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A STUDY ON THE ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS OF SUPERMARKET CLIENTS ON THE BASIS OF A QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

1. Introduction

Social awareness is an important element of life in society, which in Poland is undergoing changes due to the economic transformation. Social awareness can be defined as a "system or set of ideas, values, bases, views, convictions and opinions which are common to a whole social group (national, class, religious, professional etc., defining the way of thinking of that group, institutionalised and preserved in the historically shaped forms of social life" [O Nowoczesne Kształty..., 1989, 47].

Ecological awareness plays an important role in social awareness. This idea may be defined in two ways. "In its wider meaning it means a system of ideas, values and opinions regarding the natural environment as the place where humans (society) live and develop, which is common to a given group at a given point in time. In its narrower, more practical meaning, ecological awareness is the state of knowledge, views and concepts of people regarding the role of the environment in human life, its anthropogenic burden, level of exploitation, threats and protection, including the state of knowledge regarding means and instruments for protecting the environment and controlling its exploitation [Górka et al., 1995, 32]."

The ecological awareness of society should be distinguished from scientific ecological awareness. The former is formed under the influence of knowledge and proecological education. Individual experience also plays

an important role, popular opinion, stereotypes, convictions and "fashionable views" play a significantly lesser role. Scientific ecological awareness normally manifests itself in the form of scientific research.

Comprehensive ecological awareness, however, is formed in the course of everyday life, in social and business activities, education etc. It is difficult to exaggerate the role played by the mass media, especially television which has recently had a dominant position. Poskrobko distinguishes three stages in the formation of ecological awareness [Górka et al., 1995, 33–41]:

- a) the stage of popular ecological awareness;
- b) the stage of the formation of elements of an ideological ecological awareness;
- c) the stage of comprehensive, scientific ecological awareness, understood as a relatively coherent system.

This research was aimed at investigating a given form of ecological awareness. The ecological awareness of consumers made evident in purchasing decisions is an important factor, since awareness that the state of the natural environment depends on the activities of each individual is clearly growing [see Sołdra-Gwizdz, 2002, 35–53]. The choice of individuals in this field are particularly broad. For the purposes of this article we will adopt the approach taken by Parysek and Dutkowski [1994] that "one may assess the level of social awareness, in which the conditions and opportunities for the realisation of human values are recognized, by ecological awareness."

2. The research

The research was carried out on clients of large supermarkets. This is a specific group of consumers and is not representative of the population as a whole. Such clients are often significantly influenced by advertising and are uncritical in relation to it. Often shopping is a reaction to stress and a way of raising self-esteem.

The authors decided to carry out questionnaire-based research, which was accordingly conducted among customers of the "Tesco" supermarkets in Opole and Wrocław and at "Real" in Opole and "Geant" in Wrocław. The population covered by the research amounted to 300 respondents in both cities. The respondents were all adult. The students carrying out the polling were supervised by the authors and were expected to select their respondents, in order to obtain an appropriate mix of all age groups, as well as to maintain a proper gender ratio.

The research was conducted on Saturdays, between 9 and 12 o'clock, in order to obtain a high index of participation for people from outside the city.

The questionnaire is split into three sections. The first relates to the behaviour of respondents as consumers, the second food produced using ecological means and the two final questions were aimed at investigating the respondents attitude to genetically modified food products.

The first question: Do you read the information provided on labels of food products? (Table 1). There is a clear difference between women and men in this respect in both cities, with women being more often interested in reading product labels than men.

The questionnaire was constructed in such a way that it was impossible to give the answer "I do not know" Thus, just the percentage of positive answers are given in the tables. All the other answers were negative.

Table 1. Reading information on labels (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
1	81	86	60	62	72	75

Source: Authors' own research.

These answers highlight two phenomena. The first is the clear difference between the behaviour of men and women. Marketing research shows that women attach a greater importance to shopping than men. The aesthetics of a label has more value to them.

The second phenomenon, which may have appeared at varying levels of strength during the questionnaire, was "political correctness". Respondents may have given answers, which they thought the questioner would prefer to hear. Furthermore, there is a difference between reading and understanding.

The large percentage of positive answers is in complete contrast to the results of research carried out by AC Nielsen. This research found that 17% of Polish people do not understand information regarding a grocery product given on the label. This is one of the worst results in Europe, where the average is 6%. 47% of Polish consumers only partially understand this information [Co Trzeci Klient..., 2005].

Second question: Are you interested in knowing the chemical composition of the food product? (Table 2).

The answers show the same tendencies as the answers to the first question. As before, women were more likely to give a positive answer. There

Table 2. Interest in chemical composition of the food product (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
2	73	81	46	55	61	69

Source: Authors' own research.

is also a slightly larger number of people from Opole than from Wrocław who gave a positive answer to this question. Apart from the differentiation between men and women in these two questions, the percentage of positive answers was high and practically uniform. This is also the case for the third question: Have you ever heard of additives to food products, which are marked with the E symbol, e.g. E-250? (Table 3).

Table 3. Knowledge of the E symbol (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
3	83	87	79	79	82	83

Source: Authors' own research.

The **fourth question** was answered only by those who offered a positive answer to question 3 (Table 4): In your opinion, do they have any influence on the functioning of the human organism? A high percentage in each examined group answered positively.

Table 4. Perception of influence of food additives with the E symbol (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
4	95	95	93	94	94	95

Source: Authors' own research.

Question five: Do such substances have a positive effect on the human organism? (Table 5). The vast majority of the respondents believed that these additives have a negative impact on the human organism. Women from Wrocław gave the most negative assessment of the impact of these substances.

There was a hidden trap in this question. Not all chemical substances labeled with an E symbol are harmful, e.g. Vitamin C. After obtaining an

Table 5. Perception of positive influence of food additives with the E symbol (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
5	1	4	7	7	4	5

Source: Authors' own research.

answer the questioner asked for a description of the effects of additives. The vast majority stated that they were harmful substances, even toxic. Such opinions were expressed even by people who bought drinks with a large number of conservants or chemical substitutes for fruit juice.

Question 6: Have you ever bought a food article (e.g. a packet of chips) for the first time after having seen it advertised? (Table 6). This is a case in which the phenomenon of political correctness may have appeared. People in Poland may be ashamed to admit to being affected by advertising. It means admitting to resignation from being a sovereign decision maker.

Table 6. Buying a food article for the first time due to advertising (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
6	17	16	17	15	17	15

Source: Authors' own research.

At the same time the effectiveness of "out of home" advertising carried out in supermarkets is clearly visible. The task of such advertising is to back up advertising in the media. Out of home advertising has a lot of power, because it acts at the point of sale at the moment when a client is making a consumer decision. The lifestyle of Polish people is another element strengthening this type of advertising. Two thirds of society go shopping on Sunday from time to time. The average time spent in a supermarket is one hour. Shopping is carried out at a slow pace. Monitoring research indicates that 75% of decisions to buy are made in the supermarket itself [Kurek-Stec, 2004].

Question 7 and 8 are the questions related to health food. **Question 7:** Do you know of any shop selling so-called health (ecological) food in your neighborhood? (Table 7). There greatest number of positive answers to this question came from women in Opole.

Table 7. Knowledge of health-food shops in the neighbourhood (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
7	36	41	30	27	34	34

Source: Authors' own research.

Supermarket clients are not particularly interested in buying "ecological food". Sales of such food amounts to only 3% of total market sales of grocery goods [Maurer, 2005]. The fact that only one third of the respondents knew the location of a health food shop, may suggest that no significant changes should be expected in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, market research shows that people are prepared to pay up to 30% more for health food than for conventional food.

Question 8: Should the state financially support the production of health food? (Table 8). There is a significantly greater number of positive answers from women. The answers to this question suggest that there is general support for financial support of the health food sector. Further research will include a question on the individual willingness of a respondent to pay the costs of supporting ecological farming.

The two final questions were related to genetically modified food. Since there is intense controversy between the EU and the USA as to whether such food has an effect on the human organism [Franzone, 2003], it would be interesting to find out what were the opinions of the residents of a new member state of the EU.

Question 9: Should genetically modified food be specially marked? (Table 9). There is a very high percentage of positive answers in each of the groups examined. There is a low level of knowledge about genetically modified food products (GMO) [Kossobudzki, 2003]. The answers suggest a clear fear regarding the effects of such products on health. The high level of positive answers may also suggest that people wish to obtain any appropriate information on food products on sale.

Question 10: Would you buy genetically modified food? (Table 10). The answers suggest that a significant proportion of the respondents do

Table 8. Opinion on state support for health food (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
8	93	95	89	89	91	92

Source: Authors' own research

Table 9. Marking of GMO (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
9	96	98	96	94	96	96

Source: Authors' own research.

not fear genetically modified food; this refers to men in particular. This result shows a lack of consistency in the preferences of some of the respondents in the field GMO. This is difficult to explain without further research.

Table 10. Willingness to buy GMO (% of positive answers)

Question	Women		Men		Total	
	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole	Wrocław	Opole
10	26	23	33	30	28	26

Source: Authors' own research.

3. Conclusions

In summary, it may be stated that the respondents "declared ecological answers". The differences between clients in Opole and Wrocław were very small. There were, however, systematic differences between the answers given by men and women, women showing more ecological awareness and interest in healthy food.

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