

PRODUCT CATEGORY, PRODUCT FEATURES AND CONSUMER ETHNOCENTRISM

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to identify consumers' ethnocentrism symptoms based on declared importance of product's country of origin as a buying factor of food market and perception of selected product's features in relation to its country of origin. Paper was prepared on a basis of the primary materials from a face to face questionnaire survey, in total 423 interviews were qualified to the analysis. The respondents were the individuals responsible for supplying households with food products. The interviews were carried out in selected locations in north-western Poland. The country of origin may be an important buying factor of food products for Polish consumers. The importance of this factor is linked to the product category. Consumers pay more attention to the product's country of origin in terms of fresh and low-processed food products, while this factor is less important toward highly processed food products. There are differences related to the country of origin in terms of food products' image. Local products are perceived as e.g. more healthy, traditional, tasty. These characteristics are related to the product itself and may result from the production process or the ingredients used. The advantages of foreign products are associated to the marketing activity of enterprises, e.g. factors "easy to recognize", "innovative and attractive packaging".

Keywords: food market, consumer attitudes, country of origin, consumer ethnocentrism

JEL Classification: D12, M31, Q13

1 Introduction

The aim of the paper is to identify consumers ethnocentrism symptoms based on declared importance of product's country of origin as a buying factor of food market and perception of selected product's features in relation to its country of origin.

The importance of product's country of origin in consumer choices is connected with the term of consumer ethnocentrism. It was introduced into the literature by Sumner (1906), who considered it in a social context. He pointed out that ethnocentrism is an attitude, in which an own group is treated as a reference point for other groups. In other words, an own group, so called 'we group', is a basis for the evaluation of all external groups, so called 'out groups'. The sociological concept of ethnocentrism was an inspiration for establishing the term and research of consumer ethnocentrism. Its precursors were (Shimp and Sharma 1987), who introduced the term of consumer ethnocentrism. They defined it as a belief of inappropriateness of purchasing foreign producers' products, as this may have a negative impact on the domestic economy. Since the moment when the phenomenon of consumer ethnocentrism was described, we have been able to observe a development of works dedicated to that topic in the marketing publications. Despite some differences in defining consumer ethnocentrism, it can be stated that it is understood as consumers' preference for domestic products over the products of a foreign origin (Lindquist, Vida, Plank, Fairhurst 2001; Smyczek 2006; Wolanin-Jarosz 2013). The development of a measurement instrument CETSCALE¹³ (Shimp and Sharma 1987) that was used in many research works, had a positive impact on the popularity of research on consumer ethnocentrism. That instrument defines the willingness for preference for domestic products, through referring to four groups of psychosocial factors: cultural openness, patriotism, conservatism and collectivism (Ruyter, Birgelen, Wetzels 1998).

The research surveys carried out in various countries show that the level of consumer ethnocentrism measured with the CETSCALE is considerably diverse. Poh-Chuin T., Osman M., Ramayah T., (2001) in their overview give the examples of the studies in which ethnocentrism index oscillated between 28,7 to 61,5.

Product's country of origin is a factor taken into consideration in the studies of consumers' choices of both domestic and imported products. A country of origin can also be related to perceived products' quality Schnettler et al. (2011) and thus indirectly have an impact on consumers' confidence in a product. As indicated by Wang and Chen (2004), when domestic, local and foreign products

¹³ CETSCALE methodology is based on the Likert scale and consists of 17 statements rated from 1 to 7 (or from 1 to 5).

do not differ in terms of the quality, a significant number of clients, before making decision on a purchase, are interested in information on a country of origin. In developed countries, consumers show a tendency to perceive domestic products as high-quality ones. Thus, they are less willing to buy foreign products as they often perceive them as lower-quality ones (Kaynak and Kara 2002).

Each product should provide consumers with the values that will build their satisfaction. It results from all impressions and feelings that appear during a consumption process and that are kept in buyer's memory after consumption is finished. The diversity of factors taken into consideration by consumers when making choices (Hamelin, Ellouzi, Canterbury 2011) and the extent to which each attribute meets client's expectations, create the total satisfaction.

The importance of a country of origin for Polish consumers was the subject of the scientific studies. For instance Rojek (2007) and Maison (2004) show that Poles declare to prefer Polish products, which confirms their ethnocentric tendencies. However these declarations were not reflected in consumers' real choices, which meant inconsistency of consumer attitudes. In the studies carried out among students it was stated that evaluation of Polish products against foreign ones depends on a category type, which these products belong to (Patrzalek 2013).

Consumers have various views on products' origin, which in the literature is linked also with the stereotypical images of a country, in which given goods are produced. Romanowski (2013) links that with the level of given country's development as well as with its achievements in the international arena. The stereotypes are also the result of limited knowledge on individual countries and thus they have strong impact on perception of products originating from these countries (Figiel 2004).

2 Data and Methods

This article was prepared on a basis of the primary materials from a face to face questionnaire survey. Respondents were selected by a non-random, quota sampling (Kaczmarczyk 2003) so that their age structure corresponded with general population's age structure. The respondents' age distribution was presented in the table 2. After verification and reduction of questionnaires, there were total 423 interviews qualified to the analysis. The respondents were the individuals responsible for supplying households with food products. The interviews were carried out in selected locations in north-western Poland.

Table 1 Age distribution of the respondents, N=423

Age group	Percent
<= 29 years	28,4%
30-44 years	25,3%
45-64 years	29,8%
65 and more years	9,5%
No answer	7,1%

Source: Own research.

The intensification of ethnocentric attitudes towards the food market was identified based on the 17-element CETSCALE proposed by Shimp and Sharma (1987). Classical statistics as frequency analysis were used to analyze the results. Chi-squared test was used in order to determine relation between ethnocentrism attitude and perception of product features related to its country of origin.

The sample selection was not random it means that study results, should not be generalized to the whole population.

3 Results and Discussion

The country of origin may be an important criterion for selecting products, as shown by a survey conducted in Poland. The conducted research shows that consumers make their interest in the place of origin dependent on the product category (Table 2). The most respondents pay attention to the country of origin in the case of raw meat. In the conducted survey 143 persons declared that the place of origin of this commodity category is important for them, which constituted 31% of the respondents. The second category in which respondents consider the country of origin to be an important decision criterion is smoked meat and sausages. In this category, 28% of respondents admitted that the country of origin is the factor considered by them at the time of purchase. A comparable percentage of respondents admitted that they pay attention to the place of origin when buying eggs, bread and cereal products, as declared by 27% of the respondents. Dairy i.e. milk and cheese were on the next positions. Here, 26% and 23% of respondents respectively considered the country of origin as a factor to be taken into account when shopping. These categories are mostly of a mass nature. This means that there are no strong product brands in these markets. It may be suggested that the country of origin in this case replaces the brand of the product by acting as a guarantor of quality.

On the other hand, if we analyze the categories of products in which the country of origin does not play a significant role as a factor influencing purchasing

decisions, we can find here many markets where there are well recognizable brands. Thus, the least interest in the country of origin of the product was noted in the case of non-alcoholic beverages. In this category, only 9% of respondents are interested in the country of origin of the product. In the oil category, 11% of respondents showed interest in the country of origin. In the case of alcoholic beverages, 12% of the respondents pay attention to the country of origin. Another category where the country of origin plays a marginal role as a selection criterion is chocolate and confectionery, here as on the beverage market there are distinctive brands, which probably made only 13% of respondents admit that they are interested in the country of origin when buying product in this category. In conclusion, on the basis of the data provided, the frequency of attention to the country of origin varied according to the category of product. For fresh products and where there were no branded products on the market, respondents referred to the country of origin as a selection criterion, whereas where the market was rich in strong brands, consumers did not show an interest in the country of origin.

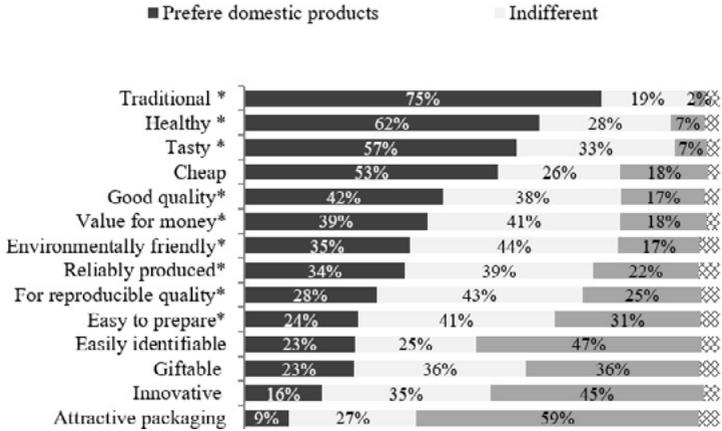
Table 2 Percentage of population concerned by a country of origin in selected product categories

Product category	Percentage of persons concerned by a country of origin
Raw meat, poultry	31%
Smoked meat, sausages	28%
Eggs	27%
Bread and cereal products	27%
Milk	26%
Cheeses	23%
Fruits	23%
Fish	22%
Vegetables	22%
Yoghurts, soft drinks and dairy desserts	19%
Sugar, jams, honey	16%
Chocolate and sugar confectionery	13%
Alcoholic beverages	12%
Oil	11%
Non-alcoholic beverages, e.g. coffee, tea	9%

Source: Own elaboration.

The country of origin may also carry complex information on the characteristics of the product. In the conducted survey respondents were asked whether they would assign a given characteristic to a domestic or a foreign product. The results of the test are presented in the diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1 **Consumers' preferences towards selected products features related to the country of origin**



Source: Own elaboration.

“Traditional” has proven to be the feature most commonly associated with domestic products. In the survey 75% of the respondents claimed this to be the case. Only 2% of respondents considered it as a feature of a foreign product and 19% considered it a neutral one - not differentiating between domestic and foreign products. The second characteristic of domestic products was “healthy” - 62% of respondents considered it typical of a domestic product and only 7% said it was more characteristic of a foreign product. The third distinguishing feature of domestic products was their taste - 57% of respondents considered that the good taste was more typical for domestic products. At the same time, only 7% of respondents considered this characteristic to be typical for foreign products, with a high percentage of people who did not decide to assign it neither to a local nor to a foreign producer. Another characteristic of local products was their low cost of ownership. Polish products were considered cheap by 53% of respondents, at the same time 18% stated that it is appropriate for foreign products, and 26% considered this feature as not related to the country of origin of the product.

A fairly similar response profile accompanied features such as “good quality”, “value for money” and “environmentally friendly”. These features were considered typical for domestic products by 42%, 39% and 35% of respondents respectively,

while 17%, 18% and 17% of respondents considered these features appropriate for foreign products. In this group, the percentage of people for whom these characteristics were not associated with the country of origin increased significantly. The penultimate feature associated more often with Polish products than with foreign ones was the reliability of production - here 34% of the respondents considered it as characteristic for domestic products, and 22% indicated that it is more typical for foreign products, with the most of the respondents, i.e. 39%, not assigning it to the country of origin. The last property that was more often considered to be typical for domestic products than for foreign ones was 'guaranteeing repeatable quality'. Here, 28% of respondents considered this characteristic to be typical for domestic products and 25% considered it more characteristic for foreign products. However, also here the majority of respondents (43%) did not associate this feature with the country of origin. "Ease of preparation", as in the previous case, is usually not associated with the country of origin, however, if consumers classify it by country, they more often assign it to foreign products (31%) than to domestic products (24%). "Easily recognizable", "innovative" and "with attractive packaging" are the features most often associated with foreign products (47%, 45% and 59% respectively). In the case of the "giftable" feature, the same percentage of respondents associated the feature with a foreign product and treated it as neutral towards the country of origin (36%). On the other hand, only 23% of the respondents considered this feature to be more typical for Polish products. Analyzing the profile of respondents' answers it can be noticed that the characteristics typical for foreign products are rather "external" - they concern brand and packaging recognition, perceptions (suitable for gifts, innovative), while most of the characteristics specific for domestic products are closely related to the characteristics of the basic product (e.g. tasty, healthy, of good quality). An interesting direction of research could be to determine the reasons for such an "image" and to determine the methods of shaping particular features in the case of domestic and foreign products. An exemplary interpretation could be based on the hypothesis that external features are mainly shaped by marketing communication and that product features result primarily from the experience of users, although of course they may also be the subject of communication.

In the case of 9 features visible on the figure 1 and denoted by star a correlation between the answers and the degree of ethnocentrism was discovered. The degree of ethnocentrism has influenced the responses to features such as "traditional", "healthy", "tasty", "of good quality", "value for money", "environmentally friendly", "reliably produced", "reproducible" and "easily prepared".

4 Conclusions

The country of origin may be an important buying factor of food products for Polish consumers. The importance of this factor is linked to the product category. Fresh and low-processed products have been found to be of high importance for the country of origin. Highly processed food products which belong to the categories with strong brands seem to be selected on lesser extent based on the country of origin characteristic.

The results obtained may indicate a relation between the significance of the country of origin of the product as a buying factor and the brand position. The stronger the brand position is, the less important the origin of the product can be for consumers. This may also mean that for low-processed products, the country of origin may play the role of specific brand. These observations need to be confirmed by further research and may be used as research hypotheses for future scientific studies.

Polish consumers point to the advantage of domestic food products in terms of many attributes analyzed in the article. Consumers opinions result from differences in the image of domestic and foreign products. Local products are perceived as e.g. more healthy, traditional, tasty. These are characteristics related to the product itself and may result from the production process or the ingredients used. The advantages of foreign products are associated to the marketing activity of enterprises, e.g. factors “easy to recognize”, “innovative and attractive packaging”.

The results of study indicate, first of all, a significant level of ethnocentrism among Polish consumers, who may prefer domestic products, especially towards low-processed products. Secondly, study results provide valuable input to the marketing communication strategies and products development strategies run by food manufacturers.

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