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## The Offer of a Healthy Food Store as a Response to Contemporary Epidemiological Challenges

### Summary

Epidemiological studies reveal a steady increase in the proportion of people with excessive body mass. Obesity, called the epidemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, implies a whole range of serious health effects and is a risk factor for many non-communicable chronic diseases. From year to year, the public awareness of the dangers of civilisation diseases increases as well as the importance of their prevention. Nutrition is one of the modifiable elements of the lifestyle, significantly affecting health state. The growing health awareness and care for health of Poles creates demand for products that are offered by healthy food stores. The company *BIOżywczy*, following the diet trends, offers a range of products, divided into four main categories: “natural medicine”, “healthy food”, “natural cosmetics”, and “eco cleaning products”. The store uses social media to contact current and potential customers. The attractiveness of the *BIOżywczy* offer is not only due to demand conditions, but also to the use of modern forms of marketing communication and the possibility of shopping online.

**Key words:** healthy food, obesity epidemic, health awareness, food distribution.

**JEL codes:** I12, L81, M31, Q13

### Introduction

The changes taking place in Poland for a long time, referred to as transformation, have brought a number of changes, not only systemic and demographic, but also epidemiological. The place of infectious diseases was overtaken by non-communicable chronic diseases (NCDs), often referred to as civilization diseases. Unfavourable lifestyle changes have contributed to a significant increase in the incidence of NCDs risk factors. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the global mortality from non-communicable diseases is unacceptably high (39 million deaths per year) and is increasing. In 2014 in Poland, NCDs are estimated to cause 90% of all deaths (WHO 2014). The WHO recognized that the growing epidemic of chronic diseases was related to dietary and lifestyle changes. Diet plays one of the main roles in prevention of morbidity and premature mortality resulting from NCDs. Scientific evidence reinforces the view that diet has strong effects on health throughout one's life (WHO 2003).

The prevalence of overweight and obesity, a number of anti-health behaviours and still insufficient awareness of the risks and consequences resulting from them not only generate a series of challenges for public health and state health policy, but also create challenges and opportunities for the development of the healthy food market.

This article aims to identify the epidemiological situation in the field of overweight and obesity, underlining the role of health awareness in consumer behaviour. We will also present the marketing strategy of a selected grocery shop specialising in healthy food as a response to these challenges (a case study of the BIOżywczy company).

## Prevalence and consequences of overweight and obesity

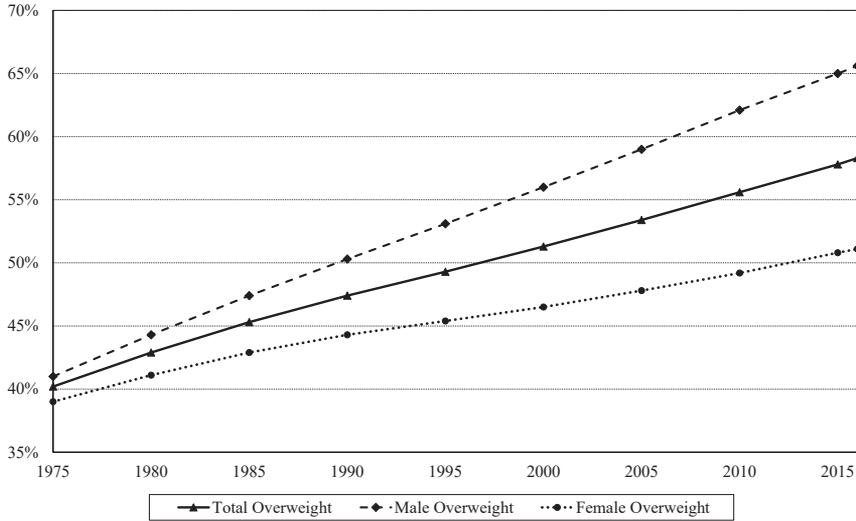
Obesity is a chronic disease caused by an excessive supply of energy contained in food in relation to the body needs (GUS 2016). This is not only an aesthetic defect but also a dangerous disease and the main cause of many other diseases (Must et al. 1999; Szymocha, Bryła, Maniecka-Bryła 2009). Excessive body mass is associated with numerous comorbidities such as: major cardiovascular diseases (coronary heart disease, stroke, congestive heart failure, sudden cardiac death), type 2 diabetes, dyslipidaemia, certain cancers, hypertension, obstructive sleep apnoea, sleep-disordered breathing and degenerative bone diseases (Hubert et al. 1983; Lavie, Milani, Ventura 2009; Poirier et al. 2006; Institute of Food and Nutrition 2018).

The problem of overweight and obesity is a common phenomenon, constantly growing in European countries. Differentiation in the level of excessive body mass results not only from territorial differences, but also disproportions in the level of education, socio-cultural, economic or environmental differences (Blundell et al. 2017; OECD 2017). One of the main differentiating factors is gender. Inequalities in health of men and women in the long run lead to higher mortality rates for men (excess male mortality), which directly translates into shorter life expectancy for men compared to women. High mortality of working age population is a serious problem. Premature deaths (before the age of 65) called “avoidable deaths”, create losses of human potential, not only in the social but also in the economic dimension (Worach-Kardas 2005).

Epidemiological studies carried out in Poland reveal a disturbing and constant increase in the percentage of people with an excessive body mass, measured by the Body Mass Index – BMI (Wołoszynek et al. 2016). Multi-centre nationwide studies of the health status of the population: WOBASZ and WOBASZ II are separated by just a decade. During this period, the frequency of risk factors has deteriorated (Drygas et al. 2015). The growing trend of overweight (BMI $\geq$ 25) and obesity (BMI $\geq$ 30) is confirmed by the Central Statistical Office. According to reports on the state of health of the Polish population, the problem of excessive body weight in 2004 concerned every third adult in Poland, while in 2009, already half of the adult population had too much weight. The negative tendency persisted and in 2014 the problem of excessive body mass concerned 62% of adult males and 46% of females (GUS 2006; 2011; 2016).

Figure 1

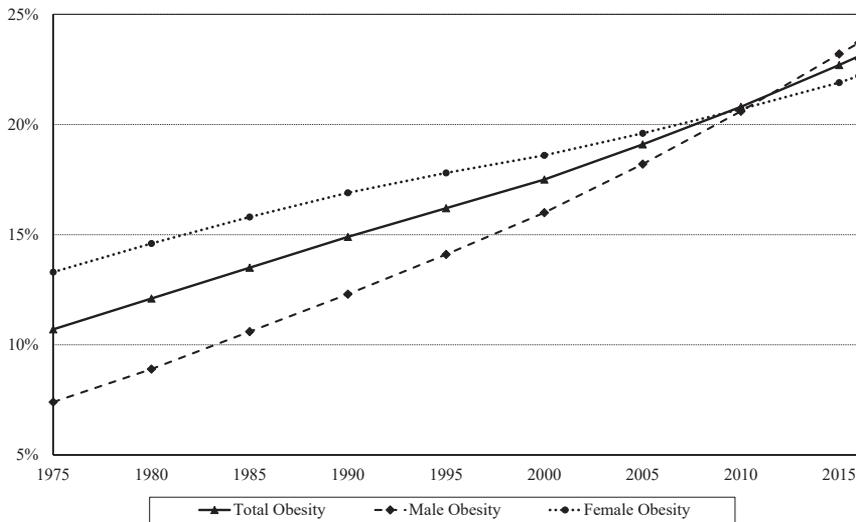
Prevalence of overweight (BMI $\geq$ 25) among adults, ages 18+, from 1975 to 2016, in Poland (standardized by age)



Source: own elaboration based on the data of the World Health Organization (WHO 2016a).

Figure 2

Prevalence of obesity (BMI $\geq$ 30) among adults, ages 18+, from 1975 to 2016, in Poland (standardized by age)



Source: own elaboration based on the data of the World Health Organization (WHO 2016b).

The literature review shows differences in statistical data concerning the scale of the problem of overweight and obesity. These differences result, among others, from different age profile of the subjects. Because of the correlation between age and obesity, the WHO eliminated the influence of age on the level of BMI by standardizing this index by age.

Standardized data showed that in the whole analysed period the percentage of overweight people was clearly higher in the male group. The difference in BMI level of men and women in 1975 was small (41% vs 39%). The passage of time significantly increased inequality between sexes and in 2016 there were as many as 65.6% of overweight men and 51.1% of overweight women (Fig. 1). A different situation was observed among obese people. This problem at the beginning of the period under study affected women to a greater extent (13.3%) than men (7.4%). However, with the passage of time, the difference between gender groups decreased, leading to a reversal of trends in 2010. At the end of study period, obesity concerned 23.7% of men and 22.2% of women (Fig. 2). This significant increase in male excessive body mass is worth noting.

Obesity is caused by a number of factors, among which food consumption plays a key role (Blundell et al. 2017). At the same time, extant research indicates that some food, nutraceuticals and beverage groups act protectively against diet-related chronic diseases (Fardet, Boirie 2014; Magrone et al. 2013). Nutrition is a fully modifiable element of lifestyle. Its importance and influence on the change of body mass is very well illustrated by the example of the United States population (Swinburn, Sacks, Ravussin 2009).

## **The importance of health awareness in consumer behaviour**

Consumers declare that health is the most important value in their lives. Health awareness of Poles is growing every year. Nutritional habits are changing, more people are looking for diet products, the number of vegetarians is increasing and the number of people convinced that healthy food has to be expensive is decreasing. The number of people who declare that they eat healthy is systematically growing. At the same time, in response to the needs of society, producers and wholesalers of healthy food occupy more and more space on the food market. A study to find out about health awareness of Poles and state of their knowledge about health care, conducted in 2015, showed that as many as 77% of Polish women and 67% of Polish men declare that they lead a healthy lifestyle. 7 out of 10 women and 4 out of 10 men choose healthy food (Nationale Nederlanden 2015).

Unfortunately, there are significant discrepancies between declared attitudes and reality. The WOBASZ research showed a poor quality of nutrition of Polish residents and a low percentage of people leading a healthy lifestyle. The level of consumption of most food products was inconsistent with recommended standards, and the content of minerals in diet was insufficient (Kwaśniewska et al. 2007; Waśkiewicz et al. 2005; Waśkiewicz 2010; Sygnowska et al. 2005). According to the Central Statistical Office data, in 2014 fruit were consumed every day by 59% adults, vegetables (excluding potatoes) - by less than 57%. The rare intake of vegetables and fruit was observed especially among men (below 47%); it was 52% among women (GUS 2016).

Despite the existing deficiencies in the nutrition habits, positive tendencies in health awareness of Poles are observed. The growing concern about one's health, increased knowledge of food and search for healthy, organic products create not only opportunities but also challenges for the food market in Poland.

The first major challenge is to raise public awareness of existing health threats. The identification of risk factors (overweight, obesity) and consequences of their occurrence (diseases, premature deaths) is indispensable. Without this, implementing measures to eliminate or reduce the risk factors of NCDs will be difficult and not entirely effective. The second, equally important challenge is to realize the importance of nutrition. Understanding that it is not only a fully modifiable risk factor for NCDs, but also that it affects lives and everyday functioning, is crucial. The type and quality of food consumed is of great importance. The change in lifestyle results from the knowledge about threats and the possibilities of their reduction and elimination, through the implementation of simple but significant changes, first of all in nutrition.

The above challenges simultaneously create opportunities for trade units in the food industry. The change in the awareness of the public is certainly not easy and it is probably a question of debate whether this task belongs to distributors of healthy food. On the other hand, greater awareness creates a greater demand for healthy products, which in turn contributes to the development of the healthy food market in Poland.

Promoting a healthy lifestyle and healthy food is important. In our opinion, it is equally important to show consequences of improper nutrition and anti-health behaviours. The use of modern forms of communication with the client, especially social media, creates possibility of reaching multiple recipients and publishing content that increases health awareness at the same time. Commercial units operating on the healthy food market, in addition to advertising their products, often emphasizing their health benefits, should also include information about the negative consequences of poor eating habits.

One of the challenges worth considering is also to personalize the offer of healthy food stores, in terms of sex and age of consumers. The larger group of men with excessive body mass and excess mortality of men confirm the need to reach especially the male part of the society.

High quality products, a high level of customer service and professional advice are elements necessary for healthy food stores to be able to compete with other stores. Complete information on available products and their ingredients is also important, enabling consumers to make a conscious choice, as well as expanding the offer, introducing new goods to satisfy already aware customers.

## **The marketing strategy of a healthy food store**

An example of a company following nutrition trends is an online healthy food store called BIOżywczy. The characteristics of the shop placed on its website (<https://biozywczy.pl/>) expose a wide selection of certified organic products, assortment of crops without the

use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers, as well as the lack of synthetic dyes, aromas, preservatives and sulphates in offered products. In addition, it emphasizes availability of gluten-free and vegan products, while defining them as “healthy food dedicated to consumers with specific dietary requirements”. Page layout is transparent, with a user-friendly interface.

### Picture 1

#### Logo of the BIOżywczy store



Source: <https://biozywczy.pl/> [access: 29.01.2018].

In the upper left corner there is the logo of the analysed company (Pic. 1). A black shopping trolley is placed in front of the store’s name with a red pumpkin in it, and inscription “your healthy basket” under it. The first part of the store name “BIO” is clearly visible, not only because of the size of the letters, but also green font, evoking associations related to ecology, environment, and healthy eating. The logo clearly indicates the store’s activity profile.

On the left side of the site, subpages of products divided into categories: “natural medicine”, “healthy food”, “natural cosmetics”, “eco cleaning products”, “new products” and “promotions” are placed. Noteworthy are functional options of browsing the offer, available after selecting a given category, enabling searching for products, not only by selecting the manufacturer, price range or availability, but also many other factors. The following options are available: “gluten-free with certificate”, “without white sugar”, “without eggs”, “gluten-free”, “BIO / EKO”, “non-dairy”. Undoubtedly, such solution is a response to the needs of the client looking for a specific assortment.

In the store’s offer, by far the most extensive category is “healthy food - organic products”, which is divided into 27 subcategories (e.g. “groats and rice”, “flours and starch”, “seeds and grains”). After selecting a product, it is presented in the centre of the screen. Its name, weight, price, photo, information on the number of available pieces, possibility of placing product in one’s basket or in a “storage room”, rating (measured with a maximum of five filled asterisks), manufacturer and product code are given. There are also options “ask for a product” and “recommend to a friend”, using an email contact, as well as links for Google+, Facebook and the Messenger application. In addition, each of the products offered by the store contains a description that varies according to the product category. It primarily informs about composition of the product along with labelling of certified ingredients from organic farming, nutritional value in 100g of product containing data not only about energy value, but also the quantitative contribution of fats, carbohydrates, proteins etc. In addition, product descriptions contain information on health properties (“it is rich in B vitamins,

lecithin and minerals: calcium, phosphorus, potassium, iron”, “is characterized by a high polyphenol content”), the health benefits of their consumption (“recommended in diseases of pancreas, liver, intestines, kidneys and during body’s cooling”, “reduces blood cholesterol, strengthens our body, adds energy”, “recommended for all types of fatigue, allergies and diseases of liver and kidneys”), methods of their use (“most often used as an addition to soups, one-pot dishes, pies, cutlets and bread pastes”, “ideal for desserts, compotes and as an independent snack”), as well as allergy information, preparation method, storage method, or country of origin of the product. In summary, the descriptions of products contain all information that consumer needs when making purchase decisions. The way of assortment presentation (marketing, not technical) positively influences the customers.

The store’s offer corresponds to the principles of healthy nutrition in terms of assortment (e.g. a large selection of products in “seeds and grains” category). In addition, within a given product category, healthier counterparts of products offered in conventional distribution channels are available in the BIOŻywczy store. For example, a Batom 80% strawberry jam contains sugars only naturally found in fruit – 22 g per 100 g of the product, while a similar product – a Stovit strawberry low-sugar jam, available in Tesco, contains up to 48 g of sugar per 100 g of the product. Vians large dried cranberries available in the BIOŻywczy store do not contain sugar, while those offered by Tesco, e.g. Bakalland dried cranberries are sweetened. An interesting example is raspberry juice. In the analysed store, we find a Polish Rose raspberry juice without added sugar (6.5 g per 100 g), while in Tesco, only sweetened raspberry syrups are available, e.g. an Excellence raspberry syrup, containing as much as 85g of sugar in 100 ml (BIOŻywczy 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; Tesco 2018a; 2018b; 2018c).

An interesting element of the retailer’s marketing communication is its blog. Unfortunately, during two years, only 8 entries (also posted on Facebook) have been published. The site also contains a horizontal bottom bar covering with catalogue of subpages such as: “help”, “delivery”, “my account”, “about the company”, “partners”. It was only at this point that “information about the company” was placed, which, according to the authors, should be more exposed, maybe as an element of the horizontal upper bar. In the “information about the company” it was emphasized that the choice of products takes into account an ethical code, promoting: attitudes and pro-ecological actions, healthy lifestyle, sensitivity to animal rights, ethics of employment and obtaining raw materials, opposition to GMOs, and fair trade. The assurance of striving to obtain a wide assortment of healthy food, high standard of service and customer satisfaction was also included.

The store uses social media to contact current and potential customers, it creates an opportunity to do shopping not only in the online store, but also through Facebook (“Buy on FaceBook’s”), which is quite exceptional still. In addition, the store uses this social network to advertise products, while emphasizing their health benefits. As of 31 January 2018, the profile of BIOŻywczy store on Facebook was liked by 950 users.

In its marketing communication with clients, the analysed company refers to nutrition and health awareness of Poles. In the information posted on Facebook, it emphasizes the impact of the offered products on health. For example, in the post of 05.02.2017, it encourages the pur-

chase of sesame seeds, arguing that “it has a positive effect not only on bones and teeth, but also on the muscular system or heart”, “lowering the level of bad cholesterol, protecting against heart disease and preventing prostate cancer” (BIOżywczy 2017).

## Conclusions

Because of the established health risks and substantial increases in prevalence, obesity has become a major global health challenge. Health consequences associated with overweight and obesity are multiple, ranging from a number of diseases that adversely affect the quality of life and ending with an increased risk of premature death. If parents do not follow the rules of healthy nutrition, children will not take care of this sphere of life. That is why proper nutritional education, deepening knowledge about a healthy lifestyle, appropriate combination of ingredients, or smart nutrition, is so important. The promotion of healthy lifestyle, preventing overweight and obesity, should actively involve many social groups, such as the government, local governments, healthcare professionals, food industry, media, and consumers. Only awareness of shared responsibility can promote healthy ways of nutrition. The development of healthy food retailers, such as the BIOżywczy store, creates an opportunity to affect consumer behaviour in the sphere of nutrition, which may lower the risk of obesity and other civilisation diseases.

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## Oferta sklepu ze zdrową żywnością jako odpowiedź na współczesne wyzwania epidemiologiczne

### Streszczenie

Badania epidemiologiczne ujawniają stały wzrost odsetka osób z nadmierną masą ciała. Otyłość, nazywana epidemią XXI wieku, implikuje wiele poważnych skutków zdrowotnych i jest czynnikiem ryzyka dla niezakaźnych chorób przewlekłych. Z roku na rok wzrasta świadomość społeczna dotycząca zagrożeń, jakie niosą ze sobą choroby cywilizacyjne, oraz jak ważna jest ich profilaktyka. Sposób odżywiania jest jednym z modyfikowalnych elementów stylu życia, wpływających istotnie na stan zdrowia. Coraz większa świadomość zdrowotna i dbałość o zdrowie Polaków kreuje popyt na produkty stanowiące ofertę sklepów ze zdrową żywnością. Firma BIOżywczy, w ślad za tendencjami w sposobie odżywiania, oferuje produkty podzielone na cztery zasadnicze kategorie: zdrowa żywność, produkty ekologiczne, naturalne kosmetyki i „eko” środki czystości. Sklep wykorzystuje media społecznościowe do kontaktu z aktualnymi i potencjalnymi klientami. Atrakcyjność oferty sklepu BIOżywczy wynika nie tylko z uwarunkowań popytowych, ale

również z zastosowania nowoczesnych form komunikacji marketingowej i możliwości dokonywania zakupów przez Internet.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zdrowa żywność, epidemia otyłości, świadomość prozdrowotna, dystrybucja żywności.

**Kody JEL:** M31, I12, Q13, L81

## Предложение магазина с продуктами здорового питания как ответ на современные эпидемиологические вызовы

### Резюме

Эпидемиологические обследования выявляют постоянный рост доли лиц с избыточным весом. Ожирение, называемое эпидемией XXI века, имплицитно многие серьезные последствия для здоровья и представляет собой фактор риска для неинфекционных хронических заболеваний. Из года в год повышается общественное сознание угроз, какие несут с собой цивилизационные болезни, а также насколько важна их профилактика. Способ питания – один из видоизменяемых элементов образа жизни, существенно влияющих на состояние здоровья. Все большее осознание значения хорошего состояния здоровья и забота о своем здоровье у поляков формирует спрос на продукты, имеющиеся в предложении магазинов со здоровой пищей. Фирма *BIOŻywca*, вслед за тенденциями в способе питания, предлагает продукты, распределенные по четырем основным категориям: здоровая пища, экологические продукты, естественная косметика и экосредства ухода за чистотой. Магазин использует социальные медиа для контакта с уже имеющимися и потенциальными клиентами. Привлекательность предложения магазина *BIOŻywca* вытекает не только из обусловленностей на стороне спроса, но и из применения современных форм маркетинговой коммуникации и возможности осуществлять покупки посредством интернета.

**Ключевые слова:** здоровая пища, эпидемия ожирения, осознание здорового питания, распределение продуктов питания.

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