

CONSUMER ETHNOCENTRISM AMONG YOUNG POLISH CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

This article is a research exercise examining consumer ethnocentrism among young Polish consumers. Its primary goal is to identify ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours of young people. The study consists of two parts: theoretical and empirical. The first one explains the concept and essence of ethnocentrism as a consumer trend, building upon a critical analysis of literature. The second, major part is empirical. The basis for conclusions is provided by the research material from a questionnaire-based survey that was conducted among young consumers. Undertaking such a research project is justified since ethnocentric tendencies have a direct impact on purchase decisions of consumers, including young people, while making it difficult for enterprises on the market to develop marketing strategies.

Key words: young people, consumer ethnocentrism, consumer patriotism

JEL codes: D12, M31

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, where globalisation and digitisation are progressing, most consumers have easier access to many products manufactured abroad. The resultant modification of buying patterns is characteristic especially of Generations Z. Therefore, by taking over active roles in the purchasing process, young people are susceptible to new consumer trends including consumer ethnocentrism. In addition, cultural integration that has been visible for more than three decades is intensifying the unification of behaviour patterns of buyers regardless of their ethnicity. The opposite trend is the heterogenisation of consumption, which is conducive to ethnocentric attitudes. Ethnocentrism is generally thought to involve a substantial cognitive ability in individuals and to be based on complex social and cultural inputs. Ethnocentric consumers

believe that purchasing imported products affects the internal domestic economy and can lead to a decrease in employment opportunities within a country. Ethnocentric consumers have different perceptions with regard to product purchasing judgements [Balabanis and Siamagka 2017]. They attribute merit to products depending on the satisfaction that is derived from their consumption, regardless of the product's country of origin.

Young consumers were chosen for the research in view of their growing importance and decision-making power in today's households, and because they respond to the changing environment, globalisation and its impact on consumption, lifestyle and emerging new consumer trends more intensely than other market participants. Undoubtedly, understanding their reasons, behaviours and market attitudes can help enterprises not only to decide on appropriate in-

novative marketing strategies but also to determine the right development path, allowing companies to remain in the market and make their product (service) offer attractive to new customers, especially young ones, despite dynamic changes in consumption and ever faster development of mobile technologies and applications.

The structure of this article is as follows. The first part synthetically explains the concept and essence of consumer ethnocentrism. The next section focuses on the research conceptualisation and a description of the research sample and its characteristics. Based on the conducted research, the last part attempts to define consumer ethnocentrism within the consumer decision-making process among young Polish consumers. Finally, major conclusions end this study.

THE CONCEPT AND ESSENCE OF CONSUMER ETHNOCENTRISM – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Ethnocentrism was first defined in 1906 by William Graham Sumner, an American ethnologist and sociologist, in his famous book *Folkways*. He understood ethnocentrism as the “view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” [Sumner 1906, cited in Hammond and Axelrod 2006]. Sumner introduced the concepts of we-group and others-group, arguing that the members of a particular group live together in peaceful relations, whereas relations with other (outside) groups are usually those of war. Groups feed on their pride, praise their superiority and look at others with disregard. Ethnocentrism makes people change what differentiates them from others. This contributes to the strengthening of the group (folkways). People, their behaviours, and things are evaluated and judged from the perspective of one’s own environment. This means that one’s own culture is praised, with an others-group’s culture being depreciated [Khan and Rizvi 2008].

In the second half of the 1980s, Shimp and Sharma were the first to use this term. They construed con-

sumer ethnocentrism as people’s belief that the purchase of products imported from abroad adversely affects economic development at home, results in inefficient use of available technologies and resources, including labour, which in turn leads to increased unemployment and represents an unpatriotic behaviour [Shimp and Sharma 1987]. Matsumoto defined consumer ethnocentrism as a perception of the world through a cultural filter [Matsumoto 1996]. It can therefore be said that consumer ethnocentrism is considered as consumer behaviour involving a consistent preference for home-produced products [Sharma et al. 1995]. This tendency generally stems from a sense of national identity, concern for the homeland, and fear of negative consequences of imports for individuals, businesses and society at large.

Consumers who are ethnocentrically oriented make their purchase decisions based on moral considerations. Simultaneously, they must have some socio-economic knowledge to enable them to assess the market situation, develop their own opinions in this respect and make informed decisions. Where consumers associate buying local products with the situation in the country or region (for example, an increase in demand for local products may translate into more jobs), this may strengthen their ethnocentric attitude in consumer behaviour and make them base their choices on duties and moral obligation rather than on rationality or emotions¹ [Zalega 2017].

According to Han, direct influence on the level of consumer ethnocentrism is mainly exerted by psychosocial and demographic factors. Numerous studies in different countries worldwide have confirmed a statistically significant impact of these determinants on consumer purchasing behaviour as regards the choice between domestic and imported products [Min Han 1994]. On the basis of his research findings, that author showed that patriotism and conservatism have a very significant impact on the expressed intentions to purchase domestic and foreign products. Han found that younger people, who are generally less patriotic, are characterised by weaker consumer ethnocentrism than

¹ Klein et al. [1998] stated that consumer ethnocentrism is negatively correlated with the assessment of and inclination to buy foreign products. Balabanis and Diamantopoulos [2004] claimed that consumer ethnocentrism is positively correlated with consumer preference for domestic products.

others. The same is true of conservatism, understood as the attachment to and preservation of traditions that have survived the test of time and the reluctance to make any changes.

An important variable differentiating consumer behaviour as regards ethnocentrism is gender. It turns out that women display more ethnocentric attitudes than men, which is explained by the female nature: they are more caring, have a greater sense of responsibility for others and strive for harmony in society [Jain and Kaur 2006]. Another variable affecting ethnocentric behaviour is disposable income. It can interact with other variables, sometimes making them significant and sometimes insignificant.

RESEARCH CONCEPTUALISATION

In order to identify ethnocentric attitudes, many variables can be used. The simplest ones include demographic variables such as: gender, age, education level, and disposable income. However, these variables have some limitations as they only provide information on the state and structure of ethnocentric attitudes, without explaining their sources at all. Nonetheless, related literature provides information on the correlations between the said variables and consumer ethnocentrism. The article aims to identify ethnocentric attitudes among young Polish consumers. With this in mind, four research hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: Disposable income is an important determinant of the attitude of young consumers to imported products. The lower the income, the more negative the attitude of young people to foreign products.
- H2: Consumer ethnocentrism is less visible among better educated young consumers who are open to foreign cultures.
- H3: Young women exhibit greater ethnocentric tendencies than young men.
- H4: Young consumers' preference for domestic products is closely correlated with their patriotic attitude.

The tool used to conduct the research was the author-designed questionnaire comprising 50 closed-ended questions regarding alternative consumer trends, including consumer ethnocentrism. The CETSCALE scale was the research tool used to as-

sess the ethnocentric attitude of young consumers. In addition, respondents were presented, among others, with cases concerning various imaginary situations in which young people had to imagine themselves as potential buyers. Those cases were intended to check whether they exhibited ethnocentric attitudes. The survey was carried out from 1 February to 1 May 2018. The difficulty lay in appropriate definition of the study subject because the category of “young consumer” is not clearly specified in the literature. Scholarly publications refer to various age ranges for the group of young consumers, for example 15-34 years [Olejniczuk-Merta 2001], 18–30 years [Kumar and Kapoor 2017], 18–35 years [Ofosu et al. 2013]. In this article, those between 18 and 34 years of age are considered to be the population of young people. The upper age limit, that is 34 years, is regarded as the end of youth in the Polish literature. The participants were recruited via the “ankietka.pl” website and social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, and e-mail. In order to partake in the survey, those interested had to visit a specific website containing the questionnaire. It was also distributed across special forums, university and private school fanpages. In accordance with the research assumptions, the sample included persons aged 18–34, representatives of Generations Z, who took independent purchasing decisions in the market. In order to select the sample, the selective quota sampling procedure was used. The characteristics (quotas) covered by the research were: gender and age. During the data processing, information from respondents was eliminated if the questionnaires were incomplete or incorrect (17 instances). From among 606 initial questionnaires, 589 were considered eligible, representing 97.19% of the total sample. Further, they were coded, and the data set thus created was processed by a statistical package.

SELECTION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Five hundred eighty nine people took part in the survey, including 325 women and 264 men. Nearly half of respondents lived in cities of more than 500 thousand inhabitants. Every third participant had completed secondary education, less than 2/5 of

respondents held a bachelor's or engineering degree, and every fifth held a master's degree. The average age of respondents is around 25 years. They were mostly students who combined studies with work, whereas the unemployed formed the smallest group. Almost half of respondents lived in cohabitation or LAT (living apart together) relationships. More than 2/5 of them were single and one in eight was married. As regards monthly disposable income per capita, the largest group earned from PLN 2,001.00 to PLN 3,000.00. However, astonishingly many (almost half of respondents) assessed their current financial situation as good, and 5.9% as very good.

CONSUMER ETHNOCENTRISM AMONG YOUNG POLISH CONSUMER AS RESEARCHED EMPIRICALLY

The research examined the attitudes of young consumers towards consumer ethnocentrism. It essentially checked whether young people understood the concept and idea of consumer ethnocentrism and whether their possible competences translated into practical behaviour. To this end, respondents were asked about their understanding of the term “consumer ethnocentrism”. Based on the results, it was established that more than 2/5 of respondents not only knew the notion but also understood its essence. In turn, 35% of those surveyed had merely heard this term but could not explain its meaning correctly. Every fifth young respondent did not know this concept at all or heard it for the first time.

Another issue was whether young consumers considered themselves to be ethnocentric in their consumer decisions. The survey shows that 2/5 of respondents identify themselves with ethnocentric attitudes. In that group of young consumers, 51.6% often pay attention to the country of origin of products (mainly food), 30.6% do so very often, and 17.8% do so always or almost always. However, only one in five young respondents uses the “Pola” application, which informs users about the origin of products. These are mainly respondents in the 30–34 age group (25.7%), mostly women (27.3%) who have completed higher education (28.6%) and live in cities of over 500 thousand inhabitants (24.4%).

Based on the conducted survey, the results concerning the correlations between consumer ethnocentrism and selected demographic variables (Table 1) were compiled.

The correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant but weak relationship between ethnocentric behaviour of respondents and demographic variables. Taking into account the economic factor affecting consumer ethnocentrism, it may be stated that a lower disposable income is generally accompanied by stronger ethnocentric attitudes. Respondents with a monthly per capita income not exceeding PLN 2,000.00 almost three times more often display ethnocentric tendencies than those earning more than PLN 4,000.00 per capita a month. As they more frequently travel around the world, are open to foreign cultures and more familiar with foreign products, wealthier consumers perceive such products more positively. Hence, they

Table 1. Correlations between consumer ethnocentrism and selected demographic variables

| Specification | Sperman's rho |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| Age | 0.278* |
| Gender | 0.234** |
| Education | -0.312* |
| Income | -0.360* |
| Place of residence (city population) | -0.277* |

* The correlation is significant at 0.01; ** the correlation is significant at 0.05.

Source: The author's research.

show weaker ethnocentric and stronger cosmopolitan attitudes. A negative correlation between the level of disposable income and ethnocentric attitudes is confirmed by numerous research results [Richardson 2012, Wolanin-Jarosz 2015]. It should be noted, however, that with respect to income levels, the research findings do not show a clear link between income and ethnocentric attitudes. Studies by Balabanis and Diamantopoulos [2011] reveal a positive correlation between higher disposable incomes and stronger ethnocentric attitudes among consumers (this more often applies to older consumers though).

The proportion of young people who declare that they act fully in line with the idea of ethnocentrism is much higher among women (56.2%) than men (41.8%) aged 30–34 as well as among those with secondary education (14.1%) and a monthly per capita income of no less than PLN 3,000.00, living in rural areas (45.7%) and cities of no more than 50 thousand inhabitants (44.3%). On the other hand, consumers aged 18–23 who hold a bachelor’s or engineering degree, earn a monthly disposable income of above PLN 3,000.00 per capita and live in large urban agglomerations quite often display cosmopolitan attitudes in addition to ethnocentric ones. Cosmopolitan consumers like experiencing cultural diversity and are therefore more open to other cultures and their products. This is because they frequently travel around the world (for student exchange, their hobbies, work abroad, etc.) and fairly well know foreign products².

Less than 4% of respondents, mainly aged 24–29, who earn a monthly disposable income of above PLN 4,000.00 per capita, hold a master’s degree and live in cities of over 500 thousand inhabitants exhibit consumer behaviours that can be classified as both consumer cosmopolitanism and consumer internationalism, in addition to ethnocentric behaviours [Zalega 2018].

The described attitudes of young respondents that can, to varying degrees, be classified as consumer ethnocentrism are convergent with research conducted among young people in Poland [Marcoux et al. 1997, Wolanin-Jarosz 2015] and many other countries worldwide [Renko et al. 2013, Makanyeza and du Toit 2017, Savitha and Dhivya 2017].

Another issue in the research was verifying whether young consumers consider the country of origin when buying products. According to the survey, only every third respondent takes into account the country of origin when making decisions about the purchase of goods and services. Over 3/5 of young consumers exhibit cosmopolitan attitudes essentially, disregarding the country of product origin in their purchase decisions.

To determine the relationship between consumers’ ethnocentric tendency and purchase intentions towards domestically produced goods, Spearman’s correlation coefficient was used (Table 2).

The correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant but weak relationship between consumer ethnocentrism and purchase intentions towards

Table 2. Spearman’s correlation analysis between consumer ethnocentrism and purchase intentions towards domestically produced goods

| Spearman’s rho | I would feel guilty if I did not buy Polish products | I always buy Polish products | Whenever possible, I buy Polish products |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------|--|
| Consumer ethnocentrism | 0.0211* | 0.0199* | 0.0187* |
| | 0.000 | 0.000 | 0.000 |

*Correlation is significant at 0.01.

Source: Author’s research.

² Consumer cosmopolitanism is attracting more and more attention as a potentially important factor influencing consumer behaviour as regards the preference for foreign products. Nonetheless, empirical evidence about its impact on consumer behaviour remains limited.

domestically produced goods. Young Polish consumers expressed a degree of domestic preference.

An important factor affecting the level of ethnocentrism among young consumers is the type of product. The survey shows that ethnocentric attitudes are most strongly displayed by respondents towards food products (milk and milk products, bread and cereals, meat and meat products, fruit and vegetables) and most weakly towards mechanised household appliances (washing machines, refrigerators, microwave ovens), infotainment equipment (TV sets, home cinema, personal computers, laptops, mobile phones), mobile equipment (passenger cars, motorcycles, bicycles), clothing and footwear, and chemical products.

Classical ethnocentric attitudes are most commonly exhibited in the market of food products, with their strength depending on demographic and social characteristics of consumers. The survey reveals that young people preferring Polish food products often follow recommendations of their friends or closest family members when choosing such products (49.7%). The consumers surveyed also admitted that they preferred Polish to imported food products because the former are not only of better quality (65.3%) and much tastier (62.7%) but also contain smaller amounts of preservatives (61.3%). Over 2/5 of respondents claimed that they wanted to support domestic producers by buying home-produced products. They emphasised that Polish food products were better known to them (43.2%), more easily available (28.7%) and generally cheaper than those imported from abroad (31.5%).

It can also be concluded from the analysis that the so-called declared ethnocentrism is common among young consumers. This means that their interest in buying domestically made products does not always go hand in hand with declared preference for domestic goods. It relatively often remains solely in the sphere of respondents' declarations. In addition, many young consumers are unaware of what kind of product they buy, whether it is imported or national. This can be partly explained by the fact that in order to lessen the watchfulness of ethnocentric consumers, companies sometimes give their products names that sound "national" and place the information that they were made at home or that some ingredients are of national origin on product packaging. However, brands often sound-

ing familiar and having been valued for generations are owned by international corporations. The survey reveals that young respondents are not always able to identify a Polish brand correctly. For example, almost 4/5 of those surveyed identify "Lajkonik" belonging to German Bahlsen and "Żywiec Zdrój" owned by the Danone corporation as Polish brands. Over 3/5 of respondents are convinced that "Wedel", managed by Japanese Lotte, and Krakus ham and Morliny sausages (part of the Chinese WH Group, the largest pork producer in the world) are also domestic brands. Almost every third young survey participant associates "Pudliszki" (belonging to American Heinz), "Winiary" (belonging to Swiss Nestlé) and "Turek" (belonging to French Bongrain) with Polish brands.

The next two questions were case studies where respondents were presented with a specific problem. First and foremost, their task was to choose a product (washing machine) whose price and country of origin was known. Assuming the same quality of domestic and foreign washing machines, more than half of the consumers surveyed would decide to buy a cheaper version of the product, disregarding the country that it comes from. Only 2/5 of respondents would consider the domestic origin of the product despite its higher price. Such ethnocentric behaviour was indicated more often by women (57.5%) than men (45.1%), aged 30–34 (43.5%), holding a master's degree (46.2%), earning a monthly per capita income exceeding PLN 3,000.00 (57.1%), and mostly living in cities of over 500 thousand inhabitants (41.4%).

Subsequently, young consumers were asked to decide about the purchase of a washing machine, taking into account the product quality and country of origin. Where the imported product is cheaper and of better quality than its national counterpart, most consumers, guided by the utility maximisation principle known in economics, would behave rationally and buy a cheaper and better-quality product, disregarding the country that it comes from. This option would be chosen by more than 4/5 of respondents, who would buy a Chinese washing machine. Only every tenth young person would be inclined to buy a washing machine produced in Poland, despite knowing about its inferior quality and less attractive price compared to a washing machine made in China. It can thus be concluded

that young people who gave such an answer are driven mainly by emotional or moral reasons (as manifestations of consumer patriotism) and to a lesser extent by economic considerations when making consumer decisions. In other words, highly ethnocentric buyers tend to prefer domestic products even when they perceive foreign products as better-quality and less expensive. According to Supphellen and Rittenburgh [2001], these preferences do not necessarily have to be correlated with actual consumer choices, as evidenced by their research.

Both case-study-based questions were aimed at verifying the strength of ethnocentric attitudes among the young people surveyed. The choice between washing machines produced in Poland and China could prove difficult to respondents since most Polish consumers usually associate products imported from China with poorer quality, high defectiveness and even junk.

The key factors affecting consumer ethnocentric behaviour include the aforementioned consumer patriotism. It is understood as consumer behaviour that involves conscious support for the national economy through the purchase of domestic products or products commonly associated with the home country³. Kucukemiroglu [1999], citing existing research, argues that the attitude towards products and purchase intentions are determined by the patriotic emotions of consumers. In order to specify the impact of patriotism on the strength of consumer ethnocentrism, respondents were asked: “Would you choose a given product simply because it was produced in Poland?”. Almost half of respondents responded in the affirmative. These were mostly women aged 30–34 (51.7%) who had completed secondary education (51.2%), earned a monthly per capita income not exceeding PLN 3,000.00 (52.6%), and usually lived in cities of no more than 200 thousand inhabitants (50.8%). It can therefore be concluded that young consumers who are more patriotic exhibit stronger consumer ethnocentrism than others. Spearman’s correlation coefficient between the variables “ethnocentrism level” and

“consumer patriotism” was statistically significant but weak and had a value of $r = 0.325$, with $p < 0.01$. This positive correlation between patriotism and a high level of consumer ethnocentrism has been confirmed in many studies [Hall and Sevim 2015, Lopez and Zunjur 2016, Kragulj et al. 2017].

The level of consumer ethnocentrism was determined by means of the CET scale (CETSCALE, Consumer Ethnocentrism Tendency Scale) specifying the tendency to buy and prefer domestic products as compared to the same products from foreign markets. Bearing in mind the response time, the CET scale was restricted to 10 questions. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (where 1 meant “strongly disagree” and 5 – “strongly agree”). On the basis of the answers, the averages for each statement were calculated and then summed up to obtain the ethnocentrism index. With the scale used, this index could range from 10 to 50; however, in the conducted study, these values ranged from 14 to 42. None of young respondents obtained the maximum score on the scale. The survey carried out with the use of this scale confirmed its high reliability (Cronbach’s alpha equal 0.95). Among the respondents, people with low ethnocentric tendencies predominate. The distribution is right-skewed (skewness coefficient of 0.50). The ethnocentrism index in the group surveyed was 22.632 (standard deviation of 8.268489, median of 23). The level of ethnocentrism was higher and more diversified in the 30–34 age group, among women, those with secondary education, a monthly per capita income not exceeding PLN 3,000.00, living in rural areas and cities of up to 50 thousand inhabitants.

CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary analysis of the empirical material obtained in the survey indicates that consumer behaviours that can be classified as consumer ethnocentrism are determined by demographic and social characteristics such as gender, age and place of residence. 40%

³ The logic behind such behaviours is connected with the so-called “new” patriotism (I am Polish, so I buy Polish milk; I am French, so I buy French wine, etc.). This is particularly true for people who have lived abroad for a long time and who buy products coming from their home countries. Undoubtedly, today’s consumers need patriotism to achieve two goals: to feel a sense of community and to build their own individual identity.

of young survey participants consider themselves to be ethnocentric consumers. Ethnocentric attitudes are most evident in the oldest respondents aged 30–34, who additionally are the most patriotic among all young respondents. The percentage of consumers regarding themselves as ethnocentric was also much larger among women than men, those with basic and secondary education, a monthly per capita income not exceeding PLN 3,000.00, and living in rural areas and cities of up to 50 thousand inhabitants. Ethnocentric attitudes are mainly exhibited in the case of food purchases and, to a lesser extent, in the case of durable goods. On the other hand, the youngest respondents, aged 18–23, exhibit cosmopolitan purchasing behaviours in addition to ethnocentrism when making purchase decisions. In turn, wealthier university graduates in the 24–29 age group who live in large urban agglomerations also display internationalist attitudes. The empirical research has also confirmed a well-established positive correlation between age and gender of respondents (especially women) and consumer ethnocentrism as well as a negative correlation between ethnocentric attitudes and the level of education and disposable income. To conclude, it can be unequivocally stated that all the research hypotheses adopted in the article have been positively verified.

Taking into account the presented survey results, some limitations ensuing from a small research sample should be borne in mind. Following the conclusions made, they should not be treated as representative of the population of young Polish consumers. They only provide some insight into actual consumer behaviours of young people as part of consumer ethnocentrism.

This publication should contribute to a broader discussion and exchange of views on ethnocentrism, thereby encouraging other Polish scholars and researchers from various scientific and research centres to carry out extensive research in this area.

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ETNOCENTRYZM KONSUMENCKI POLSKICH MŁODYCH KONSUMENTÓW

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł ma charakter badawczy i dotyczy analizy zjawiska etnocentryzmu konsumentki wśród polskich młodych konsumentów. Jego podstawowym celem jest identyfikacja postaw i zachowań etnocentrycznych osób młodych. Opracowanie składa z dwóch części: teoretycznej i empirycznej. W pierwszej z nich na podstawie krytycznej analizy literatury wyjaśniono pojęcie i istotę etnocentryzmu jako trendu konsumentki. Druga zasadnicza część pracy ma charakter empiryczny. Podstawę wnioskowania stanowi materiał badawczy pozyskany dzięki przeprowadzonym przez autora badaniom w formie wywiadu kwestionariuszowego wśród młodych konsumentów. Podjęcie takiego projektu badawczego jest uzasadnione, ponieważ tendencje etnocentryczne mają bezpośredni wpływ na decyzje zakupowe konsumentów i utrudniają opracowanie strategii marketingowych przedsiębiorstw na rynku.

Słowa kluczowe: osoby młode, etnocentryzm konsumentki, patriotyzm konsumentki