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CONSUMER BEHAVIOURS IN THE ORGANIC FOOD MARKET

Key words: organic food market, consumption of organic food motives, barriers, frequency of purchase, places of purchase

ABSTRACT. The paper's objective is to define the consumption patterns in the organic food market in Poland. Therefore, in 2019, a questionnaire survey among 204 organic food consumers was carried out. The survey covered reasons for organic food purchases, places of purchase, purchase frequency, barriers to this purchase, and willingness to pay. The research results show that the investigated consumers were mostly young women (aged up to 40 years) with monthly incomes between 2,001 and 4,000 PLN per person in a household. On average, the surveyed had been present in the organic food market for about 4 years, and their expenditures on food mainly constituted about 20% of the total food expenditures. From the variety of reasons for buying organic food, the ones of egoistic character dominated, i.e., high quality of products, lower content of agricultural chemicals, belief in a higher content of nutrients, followed by altruistic motives, i.e., a positive impact on the environment or ethical production motives. The respondents most often and more regularly bought products with a shorter shelf life, i.e., organic vegetables and fruits, eggs, bread, and cereal products, and less frequently, more durable products. Fish, meat products, and meat were relatively rarely purchased. Among the places where the organic food was purchased, specialized stores and outlets of commercial networks prevailed. The most critical barrier for the respondents is still the high price of organic products.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, more and more consumers have become increasingly interested in products originating from organic agriculture. The feature of this production system is a concern for the state of the environment, animal welfare, and social justice but also delivering high-quality food without residues of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, medicines, genetically modified organisms, and preservatives, which has a key meaning for organic food consumers [FAO 2016, IFOAM 2016].

The changes in perception of organic food first occurred in Western Europe, followed by North America and Japan [Paul, Rana 2012]. According to Sylwia Żakowska-Biemans [2011], transformations in consumption patterns took place in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. The stimulators for the changes in the purchasing decisions are greater differentiation of the offered products, higher incomes, and more efficient distribution.

The previous research proved that ensuring the high quality and safety of food had been becoming more and more significant for consumers [Context Marketing 2009, Nasir, Karakaya 2014]. Therefore, organic food consumption is determined mainly by the willingness to consume healthy, natural, and tasty food [Chekima et al. 2017, Denver, Christensen 2015, Janssen 2018], which is produced using methods supporting natural environment protection [Gottschalk, Leistner 2013, Massey et al. 2018]. Organic food consumption positively influences well-being and level of life satisfaction [Apaolaza et al. 2018, Seconda et al. 2017]. Compared to conventional food, organic food is considered healthier, tastier, but more expensive [Bryła 2016, Hwang 2016]. Therefore such barriers as high prices, lower awareness of the part of the society, level of confidence in producers and inspection system as well as low availability, may hamper its consumption growth [Bozga 2015, Buder et al. 2014, Yadav, Pathak 2016, Martins et al. 2020].

Organic food consumers are frequently perceived as engaged and sensitive to moral and health problems. Concern about the natural environment and health distinguishes this group from other food consumers [Wojciechowska-Solis, Soroka 2017, Łuczka 2019, Śmiglak-Krajewska, Wojciechowska-Solis 2021]. Despite the evident growth of organic food production worldwide, so-called primary organic food consumers constitute a limited share of the population. The earlier-mentioned barriers and factors, motivation, and awareness translate into organic food consumption level. In the EU, the highest consumption is observed in countries with relatively the longest organic farming tradition on one side and on the other with high consumers' incomes (Figure 1). These countries are Switzerland (418 euros/person/year), Denmark (384 euros) and Luxembourg (285 euros) and Austria (254 euros). The Central and Eastern European countries are at the opposite extreme with the consumption of a few euros, including Poland (8 euros), while the EU average amounts to 101 euros and the European one – 63.

Therefore, there is a need for continuous research on motivations, barriers, and consumer behaviours in the organic food market, which may contribute to the demand growth among Polish consumers. The development of this sphere is one of the reasons for further support of organic production methods [Śpiewak, Jasiński 2020, Łuczka 2021]. The study aims to recognise organic food consumption behaviours among Polish consumers. The following research questions were:
– what are organic food consumers' demographic features?
– what is the share of expenditures on organic food?
– what are the motives for buying organic food?

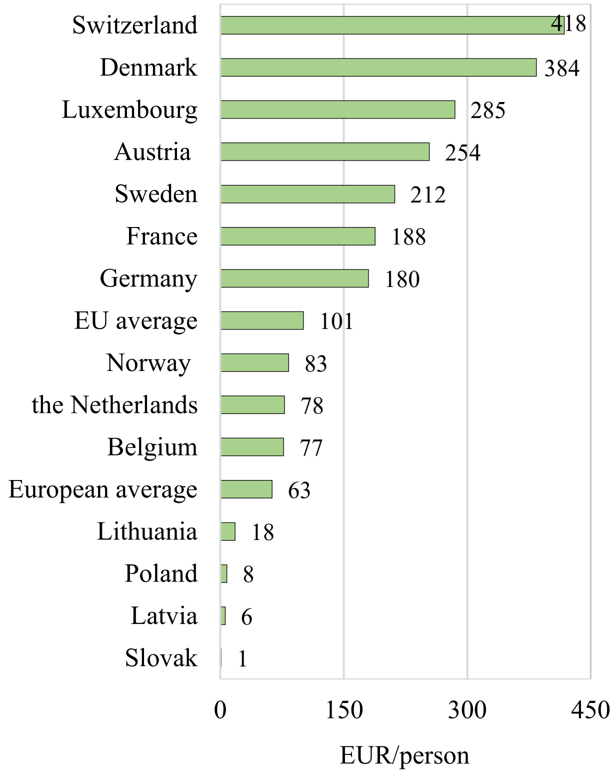

Figure 1. Average expenditures on organic food in selected European countries in 2020
Source: own elaboration based on [Willer et al. 2022]

- what is the frequency of purchasing different food groups?
- what are the places where organic food is purchased?
- what are the main obstacles to buying organic food?

MATERIAL AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to recognise behaviours, motives, and barriers to the consumption of organic food, the survey was undertaken in Poland in 2019. Despite the existence of a number of studies concerning the demand side of the organic food market, it is necessary to monitor the market, which may allow to identify changes in attitudes, awareness, and willingness to buy among Polish organic food consumers. In this research, compared to other investigations, the aspects related to the place and frequency of purchase were analysed in more detail. The survey was conducted using purposive sampling – the investigated group consisted of 204 organic food consumers. The trained interviewers conducted the research in specialist shops with organic food placed in Poznan agglomeration and Warsaw during BioExpo Warsaw 2019. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions concerning sociodemographic characteristics of consumers, motives, places, frequency of purchases of organic food, and barriers to the growth of consumption of organic food products, including the acceptability of the price level of organic food. In the construction of the questionnaire, the following tools were used: nominal and ordinal scales and Likert's scale. The collected data were coded and processed using Microsoft Excel and Statistica environment.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research demonstrated that over 2/3 of the respondents were people under 40, and only 11% were over 50, whereas the average age of the investigated consumers was 36 (Table 1). Women constituted 77.4% of the investigated as they were mostly responsible for household food purchases, which was the case for 88% of the surveyed. The vast majority of the investigated were people with tertiary education (almost 68%), and over 26% declared secondary education. Most respondents were employed, and a small percentage were students, pensioners, or unemployed. The majority of the surveyed (37.6%) had incomes between 2,001 and 3,000 PLN per person in a household, while nearly 27% had incomes higher than 4,000 PLN and only 20% less than 2,000 PLN. The main place of residence of the investigated were cities with a population of over 200,000 inhabitants (35.7%) and smaller towns and villages located in the agglomerations (35.2%). Considering the size of the household, the distribution of households with a different number of members is relatively uniform and, in contrast to the results of research carried out in Western European countries, the households with a smaller number of members dominate as two-person households had the highest share (26%). According to Renata Matysik-Pejas and Joanna Żmuda›s [2011] study on Polish consumers, similar conclusions may be drawn: organic food is usually purchased by women aged up to 35 years, with tertiary education, living in a city, whose family consists of 3 to 4 people. Regarding the period of presence in the organic food market, about 55% had purchased organic food for 3 years or less and only 22% for more than 5 years. On average, it was 4.3 years.

Considering the consumer expenditures on food in total, they ranged between 11% and 20% for almost 1/3 of the surveyed, but nearly 27% of the respondents spent over 40% of their incomes on food (Table 2). It may be due to the fact that these persons carried out a healthy lifestyle and chose high-quality but more expensive products. On average, the investigated consumers spent 31% of their incomes on food. Concerning the expenditures on organic food in total spending on food, for nearly 2/3 of the investigated, it was not more

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	Distribution of answers [%]	
Age	Under 30	39.8
	Between 30 and 40	28.9
	Between 40 and 50	19.9
	Over 50	11.4
Gender	Women	77.4
	Men	22.6
Education	Primary	6.0
	Secondary	26.1
	Tertiary	67.9
Employment status	Employed	85.0
	Student	5.7
	Pensioner	3.6
	Unemployed	2.6
	Working student	3.1
Income	Less than 1,000 PLN	2.7
	1,000-2,000 PLN	16.7
	2,001-3,000 PLN	37.6
	3,001-4,000 PLN	16.1
	More than 4,000 PLN	26.9
Residence	Village	35.2
	Town with a population of less than 20,000	9.5
	Town with a population between 20,000-39,999	5.5
	Town with a population between 40,000-99,999	9.5
	City with a population between 100,000-200,000	4.5
	City with a population over 200,000	35.7
Size of household	1 person	21.9
	2 persons	26.0
	3 persons	21.9
	4 persons	20.9
	5 and more persons	9.2
Presence in the organic food market	Less than year	22.1
	Between 1 and 3 years	32.7
	Between 3 and 5 years	28.6
	More than 5 years	16.6

Source: own research

than 20%, and every fifth respondent spent more than 40%. On average, they spent almost 25% of their total food expenditures on organic food.

Table 2. Expenditures on food and organic food

Expenditures	Distribution of answers [%]	
On food in total expenditures	Less than 10%	14.2
	11-20%	32.0
	21-40%	26.9
	41-60%	19.3
	61-80%	7.6
On organic food in total expenditures	Less than 10%	31.4
	11-20%	32.0
	21-40%	17.8
	41-60%	15.2
	61-90%	3.6

Source: own research

Geir Gustavsen and Atle Hegnes [2020] claimed that from the consumer personality perspective, openness to experience is an important factor in organic food purchase and consumption. People more open to experiences buy organic food more often as they recognise it as healthier and tastier than other types of food. Openness to new experiences also covers the willingness to undertake new activities and try new types of food or tastes, which explains the greater interest in organic food. This feature may indicate perceiving organic food as better than other foods. The conducted research proves that the surveyed organic food consumers are also attracted to innovation in the market and seek new, interesting tastes, among others, through organic food consumption. They often buy other types of food, including regional products (about 70%) and functional and convenient food (15% each).

Nevertheless, the choice of organic food for the majority of consumers allows to consciously realise the attitude toward increasing problems with environmental deterioration and decreasing food quality. Opting for organic food creates a situation in which a consumer distinguished by a developed awareness, on the one hand, pursues consumption goals and, on the other, strengthens the economic position of a producer of organic agricultural products and promotes environmental protection. Therefore, the choice of organic products, in addition to meeting individual consumption needs, is also a manifestation of the social attitude of the consumer with high environmental awareness. Hence, in the consumption of organic food, not only health and sensory values are essential, but the overall attitudes and behaviors of a buyer who pursues a pro-ecological attitude [Grzybowska-Brzezińska 2013]. So far, numerous studies have been conducted in various countries in which the motives for purchasing organic food were identified. Motives determine the specific behavior of the consumer. They are the direct engine of human action. Identifying the reasons for choosing organic food makes it possible to assess consumer behavior in the market and attitudes towards this product category.

The research shows that when choosing organic food, consumers are most often guided by the high quality of organic products (Figure 2). Production without using chemical substances was indicated in second place (4.3 on average). It was followed by higher

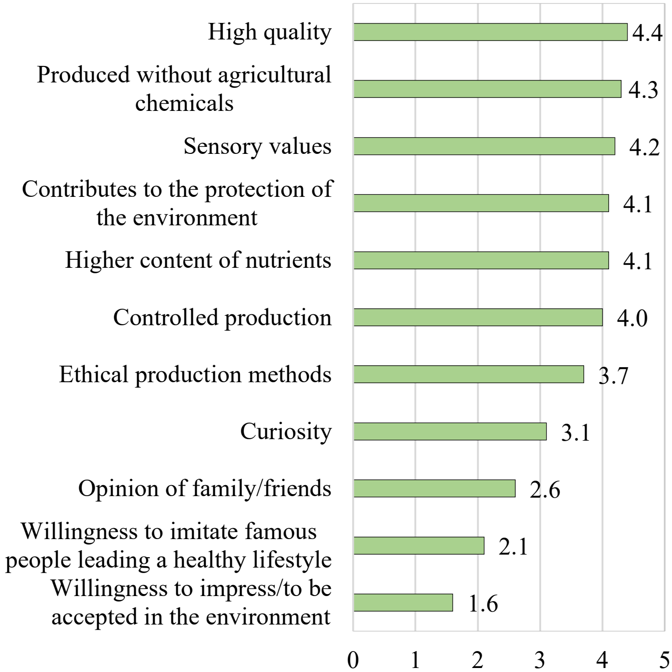

Figure 2. Motives for buying organic food (the respondents assigned weights from 1 – not at all important to 5 – very important)

Source: own research

nutrient content (4.2), environmental protection, and controlled production (4.1 each). According to the respondents, motives such as ethical production methods (3.7) or curiosity (3.1) are less important. The respondents› declarations show that they are less driven by such motives as the opinion of family or friends (2.6), the desire to imitate famous people who lead a healthy lifestyle (2.1), and the desire to impress or be accepted by others (1.6).

Similarly, research by Mariola Grzybowska-Brzezińska [2013] conducted among Polish consumers of organic food shows that the vast majority of respondents based their decisions on choosing this food on the belief that it was of higher quality and health benefits. Pawel Bryła's [2016] study also shows that the respondents' main reasons for choosing organic food were its health, ecological character, safety, unique taste, and high quality. However, according to Tomasz Hermaniuk [2018], for the respondents, the two most important reasons why they bought organic food were its positive impact on health and the fact that it is free from harmful chemical compounds. In addition, for the respondents, the following elements were also important: higher content of vitamins and minerals compared to traditional food and high taste qualities.

The studies show that Polish organic food consumers are primarily driven by egoistic motives, mainly related to their safety and impact on health. Altruistic motives, environmental protection, and ethical production methods took a further position. This is significant for organic food markets at an early stage of development, where consumers do not yet have a sufficiently well-formed environmental awareness.

One of the goals of the study among organic food consumers was to examine the distribution of the frequency of purchases of individual product categories (Table 3). The results indicate that the most frequently purchased product groups (at least once a week) were vegetables (slightly over 60%), fruit (54%), eggs and bread (around 46% each), as well as cereal products (38%) (Table 3). The surveyed consumers bought cereal (45%), tea and coffee (40%), dairy products (39%), and eggs (almost 37%) at least once a month but less than once a week. The slightly lower frequency of purchasing these products may be due to their longer shelf life, while fresh products with a shorter shelf life must be purchased more often.

Almost 30% of consumers did not buy organic fish and seafood, which were quite challenging to purchase, usually in a few specialty stores; therefore, shopping for these products requires more time and consumer involvement. In addition, 21.5% never bought organic sweets and over 17% – meat products, and almost 12% – meat, which may also be due to the lower availability of these product groups, but also the fact that a significant part of organic food consumers was on a sugar-free, vegetarian or vegan diet.

The study by Paweł Bryła [2016] shows that the most frequently purchased organic products were fruit and vegetables. Almost half of the respondents purchased fruit and vegetable products, and about 40% dairy products, meat products, bread, and confectionery. Every third respondent bought other animal products and oils. According to the research conducted by Tomasz Hermaniuk [2016], the most frequently purchased organic products were also fruit and vegetables and sweeteners (including honey), followed by bread and dairy products, and the least common were snacks and souces (ketchup or mustard) and sweets. Such a product structure indicates specific consumer preferences about fruit and vegetables but may also result from the availability of specific product categories on the market. Fruit and vegetables are one of the most readily available organic food. In addition, they must be bought more often due to their rapid spoilage.

When it comes to places to buy organic food, the vast majority of respondents (88%) declared that they most often (at least once a month) shopped in specialist stores, almost 2/3 in retail chain outlets (super- and hypermarkets, discount chains, drugstores), approximately 44% each in organic farms and farmers' markets, less than 34% in small grocery stores and 28% on the Internet (Table 4). Interestingly, 45% of respondents declared that they bought organic products at least once a year. Still, they shopped organic food less than once a month in small grocery stores, which is very likely due to their limited organic food offer, and these purchases are somewhat random. Almost 31% of

Table 3. Frequency of organic food purchase

Product group	Frequency [%]*				
	1	2	3	4	5
Fruit	1.0	1.0	9.0	34.8	54.2
Vegetables	0.0	2.5	10.9	26.4	60.2
Fruit products	4.7	11.5	48.4	24.5	10.9
Vegetable products	3.6	22.9	37.0	27.6	8.9
Meat	11.6	8.9	21.6	24.7	33.2
Meat products	17.4	3.2	21.1	28.9	29.5
Dairy	5.6	5.6	18.3	39.1	31.5
Eggs	3.1	4.1	9.8	36.6	46.4
Fish, seafood	29.7	10.9	26.0	19.8	13.5
Cereal products	0.0	4.2	12.5	45.3	38.0
Bread	6.9	2.5	12.9	31.2	46.5
Candy	21.5	19.0	23.1	29.2	7.2
Spices	6.1	19.3	41.6	23.4	9.6
Tea, coffee	13.2	16.8	24.7	40.0	5.3
Vegetable fats (oils)	10.8	15.4	19.0	45.6	9.2
Honey	11.4	11.9	33.2	29.5	14.0

* 5 – at least once a week, 4 – at least once a month, but less frequently than once a week, 3 – at least once a year, but less frequently than once a month, 2 – less than once a year, 1 – never
Source: own research

Table 4. Places of organic food purchase

Specification	Places and share [%]*				
	1	2	3	4	5
Specialist shop	0.0	7.9	4.2	44.5	43.5
Retail chains	5.8	3.7	24.7	43.2	22.6
Organic farms	24.5	15.1	16.7	28.1	15.6
Farmers' markets	15.3	8.4	31.6	32.1	12.6
Small grocery stores	13.4	7.5	45.2	24.2	9.7
Internet shops	30.9	18.0	23.2	23.2	4.6

* 5 – at least once a week, 4 – at least once a month but less frequently than once a week, 3 – at least once a year but less frequently than once a month, 2 – less than once a year, 1 – never
Source: own research

respondents never bought organic products online, nearly a quarter from organic farms, and 15% from farmers' markets.

The research shows that there has recently been a change in the purchasing habits of Polish consumers of organic food. Super- and hypermarket chains have gained importance, mainly due to the convenience of shopping in these establishments and the extended offer. Nevertheless, the assortment offered by retail chain stores is still relatively narrower than that of specialist stores, which currently have a comprehensive assortment. Therefore, regular, loyal consumers, who use a diet composed mainly of organic products, prefer specialist outlets, while shopping in retail chain units, in their case, is rather occasional.

Noteworthy is also the decline in the importance of direct sales on organic farms. The contemporary consumer appreciates convenience and saves time, which is why the once most popular form of selling organic food, although guaranteeing the credibility of the product and related to direct contact with the producer, is relatively rarely chosen by the surveyed consumers

The research also shows that the most important barrier to the consumption of organic food, in the respondents' opinion, was its high price (average rating of 4.1) (Figure 3). Obstacles related to availability, lack of knowledge on sales points, or insufficient offer in retail outlets are much less important. Such a distribution of responses may be because the study was conducted in large cities, where access to organic food is much easier than in small towns. Restrictions such as low reliability, unclear designation, short shelf life, low taste, or unattractive appearance were of absolutely little importance.

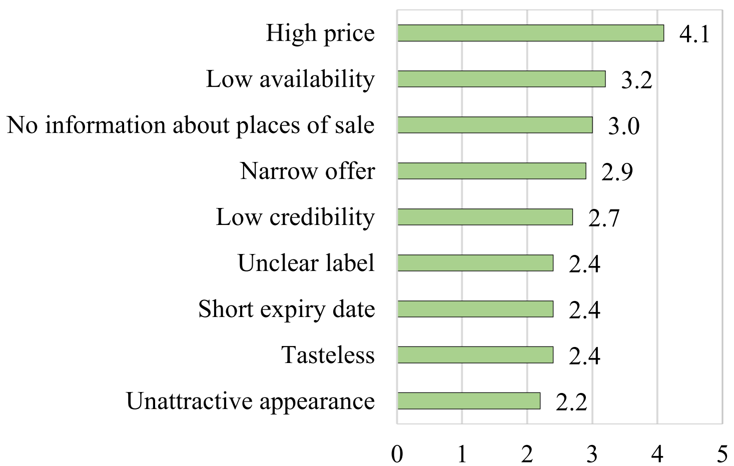

Figure 3. Barriers to organic food consumption, in the opinion of the respondents
The respondents assigned weights from 1 – not at all important, to 5 – very important
Source: own research

The research showed, therefore, that the most important limitation in the consumption of organic food was its high price, and other barriers related to its availability, at least in large cities, lost their importance along with the significant expansion of the range of specialist stores and introducing organic food to permanent sale in retail chain stores. The studies by Paweł Bryła [2016, 2018] also show that the most important barrier to the consumption of organic food was the high price, followed by low consumer awareness, then poor availability of organic food, short expiry date, inadequate exposure of this food in retail outlets and skepticism about certification and marking system. In turn, according to Renata Nestorowicz [2018], another significant barrier was limited availability, which to some extent resulted from the lack of consumer knowledge, as some respondents declared that they did not know where such food could be purchased.

Since most consumers consider organic food expensive, it is essential to study their willingness to pay a higher price for organic food than conventional food (WTP). It is a crucial factor of purchasing decisions, showing a close relationship with the consumer's attitude and purchasing behavior [Łuczka 2019]. According to Lucyna Witek [2017], consumers are willing to accept higher prices when they know the benefits of organic food consumption. It is noteworthy that regular buyers perceive organic food better than those purchasing it occasionally or non-buyers [Nestorowicz et al. 2016]. The willingness to pay a higher price will probably also increase when other factors such as availability or product range improve [Shih-Jui 2012].

The conducted research shows similar conclusions because 42% of the investigated consumers were willing to accept the difference up to 10%, every third in the range from 11 to 20%, and slightly over 16% in the range from 21 to 40% (Figure 4). Nearly 8% of respondents were ready to pay more than 40% for organic food. The obtained results confirm price declarations as the most important barrier limiting organic food consumption.

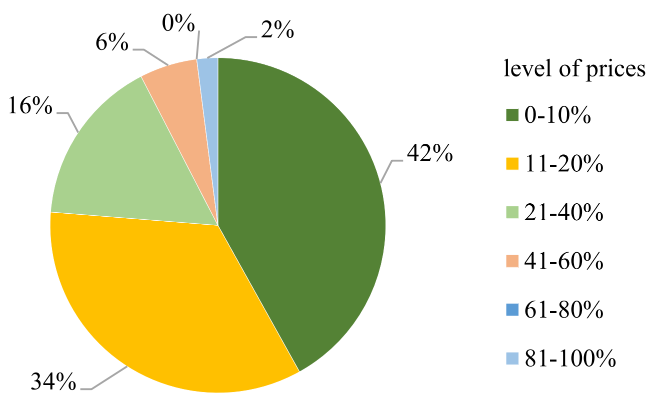

Figure 4. Acceptable level of prices for organic food

Source: own research

CONCLUSIONS

The research shows that the surveyed consumers were mainly young and middle-aged (up to 40 years old). They were primarily women with higher education, working with an average income from 2,001 to 4,000 PLN per person in a household, living in a large city. The average household of the respondents consisted of 3 people, and all members of these families consume organic food. The respondents had been in the organic food market for over 4 years. In most cases, expenditure on organic food accounted for approximately 20% of all food expenditure.

The motives for purchasing organic food were dominated by those of an egoistic nature, i.e., high quality of products, lower content of agricultural chemicals, belief in a higher content of nutrients, and then altruistic motives, i.e., a positive impact on the environment, or ethical production motives. The respondents most often and more regularly bought products with a shorter shelf life, i.e., organic vegetables and fruits, eggs, bread, as well as cereal products, and less frequently more durable products, such as processed products, spices, or oils. Fish, meat products, and meat are relatively rarely bought. Among the places where organic food was purchased, specialized stores and outlets of retail chains prevailed.

The most important barrier for the respondents is still the high price of organic products. Nearly 90% of respondents believed that the prices of this food were too high, and the majority were willing to accept price premiums not higher than 10%. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the previously perceived significant obstacles related to the availability and range of the assortment offered, which is related to the improvement of the organic food distribution system, are losing their significance.

The Polish organic food consumers, although focused on their own health, have also become more environmentally conscious, the former motives and barriers to buying organic food have been losing their significance. Therefore there is a need for further research in this area on larger groups of consumers, inhabiting smaller towns and non-buyers as well. It would also be valuable to compare the consumer behaviour of the Polish buyers with the ones from other Central and Eastern European countries.

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ZACHOWANIA KONSUMENTÓW NA RYNKU ŻYWNOŚCI EKOLOGICZNEJ

Słowa kluczowe: rynek żywności ekologicznej, motywy konsumpcji żywności ekologicznej, bariery, częstotliwość zakupów, miejsca zakupu

ABSTRAKT

Celem artykułu jest określenie wzorców konsumpcji na rynku żywności ekologicznej w Polsce. W tym celu w 2019 roku przeprowadzono badanie ankietowe wśród 204 polskich konsumentów żywności ekologicznej. Badanie dotyczyło takich elementów, jak: motywy zakupu żywności ekologicznej, miejsce, częstotliwość i bariery zakupu żywności ekologicznej oraz akceptację wyższej ceny. Wyniki badań wskazują, że badani konsumenci to w większości młode kobiety (do 40. roku życia), o miesięcznych dochodach od 2001 do 4000 zł na osobę w gospodarstwie domowym. Badani byli obecni na rynku żywności ekologicznej średnio od około 4 lat, a ich wydatki na żywność stanowiły głównie około 20% całkowitych wydatków na żywność. Wśród motywów zakupu żywności ekologicznej dominowały te o charakterze egoistycznym, tj. wysoka jakość produktów, mniejsza zawartość chemii rolniczej, a następnie motywy altruistyczne, tj. pozytywny wpływ na środowisko lub etyczne motywy produkcyjne. Respondenci najczęściej kupowali produkty o krótszym terminie przydatności do spożycia, tj. ekologiczne warzywa i owoce, jajka, pieczywo, produkty zbożowe, a rzadziej produkty trwalsze. Ryby, wędliny i mięso były kupowane stosunkowo rzadko. Wśród miejsc, w których kupowano żywność ekologiczną dominowały sklepy specjalistyczne i punkty sieci handlowych. Najważniejszą barierą zakupu ekożywności jest nadal wysoka cena produktów ekologicznych.

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