convenience food, ability to buy global products and increase in spatial mobility.

In developed economies, in the era of consumerism, consumers extend the scope of needs satisfied via consumption. Food is not treated as a must, but is considered as a pleasure combined with some concept, values etc. For example in known retail network, offering fast food products, it has become trendy to introduce healthy food and pay attention to important social topics by getting involved in various socially useful campaigns. Tarcza (2015) in his theoretical considerations, indicates that it can be stated that increasing people's awareness of their obligations regarding e.g. quality of environment, nature, will motivate them to modify their behaviours and reduce a negative impact on environment.

A crucial element supporting consumption development in the 21st century are innovations, due to which social and economic needs are satisfied with innovative ideas, products, services, business models. Innovation is the condition of social and economic development as well as the element of success of companies operating on domestic and international markets (Research and Innovation performance in the UE, 2014, European Innovation Scoreboard, 2009). The market operators are even forced to introduce constant innovations that are the response to fast changing market tendencies as well as consumers' evolving expectations.

As indicated by Łuczka (2016) the current level of recognition of sustainable consumption issues and the factors that have impact on it is insufficient, thus further studies over that topic are recommended. In this publication the authors focused on consumers' perspective. The aim of the article is to define consumers' awareness and knowledge of the term of the sustainable consumption. Individual consumers have an important role to fulfil in aiming at the sustainable consumption – they need to be ready to execute such consumption model and rules of the sustainable consumption. The awareness of that term is a necessary condition for

¹ <http://www.conecomm.com/research> (accessed on 02.11.2017).

changes of consumers' behaviours and consumption model that will execute the postulates of sustainable consumption.

2 Data and Methods

The publication was prepared on the basis of primary materials from the questionnaire survey conducted via direct interview technique in the Department of Economics and Economy Policy in Agribusiness at the Poznań University of Life Sciences, in 2017. The survey was carried out among the citizens of wielkopolskie voivodship. Respondents were selected by quota and purposive sampling method. This approach enabled to build the sample structure so that it could correspond with the structure of Wielkopolska citizens per age and gender. There were total 433 interviews conducted². For the purposes of this publication, there were used the answers to the questions regarding consumers' awareness of sustainable consumption, e.g.: "Have you heard of the following trends – consumer phenomena?", "Which of listed trends are interesting to you? Please indicate the ones you identify with the most.", "How can you describe what sustainable food consumption means?". There were open- and closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions are used when a researcher wants to diagnose respondents' attitudes to selected categories (units). Open-ended questions enable respondent's freedom of expression. The method used for examination of the content was a content analysis, used for surveying e.g. press articles, posts on internet forums etc. An important element of a content analysis is creation of the system of statement categorisation (so called key), which is used for assigning respondents' statements into a suitable category. This enabled quantitative analysis of an open-ended question. The key was created by means of emergent technique, in which categories are created

² Out of all age brackets from 18,54% of them were women and 46% were men. The interview was representative as it encompassed similar numbers of respondents of both sexes in relation to latest demographic data of the central statistical office (GUS), that show that the population of women in Poland is higher compared to men's and amounts to 51,50%. Most of them were respondents from the age group 35-44 (over 19%, with 52% of them being women and 48% being men). The next ones, in terms of the number, were three age groups: 18-24, 25-44 and 55-64, each of them having ca. 16,4% share in the surveyed group. The group „65 and more” was slightly smaller (15,9%). In the sex structure the most distinguishing was the first age bracket – 59% of women and 41% of men. These differences did not have any negative impact on the results of conducted surveys. They also did not vary from other commonly available surveys. Both for women and men, the average age amounted to 44 years with some minor differences. The survey was conducted in 74 locations; the largest group were citizens of Poznań (43%). People with higher education definitely prevailed (33%). 45% of respondents claimed they had an average standard of living – they can afford every-day living expenses, but they have to save money for more expensive items.

only on a basis of collected empirical data created by respondents' spontaneous statements and the final key contained the set of categories. The unit of analysis was one respondent's statement that contained an answer to above-mentioned question. In one statement a respondent could disclose more than one risk caused by changing into sustainable consumption in a household (question with multiple answers). Subsequently the answers were subject to a factual analysis using the elements of a content analysis developed by Berelson.

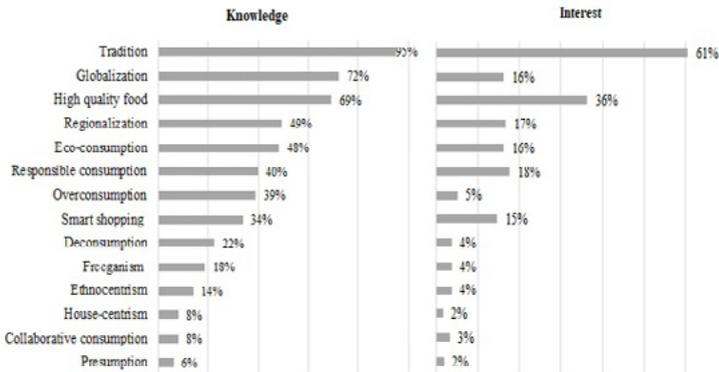
For the statistical analysis of the data descriptive statistics and frequency analysis has been used. Due to the non-random sampling results presented in the paper cannot be fully representative, however structure of the sample reflects the structure of general population in terms of age and gender.

3 Results and Discussion

The test participants were asked to indicate which items from the listed trends are of interesting to them. It should be pointed out that the subject of the analysis has been the directions of changes in consumption related to and associated with the development of the idea of sustainable consumption. The most important trends of consumption include tradition (95%), globalization (72%) and high-quality food (69%). Half of test participants are familiar with regionalism (49%) and eco-consumption (48%). More than 2/3 of the test participants showed the knowledge of the trend in consumption known as a responsible consumption (40%), overconsumption (39%), and smart shopping (34%). Less known consumer trends were deconsumption, freeganism, egocentrism, housecentrism or the collaborative consumption and prosumption. To deepen the question of knowledge of the observed trends of consumption, the test participants were asked to identify those trends, with which they identified most strongly, with which they are interested in. Their identification may indicate what behaviors may soon manifest themselves among consumers, and to which direction the consumption patterns will change.

Among the directions of change that fit into the idea of sustained consumption, the greatest interest presented: tradition (61%) and high-quality food (36%). Nearly every sixth test participant pointed to globalization (16%), regionalization (17%), eco-consumption (16%), responsible consumption (18%) and smart shopping (15%). The remaining directions were of marginal importance for the consumers (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Knowledge of trends and interest in them included in the idea of sustainable consumption, in the opinion of test participants ³



Source: Own research (N = 433).

Only 43% of consumers have chosen to describe what the concept of sustainable consumption means to them. This means that this group has knowledge of sustainable consumption, which allows them to formulate their own "definitions". Consequently, this knowledge goes beyond the superficial knowledge of (often resulting from a prior contact with the concept). Associations assigned by test participants to sustainable consumption are shown in Figure 2. To deepen the quantitative analysis, the featured text has been enhanced with selected quotes from the statements of test participants within an identified category. Research results indicate that the average number of associations per 1 answering person was 1.79. This may mean that the test participants focused on issues which have been most important for them. The presented categories provide a picture of sustainable consumption in the minds of consumers, pointing to its manifestations, sometimes to the barriers, risks and opportunities for development and the adoption of such a model of consumption in their households. An extensive range of associations proves the earlier contacts of respondents with a variety of content of

³ smaller (15,9%). In the sex structure the most distinguishing was the first age bracket – 59% of women and 41% of men. These differences did not have any negative impact on the results of conducted surveys. They also did not vary from other commonly available surveys. Both for women and men, the average age amounted to 44 years with some minor differences. The survey was conducted in 74 locations; the largest group were citizens of Poznań (43%). People with higher education definitely prevailed (33%). 45% of respondents claimed they had an average standard of living – they can afford every-day living expenses, but they have to save money for more expensive items.

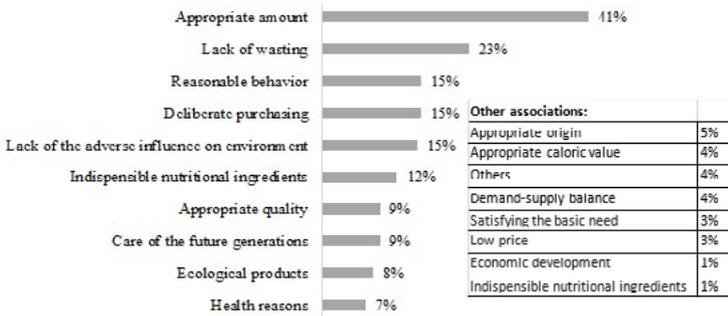
messages about the sustainability of consumption. However, it does not have to confirm their behavior in the practice of everyday life. It is important to note that the categories: adequate amount, essential nutrients, adequate quality, health concerns can be classified within the group associated with applying a proper diet.

More than 41% of the answers involved sustainable consumption with a sufficient amount of consumption, wasting, purchase of food. Test participants in this category pay attention to issues related to dietary behaviors and, in particular, the proper recognition of the reported demand and observing the amount of ingredients supplied to their bodies from food, taking into account the needs and requirements in terms of the diet and lifestyle of consumers.

This is confirmed by several quotes from the test participants, for example: *"Eating food in amounts corresponding to the needs of the body"*, *"Consumption corresponds to the actual demand and there is no phenomenon wasting food"*, *"Responsible consumption, adequate to the needs"*, *"Consumption compatible with my lifestyle."*

Sustainable consumption has also been associated with behavior in terms of proper food storage that reduces waste and with purchasing behaviors where products are selected responsibly, without excessive purchases. This can be indicated by several statements, e.g.: *"Avoiding buying too much food which later perishes"*, *"Buying such quantities of food that can be eaten"*, *"It's such a consumption, in which the consumer buys food responsibly, taking into account how much they can eat, without throwing away food products and selects such products that impact positively on the environment"*.

Figure 2 Description of the concept of sustainable consumption by consumers



Source: Own compilation; N=188, multiple answers possible, values do not add up to 100%.

The forms of behavior indicated by the test participants which can help reduce or even eliminate food waste were associated with the issue of rationalization of consumption (supply of suitable quantities, taking into account the needs of the body), informed selection of products and consumption of ecological products.

An important issue, associated with the adequate amount and behaviors in storing and purchasing, is wasting food. This issue often occurred in the statements of the test participants: *"Without throwing food or wasting it"*, *"Using your own shopping bag"*, *"Rational purchases"*, *"Avoiding buying products for later"*, *"The use of all food resources in an optimal manner, so there is no waste of food"*, and *the need for an action to contribute to this result (the statement: "Actions to avoid wasting food")*.

The next category, namely sensible behaviors in terms of food consumption, was associated by the test participants with conscious, rational and responsible behavior in this regard. This type of associations was demonstrated in the words *"Consumption which is responsible and aware of its effects"*, *"Rational nutrition"*, *"Shopping rational from the ecological and economical point of view"*, *"Responsible consumption"*, *"Responsible food purchases"*.

The test participants also pointed to the need to control spending on food and to control the source of nutrients and energy ingredients, which are supplied with food. Examples of the statements include *"Controlling the expenses on food and the type of consumed energy,"* *"Long-term savings."*

The lack of a negative impact on the environment is another of the identified categories of associations about the sustainability of consumption. It is strongly linked to the waste of food and restrictions on the consumption. For this reason, consumers knowingly postulate to do no harm to the environment by stating, for

example, that the sustainable consumption is a consumption that *"Does not harm the environment"*, *"Conscious of the use the natural resources"*. Respondents paid attention to the use of biodegradable packaging, sorting of waste; for example, the expression *"Taking care of the environment, the use of biodegradable packaging, segregation of waste"*. Attention was also paid to limiting the emission of waste or the selection of such products, which can harm the environment to an insignificant extent only. Examples of expressions: *"It limits the generation of waste through the life cycle of products and services"*, *"Selection of products that do little harm to the environment"*.

Behaviors associated with a proper nutrition are important for consumers. Therefore, it was considered advisable to extract the category of essential nutrients, which is also the first of the discussed categories, i.e. the appropriate amount. The respondents associated their diets with the need to provide the body with vitamins, minerals ingredients and nutrients. The test participants claimed that the variety of products and foods, and the method of food processing are important in this regard.

Within the category of suitable quality and health objectives, the test participants associated the consumption of food with matters of health. It was noted that properly selected products, the acquisition of healthy, unprocessed food, selected for its nutritional value, are important in this regard. In addition, there is also the awareness of what and how much one should eat and the need to avoid certain products, which are unfavorable for health. In addition, this covers the knowledge about the quality of the products in connection with the acquisition of them from well-known producers (including regional producers), who care about the quality of their products, selection of high-quality products, i.e. marked with quality certificates (of community or national characters).

Another association related to the sustainable consumption was concern about future generations, expressed in statements such as *"Consumption, which will satisfy the needs of future generations"* *"Cares for the issues associated with nature and future generations"*. The respondents mainly paid attention to the effective exploitation of non-renewable energy sources, minimizing the absorption of natural resources, the most optimal, conscious, appropriate, sustainable, uniform and longest possible use of natural resources and services at the level of individuals and others, meeting the needs and improving the quality of life.

Attention was also paid to the characteristics of food and its method of production, linking sustainable consumption with ecologic food. This means that they associate ecologic food with better health parameters. A low degree of processing was attributed to these products.

In addition to the above mentioned categories, the consumers involve sustainable consumption with economic development, preserving the market balance between supply and demand, the origin of products and the appropriate calorific value, as well as the necessary nutrients, which undoubtedly is an element for health considerations. These types of declarations had, however, definitely lower frequencies among the test participants.

In works on sustainable consumption that includes a variety of its manifestations, it is indicated that the term sustainable consumption is not widespread among the test participants. The research of Rejman, Kowrygo, and Laskowski (2015) revealed that his knowledge had been declared by only 35% of respondents, but only 18% of this group correctly defined sustainable consumption. Most of the test participants mistakenly equated this concept with balanced nutrition. Respondents who were aware of sustainable consumption pointed out that factors for food choices were the conditions for ecological premises such as: the origin from local suppliers, from ecological production, possession of a certificate. According to the authors, consumers are ready to change the diet in the direction of sustainable consumption. However, it is necessary to popularize this idea, among else in the terms of human health and ensuring food security.

Research of Dąbrowska, Byłok, Janoś-Kresło, Kiełczewski, and Ozimek (2015) focused on learning the consumers' competences and their importance for stimulating sustainable consumption. The results of this research revealed that the respondents based their knowledge on sustainable consumption on four principles: ethics and local awareness, planning, ecology (care for environment) and consciousness (know-how). The test participants treated sustainable consumption as a form of increasing prosperity. The degree of respondents' competence about sustainable and pro-ecological consumption was high, however, this is not equivalent to their practical behavior. During the study, consumers were trying to a good image, including behavior indicating sustainable consumption.

Another study in the area of sustainable consumption was conducted by Jaros (2016). It shows that as many as 31.4% of test participants believe that their consumption is unsustainable, with the answer "mostly yes" selected only by 21.4% of the surveyed. The answers are strongly dependent, among other issues, on the place of residence, education and financial situation. It has been observed that emotions in relation to sustainable consumption did not coincide with the activities, e.g. residents of rural areas often declared that their consumption is not sustainable, but their behavior showed that it actually is. The study also indicated confusion about the definition of sustainable consumption. It was noted that the positive factor, which have resulted from the research, was the growth of consumers' awareness (Jaros, 2016).

The research whose subject was a part of the idea of sustainable consumption, was an examination performed by Goryńska-Goldmann, Adamczyk, and Gazdecki (2016) and Nestorowicz (2015), examining the knowledge of respondents about the marking of food products in relation to sustainable consumption. It was concluded that the respondents had little knowledge about the marking of the fair trade products and they had better recognition for European logo for ecological food products. The respondents who declared a higher level of knowledge about the fair trade products more often recognized their logo and European ecological signs. They also admitted that they read information on product packaging. It can be stated that this group belongs to the more informed users. However, as shown by the author's research, the knowledge about fair trade products is not reflected in making purchasing decisions. In Poland, ecological food is more popular than fair trade products. However, when making purchasing choices, ecological products and fair trade products are not popular among the Polish consumers. As is apparent from the performed studies, the behavior of Polish consumers does not always subscribe to the concept of sustainable consumption, but they are willing to make changes in the current consumption.

4 Conclusion

Based on the conducted studies, it can be concluded that consumers have limited knowledge of the sustainable consumption concept. Most of the respondents came across terms related to the concept of sustainable consumption, but it was difficult for them to identify these links. The level of awareness of these terms does not seem to be caused by consumers' actual interest but on the perception of information which are reaching consumers from different sources. Moreover, respondents have declared the greatest interest in "tradition" and "high quality food", what reflects current trends on the Polish food market.

Fewer than half of the respondents were able to interpret sustainable consumption on their own. However, it is worth to add that the range of behaviours declared by the respondents proves that they correctly identify this concept. Respondents referred mainly to the reduction of food intake, the optimization of household food supply and the reduction of food waste. Less frequently, they have addressed topics related to the positive impact on the environment, which may be an indirect effect of the indicated behaviours.

Identification of the level of sustainable consumption awareness among consumers should be the first step in promotion campaign of such consumption patterns. It should also be stressed that consumers can demonstrate behaviour related to the sustainable consumption model but do not link it with this concept.

Undoubtedly, a higher level of consumer awareness will certainly be positively related to the range of sustainable behaviour.

Assuming, that the sustainability of consumption is a desirable model of consumer behaviour, the results presented in this paper indicate communication challenges for social policy makers, businesses and non-profit organizations.

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