

CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT IN THE PURCHASE OF FOOD PRODUCTS AND THE WILLINGNESS TO GENERATE FEEDBACK THROUGH WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION

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Abstract. The aim of this article was to investigate whether involvement in the food product purchase influences the tendency to generate messages on such products through word of mouth communication. The study was carried out in August 2015 on a representative group of 1,000 adult Polish consumers aged 15–50 years using CAWI method. Results indicate that food category is not highly engaging. The tendency to generate both positive and negative feedback increase together with the commitment to purchase increase, whereby consumers are far more likely to recommend food products, rather than discourage from their purchase.

Keywords: involvement, word of mouth, WOM, consumer, purchase

INTRODUCTION

Foods are frequent purchase products, as they accompany consumers every day and address their basic needs. Therefore, can food products become the ground for consumer involvement? Usually, consumer involvement means a greater motivation to pay attention at product information. A question arises, however, if the involvement in the food product purchase affect the willingness to share product opinions in the word-of-mouth communication. Are consumers more willing to encourage

or discourage others from buying food products? What are the sources of information most commonly used by consumers buying food products?

The purpose of this paper is to verify the above relations and to find answers to the research questions based on the results of a CAWI analysis. The CAWI survey was conducted in August 2015 with a representative group of 1,000 Polish respondents aged 15–50. The project was financed by the National Science Centre pursuant to decision No. DEC-2012/07/D/HS4/01761.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Consumer involvement

Consumer involvement can be defined as the level of the buyer's interest in a given product category in the purchasing decision-making process (Shiffman and Kanuk, 2010, p. 229). It is used in many ways and in various contexts, such as product category, choice of a brand, purchase or advertising. Whether strong or weak, the involvement may be situational or long-lasting. From the viewpoint of consumer behavior and marketing, the following categories of involvement may be identified: general involvement in a product (Zaichkowsky, 1985), involvement in the choice of a brand (Mittal, 1995) and product purchase involvement (Beatty and Smith, 1987; Mittal, 1995).

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There is no uniform definition of involvement as it may be conceptualized and operationalized in multiple ways. According to Costley (1988), the following three main trends in defining involvement can be identified:

- approaches based on consumer reaction;
- approaches based on individual consumer conditions;
- cognitive approaches.

In an approach based on consumer reaction, involvement is defined by describing individual consumer reactions (either static or dynamic) emerging in response to a given impulse/object (e.g. Batra and Ray, 1983). In this context, the involvement is a strong reaction to a product, brand, advertisement or purchase.

Such reaction may be situational (Celsi and Olson 1988; Rothschild and Houston, 1980) or long-lasting. In this context, situational involvement means focusing only on specific events that trigger a reaction in the form of involvement, for example the purchase of a gift. A long-lasting involvement means sustained consumer interest in an object (product or brand).

The approaches based on individual consumer conditions focus on the mental condition resulting from impulses originating from an object (product, advertisement, brand) (Mittal, 1995) and define involvement as a specific emotional condition determining the importance of a given object for a consumer.

According to cognitive approaches, involvement means the relationship of a cognitive nature between consumer and object (or activity related thereto) (Zaichkowsky, 1985). In the literature focusing on consumer behavior, the definitions of involvement are usually underpinned by the cognitive approach. The concept of strong and weak involvement in purchase (Assael, 1992) seems to be the most commonly used. In this case, strong involvement is identified with the importance of the purchase for the consumer. If strongly involved in the purchasing process, the consumer actively participates in searching and processing product information and in the decision-making process (Böhner and Wänke, 2004, p. 58–59). A strong involvement in purchase could be the foundation for a growing loyalty towards a brand or seller. In the weak involvement model, the consumers are not excessively focused on the information searching and decision-making processes (Böhner and Wänke, 2004, p. 59).

Interestingly, Brennan and Mavondo (2000), based on their literature review, identify four types of involvement: the purchase decision involvement (PDI)

or situational involvement (SI); the product class involvement (PCI); the response involvement (RI) which was later demonstrated to be a combination of PCI and PDI; and the involvement with the advertising message (AMI). This paper addresses the concept of PDI which is linked to the purchasing situation.

In the context of food products, the issue of consumer involvement was mainly considered as a motivation to purchase organic food (Makatouni, 2002; Teng and Wang, 2015, among others) or functional products (Ares et al., 2010; Verbeke, 2005).

Word-of-mouth communication

Mazzarol et al. (2007) regard the word of mouth as a process embracing discussions carried out upon the organization and its offer, during which recommendations may appear. So far, more than 7,842 scientific texts on word of mouth have been published in the top scientific periodicals (Web of Science, accessed on October 9, 2016). Over 102 articles were quoted 100 or more times. Since 2010, more than 200 new papers dedicated to this topic are published every year in English alone (Cheung and Thadani, 2012).

The word of mouth has gained in importance along with the emergence of the Internet and new forms of feedback, such as social media, review websites or discussion forums (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Today, researchers tend to focus their attention on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), a newly identified category (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Tkaczyk, 2016; Tkaczyk and Awdziej, 2013).

Recommendations from friends have an increasing impact on the consumers' purchase decision-making regardless of the stage of this process. In the case of food products, such recommendations are among the reliable sources of information about novelties (Barska and Wojciech, 2014; Lipowski and Angowski, 2014). If a friend from a discussion forum or social network mentions a product, this may stimulate need awareness. Other consumers' opinions may trigger the emergence of new, previously unknown ways of addressing a specific need. They may also introduce additional criteria used in evaluating available alternatives. Eventually, the information obtained from other consumers allows to reduce the post-purchase dissonance or facilitates product use and troubleshooting.

Word-of-mouth communication significantly influences the consumer's decision process, whatever the

involvement degree of the purchase may be. The only difference lies in the way of influence. In the case of highly involving decisions, consumers actively search for information, also by browsing through other users' opinions. If the decisions are not very engaging, consumers tend to be passively exposed to the WOM influence.

The disposition to generate positive or negative feedback in the word-of-mouth communication process can be measured with the Net Promoter Score (NPS). Introduced in 2003 by F. Reichheld (Reichheld, 2003), NPS is quite willingly employed in marketing research due to ease of use and simple interpretation, despite some criticism (Kristensen and Eskildsen, 2014). The NPS structure includes only one question rated on a 11-grade scale (from 0 to 10): how much would you be willing to recommend a product to your family and friends. Respondents who rate 9–10 are considered to be promoters who recommend products willingly, whereas those who rate 0–6 are naysayers discouraging from buying the product. Those who rate 7–8 are considered neutral.

In the case of products that are publicly noticeable and more frequently presented in the individual's environment, opinions may be both immediate and spread over time (Berger and Schwarz, 2011). Afterwards, more interesting products are likely to receive more feedback. Because of their frequent use, a larger number of recommendations may be expected for foodstuffs than for other goods (Lipowski and Angowski, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research question, a CAWI survey was conducted with funds allocated under the National Science Center grant No. DEC-2012/07/D/HS4/01761 ("The word-of-mouth communication influence on the purchase decision-making process"). A group of 1,000 respondents were selected with the stratified sampling method from the Polish population aged 15–50 (the variables used for the sampling process included gender, place of residence and education). The selection of the age group was determined by the requirements of the research method and by the insufficient representation of Internet users aged over 50. The research was conducted in August 2015. The sample included 50 percent of men and 50 percent of women. The analysis focused on 952 respondents having purchased a food product (i.e. food or beverages) within the last month.

The most universal and most commonly used measuring scale for consumer involvement is the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Accordingly, involvement is defined as the perceived relevance of an object, based on consumer needs, values and interests. The scale includes 20 item pairs on a 7-point semantic differential scale, and measures the involvement in a product category, brand or purchase. An equally reliable measuring scale is the Purchase Decision Involvement (PDI) (Mittal, 1995). In this case, involvement is defined as the range of consumer interest in making the decision to purchase a product. The scale is based on 4 statements described by dual phrases on a 7-item scale, and measures the involvement in a purchase. In the research presented in this paper, the PDI scale was modified by adding a cognitive element to check the knowledge of the purchased product. Additionally, the scale was converted into statements described by the 7-point Likert scale adjusted to 15 various product categories.

The measurement was based on the 7-point Likert scale, with 1 meaning "I definitely disagree" and 7 meaning "I definitely agree" with the proposed statement.

Table 1. Modified PDI scale
Tabela 1. Zmodyfikowana skala PDI

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1. | When buying food products, brand matters to me
W przypadku produktów żywnościowych ma dla mnie znaczenie, jaką markę kupuję |
| 2. | Most food products in a given category are similar to each other
Większość produktów żywnościowych w danej kategorii jest do siebie podobna |
| 3. | It is very important to me to make the right choice among available food products
Bardzo ważne jest dla mnie dokonanie właściwego wyboru spośród dostępnych produktów żywnościowych |
| 4. | I have an extensive knowledge on food products
Posiadam dużą wiedzę na temat produktów żywnościowych |
| 5. | It is a problem for me if a purchased food product is not up to my expectations
Jest dla mnie problemem, jeśli kupiony produkt żywnościowy nie spełni moich oczekiwań |

Source: Mittal, 1995.
Źródło: Mittal, 1995.

The scale was adjusted to 15 various product categories (from pure products, through hybrids, to pure services). For each product, the average grade was calculated, with opposite values being obtained for the other statement.

The following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The higher is the involvement in purchasing food products, the higher is the willingness to generate positive feedback (opinions) in the word-of-mouth communication process.

H2: The higher is the involvement in purchasing food products, the higher is the willingness to generate negative feedback (opinions) in the word-of-mouth communication process.

The willingness to generate positive and negative feedback was measured with the use of the 11-point NPS scale. Because an ordinal scale was used, the impact of the involvement level on the willingness to generate positive and negative feedback was examined by calculating the Spearman's correlation coefficient. In the statistics, the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient is a nonparametric measure of rank correlation (statistical dependence between the ranks of two variables) (Liu, 2017). It enables assessing whether the relationship

between two variables can be properly described using a monotonic function.

RESULTS

For Polish consumers, the main sources of information on food products are their own experience (80 percent of answers), opinions of family and friends (38 percent) and contacts with a salesperson (23 percent). Advertisements and the Internet represent additional sources of information, playing a supplementary role (see Fig. 1). When using Internet as the source of information on food products, consumers mainly prefer browsers (10 percent), other consumers' opinions in social media (7 percent) and information on the manufacturers' websites and fanpages (5 percent). Internet information on food products is much more frequently used by younger people (aged 15–34, representing 59% of the sample) than older ones (aged 35–50, representing 41% of the sample).

Poles aged 15–50 (59% of the sample), irrespective of their gender, are more likely to recommend products than to discourage from purchasing. Discouraging

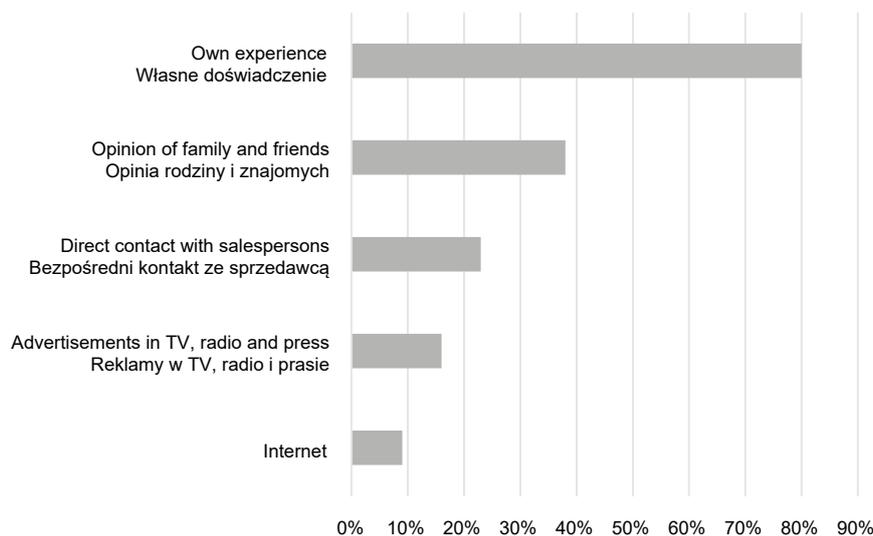


Fig. 1. Sources of information on food products

N = 952, one or more answers could be given.

Source: own research.

Rys. 1. Źródła informacji na temat produktów żywnościowych

N = 952, można było wybrać więcej niż jedną odpowiedź.

Źródło: badania własne.

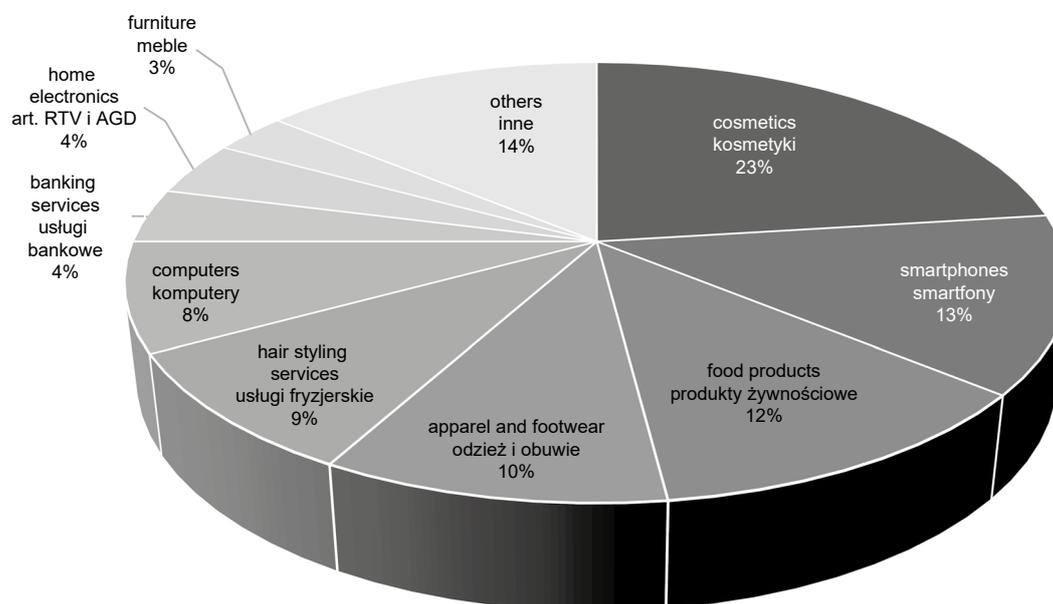


Fig. 2. The most willingly recommended product categories

Notes: the respondents had to identify the products they recommended within the last month (an open question); the results represent the categories created by the author.

Source: own research.

Rys. 2. Najchętniej polecane kategorie produktów

Uwagi: Respondenci mieli wskazać, jaki produkt polecali w ciągu ostatniego miesiąca (pytanie otwarte); wyniki prezentują kategorie stworzone przez autorkę.

Źródło: badania własne.

opinions are relatively more often expressed by older people (aged 35–50, 41% of the sample) than younger ones (aged 15–34). Still, unfavorable feedback has a greater impact: the consumers recommended products to 3.73 people and discouraged 4.27 people, on average. The consumers are most willing to express favorable or discouraging opinions during a personal conversation in the case of the following groups: close family members (recommendation: 76 percent, deterrence: 69 percent), closer friends (recommendation: 74 percent, deterrence: 66 percent) and acquaintances (recommendation: 42 percent, deterrence: 37 percent).

Foodstuffs are in the top three products being the most willingly recommended by consumers, just behind cosmetics and smartphones (see Fig. 2).

The involvement in the purchase of food products was measured with the use of the PDI scale adapted for the purposes of this research. The distribution of answers is presented in Figure 3.

Over 60 percent of consumers consider the purchase of a bad food product to be a problem. Over 70 percent find it very important to make the right choice of a product. The food brand is an important purchase driver for about 48 percent of respondents, mainly including those aged 35–50. Younger consumers believe the brand to be less important. Also, they find that older respondents know the foodstuffs better, which is understandable and related to both their life experience and roles played in the household.

The average level of involvement in food product purchasing was 4.53 (in a 1 to 7 scale) for all consumers. It was one of the lowest indicators in this research (among 15 various product categories, only 2 were graded lower than food products, confirming that this product category was not perceived as very engaging, though it certainly did not lack importance for consumers).

The willingness to deliver WOM feedback on food products was measured with the use of the NPS scale. 45 percent of consumers are definitely willing

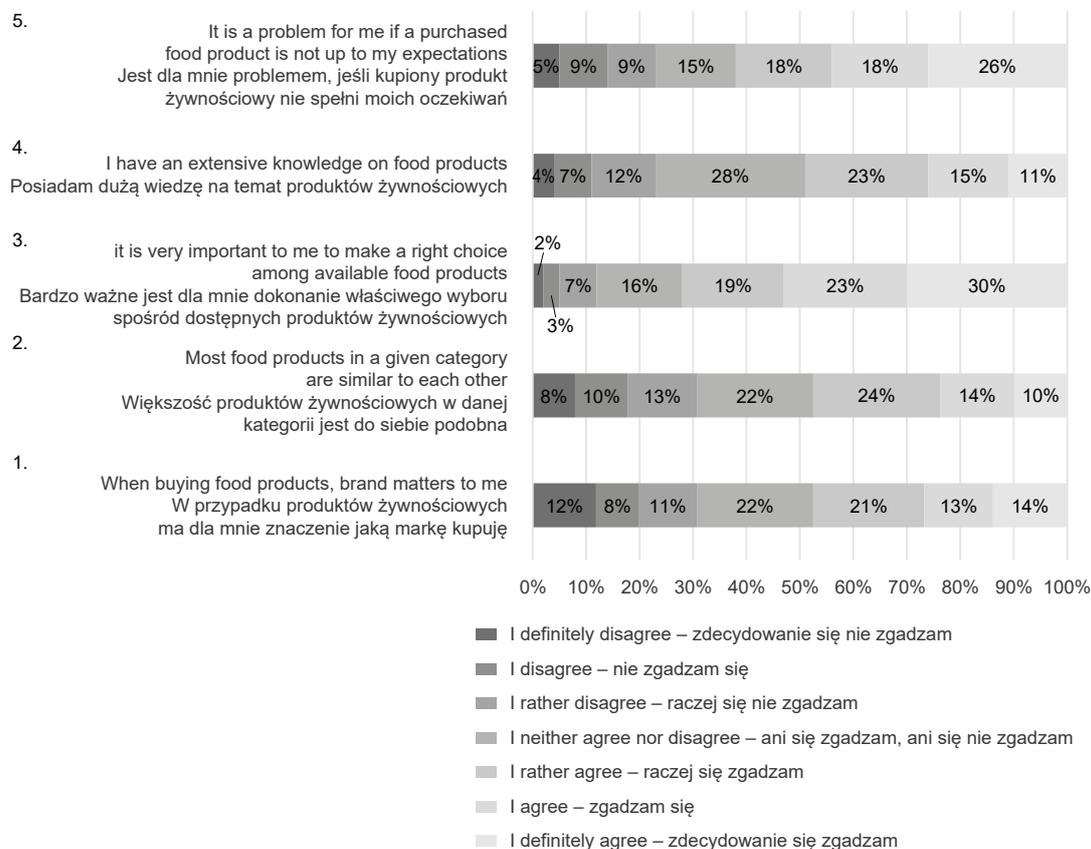


Fig. 3. Purchase Decision Involvement for food products (modified PDI scale)

Source: own research.

Rys. 3. Zaangażowanie w decyzję zakupową w przypadku produktów żywnościowych (zmodyfikowana skala PDI)

Źródło: badania własne.

to recommend such products (grades 9–10 in the NPS scale), if only they are satisfied with the product. Naysayers represent 25 percent (grades from 0 to 6). Additionally, the willingness to generate unfavorable feedback was measured by reversing the NPS scale. Accordingly, 38 percent of consumers are definitely willing to discourage others from buying if they are dissatisfied with their purchase. A slightly larger share (43 percent) would rather not discourage other consumers, even if dissatisfied with their own purchase.

In addition, respondents were asked if they would be more willing to rely on an opinion of another consumer or an expert when choosing a food product. The other consumer's opinion was much more preferred than that of the expert (40 percent vs. 9 percent). However,

as much as a half of respondents declared it was not too important for them.

The H1 hypothesis (the higher is the involvement in purchasing food products, the higher is the willingness to generate positive feedback in the word-of-mouth communication process) was positively verified. The value of the Spearman's correlation rho coefficient reached 0.383 ($p = 0.000$). The H2 hypothesis (the higher is the involvement in purchasing food products, the higher is the willingness to generate negative feedback in the word-of-mouth communication process) was also verified positively, with $\rho = 0.283$ and $p = 0.000$ (in both cases $N = 417$, as not all buyers of food products shared their opinions on this category).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The tendency to generate feedback in the word-of-mouth communication process grows bigger as the involvement in food product purchase becomes higher. There is a much stronger relation between involvement and willingness to give favorable opinions than between involvement and willingness to give unfavorable opinions. The above means that both hypotheses formulated earlier in this paper were confirmed. The consumer involvement, as a multidimensional category, has a significant impact on the generation of both positive and negative product feedback. The higher is the involvement in purchase (i.e. the more extensive is the product knowledge; the more relevant it is; the higher is the perceived importance and risk), the stronger becomes the tendency to generate positive product feedback. Similarly to other research projects focuses on WOM, it turned out that consumers were far much eager to recommend food products than to discourage from purchasing such products.

Based on this research, it may be concluded that when buying food products, consumers primarily rely on their own experience. However, they also take the opinions of their family members and friends into account. Family and friends are also the recipients of feedback generated by consumers. Therefore, the companies should set much store by opinions appearing among consumers as this is a reliable source of product information. The willingness to search information on food products, including in the Web, is demonstrated especially by younger consumers, as they are less experienced and less loyal to brands. Therefore, in their marketing strategies, food manufacturers and sellers should consider such actions as cooperation with well-known culinary bloggers; stimulating the recommendations among consumers with tangible and intangible incentives; and promptly responding to any unfavorable comments posted in social media.

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ZAANGAŻOWANIE KONSUMENTA W ZAKUP PRODUKTÓW ŻYWNOŚCIOWYCH A SKŁONNOŚĆ DO GENEROWANIA PRZEKAZÓW W KOMUNIKACJI NIEFORMALNEJ

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest sprawdzenie, czy produkty żywnościowe są kategorią angażującą konsumentów i czy wraz ze wzrostem zaangażowania w zakup rośnie skłonność do generowania przekazów w komunikacji nieformalnej. Badania zrealizowano w sierpniu 2015 roku na reprezentatywnej grupie 1000 dorosłych Polaków w wieku 15–50 lat, metodą CAWI. Wyniki badań wskazują, że choć produkty żywnościowe nie są kategorią wysoko angażującą konsumentów, to jednak wraz z zaangażowaniem w zakup rośnie skłonność do generowania zarówno pozytywnych, jak i negatywnych opinii, przy czym konsumenci zdecydowanie chętniej polecają produkty żywnościowe, aniżeli zniechęcają do ich zakupu.

Słowa kluczowe: zaangażowanie, komunikacja nieformalna, WOM, konsument, zakup

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