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AWARENESS OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SELECTION OF FOOD PRODUCTS

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to present the concept of sustainable consumption, its aspects, awareness and implications for choices concerning food products. Particular attention was paid to consumer choices based on the perception of foodstuff packaging and the perception of the importance of labelling information. Empirical studies have shown that Polish consumers are increasingly more aware of the need for action on sustainable consumption, although it is not always reflected in tangible activities in this area. Still for the majority of Poles it is synonymous with ecoconsumption, and engaging consumers in the concepts of sustainability is manifested e.g. in waste sorting, waste reduction, selection of organic, local products, in ecologigal packaging, for which they are ready to pay higher prices or search for information on sustainable products. Unfortunately, at present the scale of these activities and attitudes is still limited, thus the primary objective of the environmental, social and economic policies is to provide systematic and intensive consumer education and promote sustainable development.

Key words: sustainable consumption, consumer trends, food products, packaging, food labelling

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development has been influencing the contemporary world, indicating directions of changes taking place at various stages of management as well as affecting both individual people and organisations. This concept aims at ensuring a broadly understood quality of life at all spheres of human activity and protecting the natural potential and human capital.

Consumption is a significant area in the implementation of the concept of sustainable development. Next to the commonly identified phenomena and trends in consumption, both those perceived as positive and those found socially unacceptable, sustainable consumption is becoming an ethical and responsible alternative. Its most accurate definition will be the consumer activity, which indicates the need for reflection on its broader sense extending outside the scope of interest of an individual, e.g. in the perception of information, choice of goods, their use and disposal. Jaros (2014) after Scholl (2011) indicated that sustainable consumption may be considered effective and efficient, connected with limited consumption of resources, including reduced pollution and waste (in the narrow sense) and as an improved quality of life, while at the same time being inseparably connected with improved health at a lesser use of environmental resources. Sustainable consumption combines social, economic, cultural or political practices at the level of individuals, households, enterprises and communities and aims first of all at the development of consumption of goods and services having a positive effect on health, prosperity, welfare of consumers and the environment (Kramer, 2011; Niva et al., 2014).

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It is increasingly often acknowledged that consumers in relation to products, mainly foodstuffs, make decisions consistent with the concept of sustainable development, resulting not only in the choice of specific products – according to their type, origin and packaging – filtering of information and its sources, as well as awareness of consequences of these choices both for themselves and the environment, in which they live.

Extensive studies on behavior and attitudes indicate that consumers are increasingly better educated and aware of what to buy, consume and use. They modify their consumption consciously focusing on quality of products or their prices. Unobstructed access to information promotes knowledge and modifies awareness. Sometimes, consumers obtain contradictory information from producers or sellers, or they are left uniformed, which leads to confusion, disintegration, inadequate or hindered choice. This refers e.g. to product labelling or advertising messages. Frequently in these messages e.g. the importance of taste, colour and aroma is stressed, which is to stimulate the imagination of consumers and effectively modify a favourable attitude to promoted products. Controlling consumer awareness by producers and merchadisers may strengthen not always healthy eating habits and additionally stress the pleasure they generate (Adamczyk, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to present selected aspects of sustainable consumption and implications for choices concerning foodstuffs. This study focused on consumer choices based on the perception of packaging of food products, as well as the perception and importance of information given on the labels. This is a review paper and the selected problems are illustrated using empirical evidence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used secondary sources such as monographs and journals, which supplied data for the preparation of the theoretical, review part of this paper. Additionally, publications of governmental agencies, legal acts and research reports were used. In order to illustrate selected problems empirical evidence was applied, coming from the study conducted by the Department of Market and Marketing, the Poznań University of Life Sciences by Adamczyk and Pawlak at the turn of May and June 2014 entitled "Packaging as a factor in choice of food products"[1].

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION – ASPECTS, RELATIONSHIPS, DILEMMAS

At present extensive globalisation processes as well as liberalisation and internationalisation of economies have a significant effect on consumer behaviour and eating patterns. In relation to many determinants of behaviour, both personal and external, all consumers strive to realise objectives they consider important. In the economic aspect their behaviour is aimed at reaching maximum usefulness of specific financial resources, as well as maximising satisfaction gained from their use. In turn, in view of the non-economic aspect consumers focus their behaviour and decisions to fulfill consumer models, e.g. such as social groups, in which they are functioning or to which they aspire, consistent with the adopted system of values and attitudes, or the type of personality they are representing. In other words, their aim is to attain the broadly understood high standard of living and balance between opportunities and resources at their disposal and market activity, patterns and attitudes of consumers.

In the last two decades much attention has been focused on the phenomenon of sustainable development, with consumption being its important component. It is not easy to define this concept, especially since it should be viewed in a multifaceted manner to perceive interrelationships or interactions between its various aspects. These definitions stress the necessity to undertake rational, responsible and insightful consumer choices, which are to facilitate not only attaining consumer balance, but also realisation of sustainable development objectives (Kryk, 2011; Pereira Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012; Niva et al., 2014). Thus consumer activity should

[1] The study applied the diagnostic survey method using direct interviews. They were conducted in the Poznań agglomeration. The experimental sample comprised 200 individuals, of which 55% were women and 45% were men. A 40% share of the population represented the age group of 18–30 years, while 50% were consumers aged 31–50 years. The remaining 10% were older respondents. In terms of their place of residence inhabitants of villages accounted for 27%, people living in towns of max. 10 thousand inhabitants accounted for 15.5% and those living in towns of 10 to 15 thousand – 13%. The most numerous group comprised residents of towns of over 50 thousand.

make it possible to meet objectives aiming at maintenance of equilibrium both within generations and between them. According to that principle both contemporary and future consumers should be able to satisfy their needs with no concerns for the condition of the environment or shortage of resources. Generally such consumer behaviour should be ensured irrespective of the fact whether their decisions are rational and responsible or not.

Similar aspects of consumer behaviour may be found in the approaches to its definition proposed in government documents, stressing the action of a conscious, responsible and optimal activity for the sake of the environment, use of its resources at various levels ranging from the household to the global approach. It is also crucial not to hinder satisfaction of basic needs of the future generation, connected with the preservation and recreation, by an inappropriate behaviour of the present generation. The primary guidelines for consumer behaviour include e.g. reduction of wastage, waste production and pollution, as well as the promotion of goods meeting strict social, ethical and environmental requirements. The requisite of consumer behaviour is thus to integrate these actions with the maintenance of equilibrium, stability and sustainability of natural processes.

The inseparable connection between consumption and sustainable development and their interrelationships was stressed by Kiełczewski. He pointed e.g. to the sequence of these processes, their consistency and stability. Thanks to the consistency of consumption mechanisms appear, which e.g. regulate their continuity, limit internal disturbances as well as eliminate or minimise barriers preventing further satisfaction of needs. In turn, stability makes it possible to develop a certain model of consumption ensuring prosperity and welfare of consumers (Kiełczewski, 2007).

Realisation of consumer behaviour is facilitated both by material and non-material goods. Thus what are sustainable goods? They are products and services, which e.g. are safe for consumers and the surroundings, meet high environmental and ethical standards at each stage of their life cycle, generated by sustainable production, involving optimal and rational social or natural resources. They are also properly labelled, with truthful and reliable information on environmental aspects, as well as methods of their use and disposal. It is also frequently stressed that the above-mentioned products should at least be equivalent or possible exceed conventional products in terms of their quality, functionality, performance or innovativeness.

Numerous researchers studying consumer behaviour stress a much broader context of this problem and indicate the necessity to integrate actions, processes and structures in the broadest sense. Kryk (2011) mentioned e.g. the balance of the above-mentioned activities in the economic aspect, aiming at the development of a balance between current and future consumption, the ecological aspect ensuring consumer satisfaction at the simultaneous concern for the good of the natural environment and the social aspect, eliminating the spatial, temporal and geographic asymmetry between consumers. That author also stressed the importance of psychological or demographic aspects of consumer behaviour. The former focuses on the development of a balance between the satisfaction of material and non-material needs, while the latter – on the elimination of barriers resulting in the diversification of consumption in demographic and social groups.

At present consumption and all the related aspects have a significant effect on the environment, in which consumers are operating. Particularly strong relationships are found in the economic environment. In order to stress these relationships in literature we may find such terms of the era of consumer economy or consumer capitalism (Bywalec, 2010). These relationships show a marked feedback relationship, since on the one hand the economic development in many European countries produces an improved standard of living and increased consumption, while on the other hand consumption becomes a driving force for economic development. A negative effect of these relationships and interactions is connected with excessive use of goods, exceeding actual demand. For this reason unsustainable consumption is a sign of contemporary times as an effect of disturbed relationships, proportions between the inner homeostasis of the human organism and external balance. In one of the dynamic approaches to consumer behaviour it is stressed that its activity are initiated by the continuous, repeated processes concerning disturbance of balance, manifested in the perception of needs and attempts to satisfy them, as well as restoration of balance in the satisfaction of needs by specific goods.

In relation to contemporary consumptionism – criticised from the social point of view, celebrating possessions, excessive use of goods, showing off or imitating other users – it needs to be stressed that these actions

leave a significant mark on all spheres of consumption, particularly that connected with its consequences. Effects of consumption may be manifested by either a direct (e.g. satisfaction of a need) or indirect effect (e.g. better health) on consumers. In turn, external results are much broader, are extended in time, are evolutionary in character and they are connected with the effect on the social, natural, ecological and economic environment.

Particularly adverse effects of consumptionism are observed in relation to the natural environment in many countries, both in Europe and worldwide. The range of ecological consequences of mass consumption is very wide, starting from excessive exploitation of depleted natural resources, degradation of the natural environment, emissions of noxious pollutants and production of waste, through damage caused by excessive logistic and distribution activity, and ending with waste management in the process of use and disposal of goods (Achrol and Kotler, 2012).

SEARCH FOR AND PERCEPTION OF INFORMATION ON PRODUCTS AS A MANIFESTATION OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

In the global sense consumers in the 21st century are becoming increasingly strict in their requirements concerning goods and critical in relation to all information – marketing, market and performance of products. Consumers are able to relatively clearly define their preferences and opinions in relation to purchased goods and services. This is obviously the result of the practically unlimited access to any information, their comparison or confrontation with other users and specialists. One of the objectives for consumers is to filter the information carefully, in order to find the most significant data. According to one such approach information collected by consumers may be divided into subjective, suspicious, dubious and reliable (Pieczykolan, 2005). There may be many criteria for selection and one of the frequently stressed criterion for consumers is their reliability (Tkaczyk, 2011).

In order to initiate the search for information required by consumers the first step is to indicate and identify the need to have a specific product or use a service. Consumers typically have several methods to obtain and verify their knowledge on a given product or service. They may be divided into various categories, e.g. commercial information, provided by producers and providers of services. These include e.g. leaflets, commercial brochures or TV commercials. Another source is personal information provided by the closest environment of the consumer (family, friends, colleagues) and independent sources of information, e.g. quality certificates (Grzędzińska et al. 2010).

Quality and reliability of this information may vary. For example, sources of information coming from family or friends may concern only selected producers or brands. They may be incomplete or premature opinions, while with time it turns out that the used product does not meet the expectations of the consumer or proves to be defective. Occasionally previous users of a good do not admit that their earlier positive opinions were exaggerated. In turn, commercial messages present products and services using the language of benefits. They do not present defects, weaknesses or hazards, thus they may not be considered a reliable source of information. In independent sources we have to take into account the possible errors. In sectors with rapid technological progress the official data may very soon prove to be dated (UOKiK, 2007).

Currently the Internet is a very popular source and method to search for information. A new type of consumers, the so-called e-consumers, transfer the entire process of purchase decisions or its considerable part to the electronic platform (Piwowar and Moneta, 2011). It is very useful for consumers to be able to compare a large number of offers, which would be hindered at the traditional purchase system. E-consumers verify information available on the Internet on specialised forums and blogs, focusing primarily on specific contents and clear message (Kimmel, 2010).

It needs to be said here that consumers usually use various sources of information and verify, test and compare attributes or parameters they consider interesting. In the case of food products opinions of other consumers, nutritional recommendations as well as personal experience are considered a valuable source of consumer information.

Consumers having selected information on the potential to satisfy specific needs have to evaluate alternative choices for specific goods. There are very many evaluation methods, one of them based mainly on emotional value connected with satisfaction, pleasure, a sense of well-being and prestige, while others are founded on more rational indicators, including performance,

functional properties, health benefits, safety and care for the environment.

PACKAGING AND LABELLING AS A FACTOR INFLUENCING CONSUMER CHOICES

A vast majority of food products are offered to customers in a packaged form. Packaging of products is to protect their stability and ensure quality. Packaging generally and its individual types specifically have their ascribed function, e.g. information, promotion, competitiveness, protective and symbolic functions as well as safety assurance. Modern and functional packaging is this aspect, which enhances product attractiveness and in this way persuades potential consumers to buy the product. It is frequently stressed that "packaging protects what it sells and sells what it protects". Packaging makes it possible to prepare merchandise for transport, distribution, storage, sale and finally use by the consumer, resulting in diverse roles served by packaging, i.e. storage, transport, delivery, protection and presentation of the product. Each packaging should thus be adapted to properties of a given product (Ciechomski, 2008).

Packaging takes a particularly important role when products are sold in the self-service system or using vending machines. It has to attract customers' attention and make a positive impression. A better packaged product will be more attractive to consumers, when it focuses on prestige and convenience. Such packaging is also a characteristic of a brand, reinforcing its recognition and uniqueness (Mika-Mętel, 2011). An excellent example in this respect may be e.g. the violet packaging of Milka chocolate.

External appearance is of great importance for the category of integrated products. Outer packaging of a product facilitates its proper use and ensures freshness. It also advertises it and is an effective means of promotion. Introduction of new packaging by producers in many cases is connected with launching a new product and search for new markets.

Investigations conducted by one of the authors of this study (Adamczyk and Pawlak, 2014) indicate that in the case of food products packaging plays a relatively important role. In the hierarchy of importance it ranks high as a determinant of choice – immediately after quality, price and brand. Consumers in relation to packaging stress the significance of both the type of packaging, its size, functionality (e.g. re-sealing facilitating further storage) as well as appearance, esthetic value and originality. It is frequently stated that by purchasing a properly packaged product we buy dreams and fantasies of its contents. A relatively important factor influencing the choice of a food product in that study was also connected with labelling, i.e. information on the label in terms of its scope, accuracy, reliability and eligibility for average buyers.

In relation to the type and potential use of packaging it turns out that important aspects in this case include the material, from which it was manufactured and the environmental declaration of the producer. Over fifty percent of consumers, particularly those representing the Y generation, declare that they are ready to pay a higher price for products in an environmentally friendly packaging. It also needs to be stressed here that for many buyers other aspects such as convenience and functionality are also important, following the principle "eat on the go and store for later".

Another significant element of packaging is connected with various symbols used. Signs on a food product may be placed either directly on the product itself or on its label. These symbols are not only to protect the consumer, but also to provide commercial information for entities participating in the logistics chain of sale. Food labelling is to ensure product safety and present its nutritive and health value (Śmiechowska, 2012). General regulations concerning food labelling are given in the Act on Safety of Food and Nutrition. According to its provisions all food has to have a label or a labelling method, which contains clear information in the form of writing, graphic signs, symbols and trademarks referring to the sold food product (Act…, 2006).

A label is a major source of information on any product. The European Union in its legal regulations specified the rules concerning presentation of information concerning food on product packaging. The rules given in the Regulation of the European Parliament and The EU Council no. 1169/2011 of 25.10.2011 were based on the need to regulate issues connected with uniform labelling of food and information passed to food buyers, first of all information on nutritive value. This document introduced the obligation to place information on the nutritive value of products and comprehensive information on allergens. At the same time it prohibited labelling information on therapeutic properties of the product, which would be misleading to consumers

(Regulation…, 2011). At present all food products are labelled with data on the daily allowances or intake of nutrients based on the Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA). This food labelling system is a relatively rapid method to verify the amounts of consumed nutrients, e.g. sugars for dieters or those who for health reasons may not consume a given category of substances (PFPŻ, 2014). In accordance with the above-mentioned regulation producers are obliged to give on the label the name of the product, its ingredients, amounts of ingredients in a given category, net weight, expiry date, name of producer and its address, instructions on use, information on nutritive value and allergens, etc. (PFPŻ, 2014).

Numerous studies on the role of information presented on the packaging in choice of products confirm that it is frequently perceived by consumers as a guarantee of product quality or a specific form of promotion. The results of the previously mentioned study conducted by one of the authors of this paper confirmed an increase in the importance of information given on the label, as well as the skill to search for and interpret the data most important for the maintenance of health and safety of consumers and their families. However, opinions of consumers on this subject vary greatly. Definitely positive opinions were given in relation to the statements that labelling information is necessary to gain better knowledge on the product and to verify contents of substances, which may be dangerous for consumers' health (e.g. on potential allergens or preservatives). In the opinion of the respondents this information, particularly nutritional information, is a valuable source of knowledge, which may be used in balancing the daily diet, especially in situations when consumption of certain nutrients needs to be strictly controlled (e.g. the glycemic index). For some consumers labelling information is the only obligatory element, which has to be given by producers and a marketing instrument, which is to persuade consumers to buy and persuade them of extraordinary attributes of a given good.

Despite the varied opinions almost 90% respondents declared that they pay attention to information given on the label and 25% declare that they do it always, at each purchase. Every second buyer analysing labelling information considers them sufficient, comprehensible and reliable. In relation to the clarity of information consumers expect e.g. nutritive value of products per serving (e.g. a slice, cup) or a distinct marking on the label or packaging for the use of products (e.g. for children) using a graphic sign or slogan.

One of the indicators of information reliability indicated by consumers is connected with recommendations of various institutions connected with nutrition, product health-promoting value, origin, environmental safety or medical recommendations. Studies have shown that such information appearing on packaging makes products more reliable, safer, better quality and having a positive effect on health and the environment, in which consumers are living. However, almost 1/3 respondents definitely indicated the fact of rather false intentions for placement of such information, which is clearly connected with marketing activity of producers.

In turn, what is the importance of various information on the label or packaging of products? It turns out that still almost all consumers declaring that they analyse data concerning the product first look at the expiry date. This is connected with the potential purchase of products for later use and its storage or the degree of its processing and preservation. A definitely positive aspect of such attitudes is connected with the increasingly frequent choice of goods coming from relatively local sources, which has a considerable effect on costs and safety of products, and purchase of those which are more organic, non-preserved and chemically preserved during production and distribution. One of the indicators for such attitudes may be provided e.g. by the decision not to buy goods, which list of additives and E-labelled chemicals is extensive – such a declaration was given by 48% respondents. However, this result should not be a cause for excessive enthusiasm, since all consumers asked what E-labelled substances are, definitely classified them as preservatives, stressing their adverse effect on human health. However, the group of these chemical additives includes also pigments, preservatives, emulsifiers and antioxidants, which are sometimes essential in the product formulation and are considered to be harmless.

The hierarchy of importance of information read from product packaging the following ranked next: nutritive value, nutritional recommendations, composition, information on preservation and its method, origin and certificates. The so-called nutritional information is of particular role and importance. It may be understood as a type of message, which is to make it easier for consumers to take nutritional choices good for their health. This refers first of all to information on the nutritive value of products and nutritional and health declarations, typically concerning either specific properties of the product formulation or potential improvement of

health or reduction of disease risk factors, provided by regular consumption of the product. These declarations are frequently commercial in character, marketing targeting the consumer and they do not always present the true character of the product and its attributes.

It seems that consumers are relatively aware of the harmfulness of preservatives and this information could significantly affect their choices. Information on the diet value of products would be of a comparable rank. Both these characteristics in the cited study were considered by consumers as equally important as the competitive price. In turn, placement of the environmentally friendly value of the product on the packaging was considered by most consumers as less important.

Declarations concerning the importance of information and awareness of consumerism are not always compatible with knowledge on the subject. An example of this trend may be connected with the correct interpretation of signs placed on labels or packaging. Among the many pictograms presented in the study consumers could correctly identify only five. Every third respondent correctly interpreted the symbol "Organic product", while every fifth – the symbol "Fair Trade" and "Recyclable packaging". It was much worse with the symbols: "Gluten-free product", "Green point", "Ecoland" or "Reusable packaging".

In recent years Polish consumers have undergone a significant transformation. A previous model – having insufficient knowledge on the market, rather careless, easily influenced and manipulated by market messages – has evolved towards more aware consumers, educated, responsible, caring for the natural environment in which they are living.

However, it is still believed that it is slightly different from the model of the European consumer, rather deliberate, responsible, critical and able to make decisions on their own responsible consumption (Stefanicki, 2004).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The turn of the 20th and 21st centuries is a time when much attention has been focused on sustainable development, which one of the significant segments is connected with consumption. It is not easy to define this concept, especially since this phenomenon should be considered in a multifaceted manner, between which interrelations or interactions occur. This is most frequently connected with sustainable development, indicating e.g. the necessity to make rational, responsible and conscious consumer decisions, which may contribute not only to consumer equilibrium, but also realisation of objectives of sustainable development. Buyers are becoming willing to gain knowledge, which they may use e.g. when making decisions, choosing goods with minimal harmfulness for their health and the environment, a rational attitude to price and quality, as well as a critical attitude to the market offer, marketing messages of producers and sellers. However, adequate education is insufficient to permanently change consumer behaviours. Comprehensive, long-term activities both in terms of the offer, its availability, functionality of products, price, attractiveness and environmental friendly value, determine not only a periodical direction of changes, but also what will become a social norm. An important role in the promotion of sustainable consumption is attributed to reliable, comprehensive and truthful information, which may be realised by adequate labelling. We also need to stress the choice of more sustainable, truly organic and less processed products, reduction of wastage, as well as promotion of a sustainable lifestyle, which primary principle should be to measure welfare not by possessing material goods and their amounts, but their use adapted to the real needs, while caring for the natural environment, in which consumers are living.

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ŚWIADOMOŚĆ ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ KONSUMPCJI I JEJ IMPLIKACJE DLA WYBORU PRODUKTÓW ŻYWNOŚCIOWYCH

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie idei zrównoważonej konsumpcji, jej aspektów, świadomości oraz implikacji dla wyborów dotyczących produktów żywnościowych. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na wybory konsumenckie oparte na postrzeganiu opakowań dóbr żywnościowych oraz na percepcji i znaczeniu zawartych na nich informacji. Badania empiryczne wykazują między innymi, że polski konsument jest coraz bardziej świadomy konieczności działań w obszarze konsumpcji zrównoważonej, chociaż nie zawsze przekłada się to na konkretne aktywności w tym zakresie. Dla większości Polaków jest ona nadal synonimem ekokonsumpcji, a zaangażowanie konsumentów w idee zrównoważonego rozwoju przekłada się na deklaracje między innymi segregacji śmieci, zmniejszenia marnotrawstwa, wyboru produktów ekologicznych, regionalnych, w ekoopakowaniach, za które są w stanie zapłacić wyższą cenę, czy na poszukiwanie informacji o produktach zrównoważonych. Niestety, skala tych aktywności i postaw obecnie jest wciąż niewielka, stąd nadrzędnym celem polityki środowiskowej, społecznej i ekonomicznej staje się systematyczna oraz intensywna edukacja konsumencka i promowanie idei zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważona konsumpcja, trendy konsumenckie, produkty żywnościowe, opakowania, informacja żywieniowa

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