

ORGANIC FOOD MARKET AND GROWING NEEDS AND AWARENESS OF THE CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER

Marzena KACPRZAK¹, Izabela WIELEWSKA^{2*}

¹ Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Poland; marzena_kacprzak@sggw.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-0680-8241

² UTP University of Science and Technology in Bydgoszcz; wielewska@utp.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-1721-6890

* Correspondence author

Abstract: The aim of the study is to determine the factors that influence the organic food consumers' shopping decisions. In 2019, research in this area was conducted among 113 organic food consumers, using the diagnostic survey method with the application of the poll technique and a questionnaire form as a research tool. The research has revealed that organic products have become a target for more and more consumers, who, in their choices, are guided by both rational and emotional arguments. The development of pro-ecological attitudes clearly indicates certain changes in the way of life, thinking and nutrition of contemporary consumers. Universal access to information, the level of awareness and education of people means that people want to know what they eat and know the sources of their food. Therefore, the organic food sector is currently one of the most dynamically developing areas of the Polish economy.

Keywords: organic food, consumer, economy, agriculture.

1. Introduction

The attitude of consumers towards food has changed significantly in recent years. The principle held for years – that food is healthy in itself because it provides the nutrients needed for the proper functioning of the human body – has not been reflected anymore in the process of food production, because food today contains a number of substances hazardous to health, preservatives, dyes, fertilizers and additives (Waszkiewicz-Robak, 2002). As a result, society began to show a demand for a healthy lifestyle and nutrition. They started to pay attention to where the consumed products came from. According to E. Fromm, consumption today has become a value whereby the whole world in its wealth is transformed into the subject of consumption. It is true that modern consumer culture forces man to constantly search for products that are not only able to meet the requirements of the consumer, but are healthy and

tasty as well. The subject of consumer choices on the organic food market includes psychological, economic and social elements, which requires not only an in-depth analysis, but also a search for evidence of certain behaviours and beliefs in a society.

Today, ecology is both a lifestyle and an industrial sector. The subject raises a lot of emotions, both very positive and negative ones. The spectrum of the problem of ecology is now very broad; it concerns nutrition, activities of various groups and organizations, as well as saving water and electricity, or the ozone hole.

The aim of the paper is to determine the factors that influence the organic food consumers' shopping decisions.

2. Organic farming and eco food

Organic farming is, generally speaking, a management method based on sustainable plant and animal production using natural methods as well as both mineral and biological agents that are chemically or technologically unprocessed. It is designed to protect natural resources, promotes maintenance of permanent soil fertility and animal health as well as ensures high quality of agricultural products (Sołtysiak, 1994).

Organic farming combines best environment-friendly practices, high biodiversity, protection of natural resources and high animal husbandry standards, while offering consumers products that are manufactured using natural methods and natural means (Bodin, and Ebbersten, 1999). The main goals of organic farming are:

- production of food with high health and nutritional values,
- using natural resources in a way that protects biological mechanisms and regulates the functioning of natural systems,
- regulating and maintaining biological cycles inside the farm,
- maintaining soil fertility,
- ensuring proper living conditions for farm animals,
- minimising environmental degradation,
- using renewable natural resources in agricultural production,
- caring to keep high biodiversity on the farm and its close surroundings (genetic wealth) (Tyburski, and Żakowska-Biermans, 2007).

Food from organic farms, also referred to as eco-food, means products manufactured in accordance with the principles described in Council Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 of 24 June 1991 on organic production of agricultural products and indications referring thereto on agricultural products and foodstuffs.

In recent years, organic food has become an alternative to the widely available and common conventional products. Organic food is defined as foodstuff with the lowest possible level of contamination, produced on farms using ecological methods of plant cultivation and animal husbandry (Mróz, 2013). These products are frequently referred to as health food or natural products. This is often misleading because the term *organic food* only describes products certified under certain legal provisions. All other terms have been coined for the purposes of sales and drawing the consumers' attention and interest, but they do not necessarily meet specific requirements for their production.

In an international perspective, the subject of food and organic farming is touched upon in the Codex Alimentarius of FAO and WHO, which identifies organic farming with a complementary production management system that promotes the idea of agricultural ecosystem and biodiversity. The production of organic food takes place by of enriching the soil with nutrients through recirculation of elements of plant and animal origin, which causes a decrease in the use of non-renewable sources (Łukasiński, 2014).

According to the records of the Framework Action Plan for Food and Organic Farming in Poland for years 2014-2020, organic agriculture is a self-sufficient, sustainable, economically safe farming system characterised by sustainable plant and animal production within the farm. (Framework Plan for Action on Organic Food and Agriculture in Poland 2014-2020, 2014).

In the process of organic food production, all stages and processes related to its manufacture are subject to continuous assessment and control. Every step is important, from the methods of increasing soil quality, through the selection of the plant cultivation method, the choice of farm animals and methods of their rearing, the means used for food processing, the labelling of products, to the proper transportation to places of sale or distribution (Łukasiński, 2014).

The most frequently cited advantages of organic food include:

- high quality, the so-called food safety and specific nutritional values, such as proteins, healthy fats, vitamins and carbohydrates,
- flavour, smell, as well as the appearance of products: packaging and special labelling,
- little or no chemicals, antibiotics, taste enhancers, preservatives, or transgenic organisms (GMO) (Niklewicz, 2008).

Currently, over 10% of consumers turn to organic food in Poland. Many consumers also regularly buy eco-food aside from traditional foods. Increasingly, in addition to specialised stores or supermarkets, buyers purchase products directly from farmers.

The currently operating ecological stores offer an average of 300 to 500 products, which number is gradually increasing from year to year (Łuczka-Bakuła, 2007). Also, there is an increase in the number of shelves and aisles with healthy products in popular supermarkets or delicatessens, and now even in small local corner shops, which is due to the ever-growing interest in healthy products. The growth of this market is also enhanced by the development of very fashionable eco-bazaars, where not only farmers or manufacturers, but also producers who offer local and traditional products display their products. In addition, besides previously

mentioned products, the domestic organic market is also abundant in dried fruits, cereals, oils and legumes (Organic product..., 2019).

According to data from 2016, the organic food market is worth over PLN 700 million, and this amount is growing every year because the sector still remains unsaturated and the demand for organic products is constantly on the rise. Although the sale of organic goods in Poland is only 0.3% of the general grocery market, its growth is estimated at nearly 20% per year (as of 2019, the organic food market in Poland is worth PLN 600-650 million,). This is even more plausible given the growing interest in organic products and healthy lifestyles of consumers who are more and more frequently choosing healthier substitutes of conventional goods. In the coming years, an important issue will be to increase the amount of processing plants, which is necessary with the relatively high rise in the number of farmers and producers of healthy food, of which there are currently more than 20 thousand. Currently, businesses operating on the organic food market include approximately 26,500 farms with an estimated area of 675,000 ha. The largest number of fields and farms with organic certification are located in the following voivodeships of Poland: Podlasie, Warmian-Masurian (warmińsko-mazurskie), and West Pomeranian (zachodniopomorskie) (Organic Food Market Is Growing, 2019).

3. Ecology and consumption

Sustainable development is a model of contemporary socio-economic development that sets the direction of civilization progress and guarantees a high quality of life for the population through proper protection of natural capital as well as that created by man (Wielewska, 2018). The idea of sustainable development, which is so popular today, has a huge impact on changes taking place in global markets and is visible in almost all spheres of human life.

Based on the observation or the analysis of available literature, it may be assumed that more and more attention is paid to what is happening in one's immediate environment. Pro-ecological behaviours bring positive effects not only for the natural environment itself by limiting the negative practices of its exploitation. They also have a positive impact on the way people think about what surrounds them. Consumers today more and more often decide to purchase products from honest manufacturers; they are interested in the protection of endangered species of plants and animals; they choose virgin forests instead of exotic journeys. All this is the result of growing awareness and interest in what surrounds the consumer. The practice of pro-ecological behaviour, sometimes only in certain aspects of everyday life, helps to stop the progressing degradation of the environment. Ecology is now becoming a challenge, which is being taken by an increasing number of people who consciously decide to live in harmony with the natural environment.

A high degree of environmental awareness has an impact on consumers' behaviour and shopping decisions. People who are committed and act in favour of environmental protection often adjust their habits developed so far and reach for environmentally friendly solutions. This state of affairs directly affects producers by forcing the introduction of changes and production methods that would be more environmentally friendly (Organic Food Market Is Growing, 2019).

The greening of consumption, as a relatively new phenomenon, has quickly gained new supporters, which is influenced by currently popular ecological movements and initiatives, mainly within the societies of highly developed countries, which thus respond to the progressing degradation of the natural environment (Sobczyk, G., 2008). The latest research on consumers' behaviours indicate that people are increasingly guided by ethical and environmental reasons when selecting goods and services. Aesthetic values are also significant: they undoubtedly characterise products that originate e.g. from ecological crops or farms. Ethical consumption is nothing more than buying goods that have been manufactured with respect for human rights and the natural environment. Nowadays, much is said about *positive buying*, which can be described by choosing products from suppliers who, in their activities, are driven by the good of their customers, society and nature. In addition to this trend, there is the so-called *moral boycott*, i.e. foregoing products of companies that engage in unethical behaviour or practices and represent such an attitude (Dąbrowska, and Janoś-Kresło, 2012).

Pro-ecological decisions and consumers' behaviours are also largely determined by economic or marketing considerations. The constantly growing level of ecological awareness and the greening of consumption manifests itself primarily in (Mańkowska-Wróbel, 2014):

- the level of knowledge about environmental protection and the social responsibility related to it,
- measures to rationalise consumers' behaviours: a reduction in buying goods that have been produced using non-renewable resources; refraining from impulsive purchases, an analysis of one's own needs and expenses,
- boycotting products and producers that go against certain ethical standards, e.g. harming nature, using animals, not complying with labour law or taking actions that are deemed socially harmful,
- popularising products using socially engaged marketing.

Ecological trends observed in consumerism are also stimulated by changes in the perception of consumption in the general system of human values. However, this does not change the fact that many behaviours of organic products' buyers are caused by a far-reaching fashion for the 'eco' style, which is why there is still a lot to be done in this field. It is necessary to continue activities that support sustainable production and consumption by supporting rational methods of resource management, promotion of a sustainable lifestyle, as well as proper ecological education (Burger, 2005).

4. Polish consumer of organic food

It is estimated that nearly 70% of the population between 15 and 65 years of age express interest in or reach for certified products. When choosing ecological goods, Polish consumers are most often motivated by caring for health and the lack of antibiotics or genetic modifications. Other important factors include: flavour, the increased amount of nutrients, care for the environment and opposition to its degradation (Olech, and Kuboń, 2015). Some consumers are also driven by social issues, such as support for domestic production or the development of the Polish countryside. Besides the incentives for purchasing eco products, there are also some shopping barriers. The largest obstacle in this industry are prices which are often up to 50% higher than those of the conventional goods.

Not only the decisions regarding the purchase of organic products, but also the people's attitude towards such articles is determined by certain circumstances, which include wealth, education and personal background, the place of residence as well as ecological and environmental awareness (Mirowski, 1999).

Environmental protection and health-promoting values are the main expectations in buyers of organic food. The prospects for the development and future of this market sector depend on the level of education as well as the level of consumers' awareness (Komorowska, 2009).

It is not uncommon today to observe the actions motivated by social or economic reasons, which can be manifested in ordinary, everyday activities, such as favouring products in biodegradable packaging, sorting rubbish or reducing chemical consumption of detergents that are harmful to the environment. Because this type of buyer is a relatively new phenomenon and is still considered to be a niche, attention ought to be paid to the level of pro-social and pro-ecological behaviours in contemporary consumers.

5. Research methodology

Research was carried out in 2019, using the diagnostic survey method with the application of the poll technique and a questionnaire form, prepared by the author, as a research tool. The questionnaire was addressed to organic food consumers.

The study involved 113 people, including 70 women (61.9%) and 43 men (38.1%) of different ages, with different social statuses and education levels. The most numerous group were people in the 30-40 age range (36.3% of respondents). Another group, constituting 25.7%, were respondents aged 20-30. Slightly less – 23.9% of respondents – were aged 40-50. The least numerous groups of respondents were people aged 50-60 (9.7% of respondents) and over 60 years of age (4.4% of respondents).

Respondents included people with different social statuses. According to 41.6% of respondents, their monthly income was around PLN 2-3 thousand, and 33.6% of respondents declared earnings at the level of PLN 3-4 thousand per month. In turn, 13.3% of respondents admitted that their monthly income ranged between PLN 4 and 5 thousand. Only 8% of respondents earned over PLN 5,000. The smallest group – 3.5% – were respondents whose monthly income did not exceed PLN 2,000.

Among respondents, most people had secondary (43.4%) and vocational (29.2%) education. The least numerous group were respondents with post-secondary education (7.1%). 20.4% of respondents had college education, including 11.5% of respondents declaring undergraduate education.

The large diversity of the study group was needed due to the diversity of needs, as well as people's views about organic food and its increasingly stronger position on the Polish market. The data obtained in the study were subjected to a statistical analysis, and the results were discussed and presented in charts.

6. Organic food – research results

Organic food market in Poland has been described as a developing sector for several years and this trend is becoming more and more visible every year. The increase in the number of organic farms, processing plants and specialist stores foreshadows further development of this sector of the economy, which is determined by the growing demand for food and products of organic origin.

The first question in the survey concerned the frequency with which respondents shop for groceries. Most – as many as 48 people (42.5%) – answered that they do their grocery shopping several times a week, 41 respondents (36.3%) do grocery shopping every day, and the remaining 21.2% of respondents (24 people) do this type of shopping once a week (Figure 1).

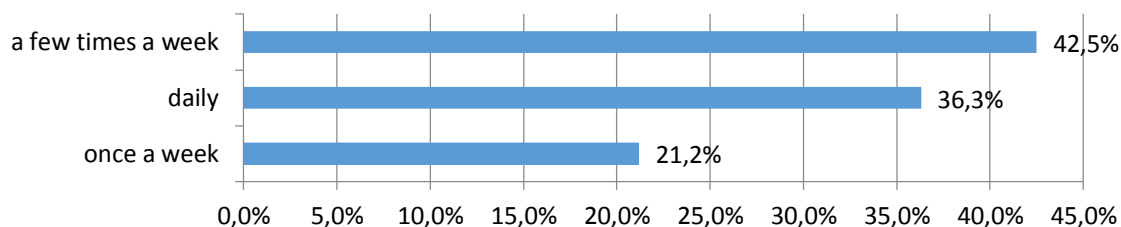


Figure 1. Frequency of grocery shopping among respondents. Source: own study.

The modern market offers an extremely wide range of products, including organic products. The survey respondents were asked what they understand by the 'organic product'.

Out of the 113 surveyed individuals, most of respondents (nearly 49.6%) identify the organic product with healthy food. 30.1% of respondents consider products from ecological

farms to be organic. In turn, 12.4% believe that these are goods with much higher prices. Only 8% of respondents believe that organic products are those that bear information about their eco- or bio-origin (Figure 2).

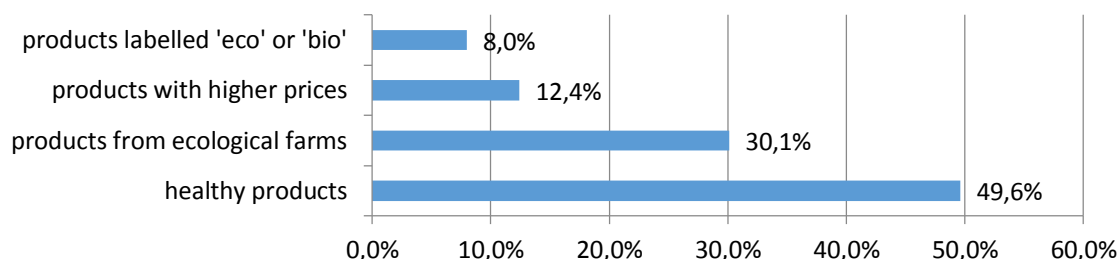


Figure 2. Definition of the organic product in the opinion of respondents. Source: own study.

Respondents were also asked whether they reached for organic products. As many as 77% of respondents admitted buying healthy food, which is certainly influenced by the increasing availability of organic products and their presence in almost every supermarket. The remaining 23% of respondents do not reach for organic food when shopping.

Consumers are increasingly paying attention to the product being not only tasty or visually attractive, but above all safe for health. Therefore, respondents were asked about the characteristics of organic products (Figure 3).

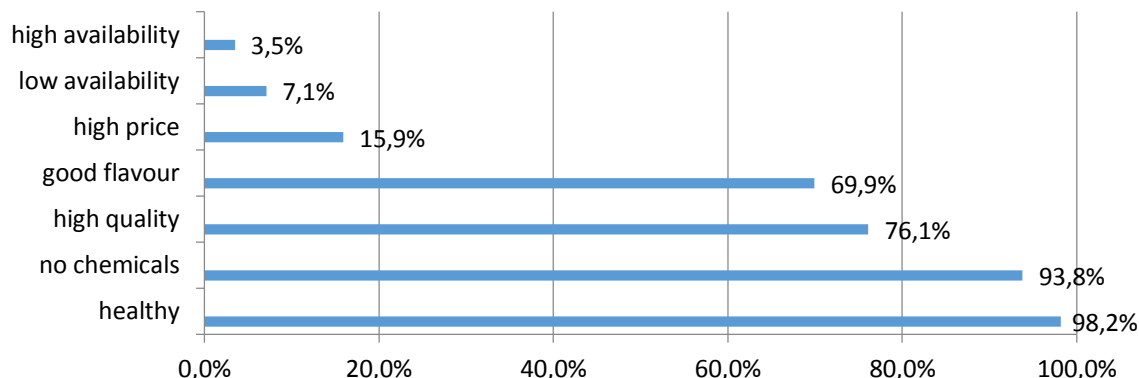


Figure 3. Features characterising ecological products in respondents' opinions. Source: own study.

According to respondents, these have to be primarily healthy products (98%), with no chemical additives (93.8%), of high quality (76.1%) and good taste (69.9%) (Figure 3).

The wide assortment of products available on the market makes it possible to buy not only basic products, but also more or less processed goods. According to the majority of respondents, the most popular organic products are vegetables and fruits (87.6%), and eggs (69.0%). Next came dairy products, as well as preserves and juices. The least frequently bought products were meat and bread, which may be caused, for example, by high availability of these products among conventional foods and the relatively large price difference between the organic and conventional products. The percentage share is presented in Figure 4.

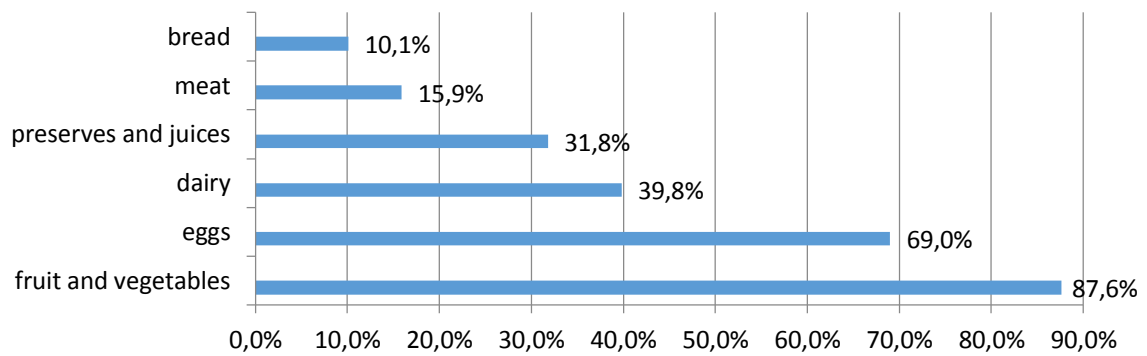


Figure 4. Most frequently selected organic products in the opinion of respondents. Source: own study.

The next question in the survey questionnaire concerned places where respondents usually bought organic food. Respondents admitted that they most often bought organic products at markets and bazaars, where they believed most fruit and vegetables (but also fresh eggs or honey) came from organic farming. As many as 45.1% of respondents gave such an answer. Another 23.0% of respondents admitted that they bought their organic products directly from farmers and producers. Only 12.4% of respondents shop in specialised stores, and slightly less – 11.5% – visit hypermarkets for this purpose. The fewest number of respondents – only 8% of the surveyed group – admit that they obtain ecological products online, which certainly has a chance to gain greater popularity over time, as most items can nowadays be purchased online, practically without having to leave home. Figure 5 presents the percentage share of individual responses.

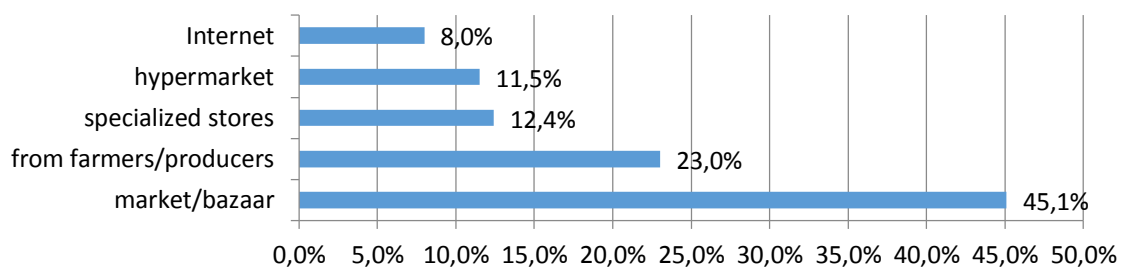


Figure 5. Places for buying organic food. Source: own study.

When asked about their opinion on organic products, respondents most often (54.8%) indicated that organic food is first and foremost safe for health due to its nutritional value and the lack of chemicals that are contained in conventional products. The second most frequent answer was that this food is environmentally friendly. This was the opinion of 23% of respondents. According to 15.9% of respondents, organic food remains more expensive than other products available on the market. Only 6.2% of respondents indicated its visual qualities (Figure 6).

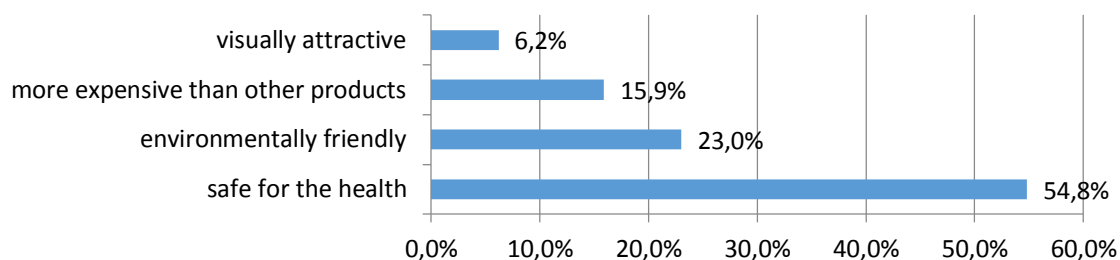


Figure 6. Opinions of respondents regarding organic products. Source: own study.

When speaking about the taste, the impact of organic products on health or their visual attractiveness, it must be remembered that there exist some barriers in buying organic food. Respondents, when asked whether they felt that there were barriers in buying products of organic origin, mostly answered yes. As many as 75.2% of the surveyed group believed that there were such barriers. However, 24.8% of respondents did not seem to notice them and they answered no.

When asked about the main carriers of ecological information, respondents most often indicated television and radio – this answer was given by as many as 40.7% of respondents, which seems to be a natural consequence of the wide access to these sources. Slightly less – 34.5% of respondents based their knowledge on this subject mainly on information obtained from their family or friends. Another 23.9% of respondents relied on information obtained online. Only one person replied that books were a source of knowledge about organic products. The received answers, mainly those regarding television, radio or the Internet, proved the importance of information, especially the hidden one, e.g. in advertising.

Consumers are more eager to reach for products the purchase of which may bring some measurable benefits, in this case, e.g. improvement in fitness, health or an increase in vitality. The percentage share of individual information sources is presented in Figure 7.

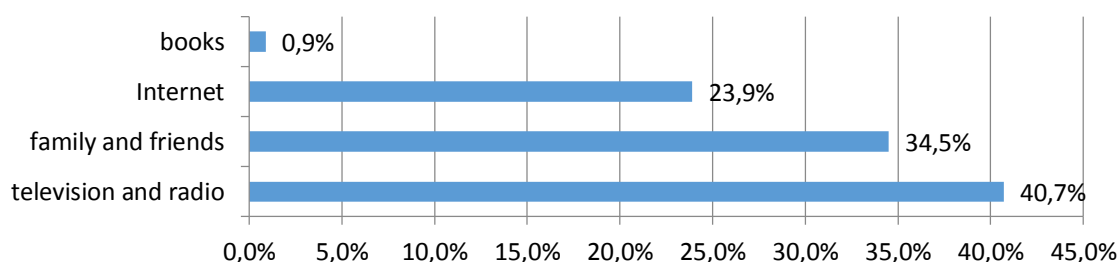


Figure 7. Sources of information on organic products. Source: own study.

Respondents were also asked about other factors that determine the interest in organic food. According to respondents, the quality (31.0%), the improvement of health (27.4%) and care for the environment (23.9%) are those values that cause organic food to be gaining more and more supporters every year, among people in different ages. Another answer was fashion (15%), which can be seen especially among young people who want to live in accordance with the prevailing trends for healthy eating. Only three people (2.7%) from the surveyed group indicated the price as a factor determining the interest and demand for organic products. Respondents' answers are presented in Figure 8.

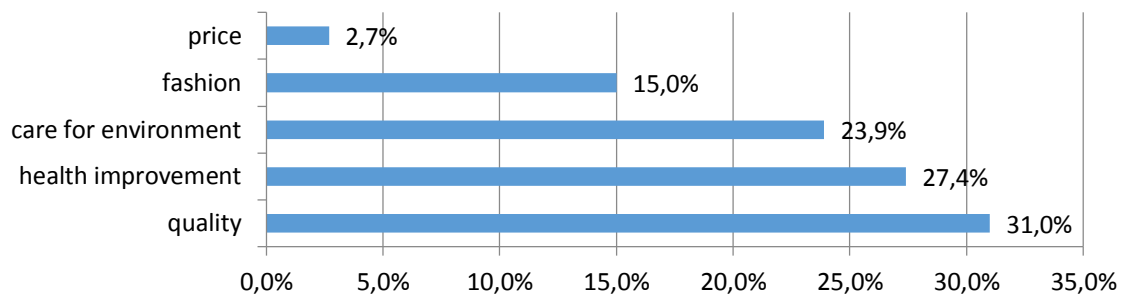


Figure 8. Factors that determine the increase in interest in organic food. Source: own study.

The last question concerned the percentage share of organic food in respondents' grocery shopping. The largest group (46%) was represented by people in whom organic products accounted for 30-60% of the total number of food purchases. Another answer was 0-30%, 41.6% of respondents declared this share of ecological purchases. Only 9.7% of respondents admitted that organic products accounted for as much as 60-90% of the total number of grocery purchases. 2.7% of respondents indicated that organic food accounted for over 90% of their purchases.

7. Conclusions

The increase in consumer awareness, caused by the growing threat of civilization diseases, changes in the standards of living, and the interest in the state of the environment means that people are increasingly driven by health issues in their choices. The universal and wide access to information means that consumers pay more and more attention to what they eat. At the same time, the consumers seem to increasingly understand the existing price-quality ratio. Although the cost of organic products in most cases exceeds the prices of conventional food, the organic food market is undoubtedly one of the most dynamically developing sectors of the economy. Not only is eco food becoming fashionable, but also many other areas related to it. An example may be the development of eco- or agricultural tourism observed over recent years, which offers contact with nature and enjoying the charms of the village (Gralak, and Kacprzak, 2018).

The research conducted has shown that more and more consumers are reaching for organic products. Currently, almost every conventional product has its ecological counterpart. Although the biggest barrier to the development of organic food is the higher price, more and more people are choosing to buy organic products. Polish consumers are driven by both rational and emotional arguments in their choices. The first group includes health, family, safety and environmental protection. The second category is fashion or the search for better taste and aesthetic values. Conscious consumers do not only require good taste, but, above all, no added preservatives, antibiotics or pesticides. The development of pro-ecological attitudes clearly indicates changes in the way of life, thinking and nutrition of contemporary consumers.

Universal access to information, the level of awareness and education of people means that consumers want to know what they eat and be familiar with the sources of purchased food.

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