

## PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION OF FOOD BY VITRUAL COMMUNITIES

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**Abstract.** Nowadays consumers tend to exchange information and collaborate to satisfy their needs in more and more effective ways. In consequence products are prepared and offered basing on customers' involvement and replacing traditional B2C paradigm. The growing popularity of that approach is possible mainly because of technological changes as well as changes within societies – their evolution towards post modernity. The paper presents different types of virtual communities created in Internet by businesses, NGOs or individual users to promote the idea of sustainable consumption of food.

**Key words:** collaborative economy, postmodern society, sustainable marketing, social media, smart shopping

### INTRODUCTION

Internet and its accessibility enable users to consume together, share thoughts, opinions, facts concerning their private and professional lives in the scale and with easiness that have not been accessible so far. Information and communication technologies development influence interpersonal contacts, determine consumption patterns including ways of information gathering about products. Organisations, trying to follow that trend, prepare places where interactions between organisations and their customers and among customers can occur, develop and may be maintained. The communication tools in forms of Internet platforms, chats, blogs, social media accounts are participated by individuals who would probably never meet personally. They can share their hobbies, points of view, interests and also get involved in movements or initiatives as ones promoting sustainable development.

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The idea of sustainable development require some efforts from its followers but it is necessary when our planet functioning in present form is to be preserved for the next generations.

The idea of sustainable consumption is recognized by Polish customers but its holistic character is not known so well. People often follow some parts of it by using environment friendly products for example, but they do not see the wider context of the idea of sustainability. This is also the way how most of virtual communities perform – they focus on one aspect of sustainability and do not present those areas in the wider approach. That assumption was the main thesis discussed in the research part of the paper where Polish initiatives promoting sustainable consumption were analysed. The paper also includes presentations of different virtual initiatives and discussion on their character.

## **CHANGES WITHIN ECONOMY AND MARKETING**

Economy evaluates towards the concept of the sharing economy or 4.0 economy but some author indicate that collaborative economy is a concept that describes nowadays changes more adequately. It bases on many-to-many model instead of one-to-many model that has been describing business and customers activeness for many years. The many-to-many approach is possible to be spread among different groups of customers because of intensiveness of new interactive media development. It influences many different areas of customers' decision making processes. Basing on results of research conducted by the Campbell and Mithun agency collaborative economy significance in nowadays world is increasing because it is compatible to rational expectations of receivers as: expenditure cuts, environment protection, flexibility, as well as emotional ones as: self-help and helping others, appurtenance, sharing intelligent life style, responsibility for being a part of larger initiatives [Sokołowski 2014].

Basing on analyze of nowadays tendencies in economy Kotler indicated that activities aimed at the common well being incensement are reasonable. He derived the concept of 3.0 marketing from cooperative, cultural and spirituals marketing. The concept is based on assumption that organisations are expected to look after the well being of global society not only about their dealings by customers [Kotler et al. 2010]. According to Nowacki [2014], marketing evaluates towards 4.0 orientation that involves activities aimed at creation of adequate spaces (virtual platforms, e.g.) to enable interactions between consumers and organisations and among consumers. There proposals concerning different dimension of organizational activities can also be submitted and discussed [Nowacki 2014]. If prepared for this purpose, communication tools enable creation of value not only for organisations but also for users of its offerings [Gouillart, Billings 2013]. In that situation traditional classification of producers and consumers is not valid anymore because both sides co-create value and both are involved by offering their unique sources in the value creation process [Casalo et al. 2010].

## **TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR PROCESSES**

Information and communication technology development results in many aspects. One of them is a change in self-perception of customers – from “I think therefore I am” towards “I am connected to others”. As the results social competences do not follow technological development and being permanently “in-touch” is crucial for nowadays customers. People want to control their actions to fulfill every single moment of their everyday life according to their expectations. At the same time they want to keep up with information about their friends, with news and this way they follow many stories at the same time [Gołowski 2014]. As the result customers nowadays (especially the ones who are called Digital Natives) are not able to focus on one task for longer than 5–7 minutes. They suffer from memory deficits, they are impatient. Their perception of relation between value and price is disordered. They require mobility while products’ usage [Żórawki 2014]. Nowadays consumption may be described as multitasking one. Customers gather information from many sources, sometimes using two devices at the same time – this behaviour is called multiscreening and it provides producers with a new tools to attract customers attention and to deliver information about products simultaneously to a TV broadcast.

There are also some other trends that may be observed in customers behaviour nowadays. Customers have become smart shoppers and they expect usage of a product to provide them with attractive, exciting and surprising experience [Taranko 2013]. Also the scope of activeness of customers has changed. In the literature the following stages of evaluation of customers can be found: from 1.0 customers who are passive addressees of promotional communication, through 2.0 consumers who express their opinions towards 3.0 – cooperating and co-creating prosumers [Nowacki 2014].

## **PROMOTION OF AN IDEA**

An idea is interpreted as one of products’ categories. Its introduction in the market require the same efforts as in case of other groups of offers, so customers’ expectations should be recognized, adequate marketing mix tools performed and results analyzed.

Level of acceptance for a new idea depends on a process of consequent changes within ways of thinking, approaches and behaviours of target groups, as well as on costs of change estimation, the change arduousness, difficulties it causes, stress and lost benefits as results of the change introduction [Szromnik 2013]. No matter whether promoted idea is a commercial or non commercial one, the process of its distribution and communicating is similar and it should include steps indicated by Szromnik [2013]: analysing situation, indicating strategic goals of marketing strategies and programs, targeting, choosing adequate techniques and tools of influence, budget calculating, results monitoring and evaluation.

Sustainable development and sustainable consumption, as one of its dimensions, are examples of ideas that have been being introduced and promoted recently.

## SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Sustainable marketing and sustainable consumption can be indicated as ideas that has been discussed in Polish marketing literature more and more frequently. In the world the concept of sustainable consumption is discussed mainly as one of new marketing tendencies [Baines et al. 2008, Armstrong and Kotler 2012] but there are also some publications describing only that aspect of marketing approach [Cohen and Murphy 2001, Souther-ton et al. 2004, Seyfang 2011]. It can be observed that sustainable consumption is also discussed from its sector perspective [Leithner 2010, Belz and Peattie 2010, Martin and Schouten 2012]. And in Poland the concept is discussed mainly in articles and described quite widely.

Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) can be defined as holistic approach to minimizing negative environmental impacts from production and consumption in society [Środowski 2007]. "SCP looks holistically at systems of production and consumption and explores how these systems can be changed to reduce their ultimate environmental impact. It involves critically reviewing current lifestyles and examining alternative modes of consumption, asking ourselves whether more is always better. SCP also recognises the influence of consumer demand on the consumption process, and therefore its potential as a policy area that can be addressed to minimise environmental effects" [CSCP 2007]. Sustainable consumption, when interpreted that way, includes not only purchasing and production but also life style dimension [Marchand and Walker 2008]. It indicates how customers' decisions influence functioning of the world. Local producers, ecology and respect for people and animals in production processes are indicated as key elements of sustainable consumption concept in its wider interpretation [Puciato 2014]. As Hansen, Schrader and Cooper indicate when individual customer decisions are discussed the symptoms of sustainable consumption may be indicated among: limitations of consumption, perceiving consumption that exceed needs as negative one, choosing products basing on their ecological features, recognizing substitutes for traditional consumption [Marchand and Walker 2008].

It must be underlined that sustainable consumption is also determined by personal factors (habits, motivations). For example research conducted among voluntary simplicity movement members revealed that some of them decide to purchase products basing on their personal benefits and personal factors and sustainability is not the only determinant of their decisions [Marchand and Walker 2008]. Researching that aspect of sustainable consumption in more detail way would allow to find more effective ways to change perception of people who are preferring sustainable patterns of consumption. At the moment they are perceived as people who are sacrificing themselves and that image cannot be helpful when wider promotion of sustainable consumption is discussed [Marchand and Walker 2008].

Also more holistic approach towards sustainable consumption is required. As observed, for most of customers the concept means buying ecological products that became

“must have” category of offers [Frątczak-Rudnicka 2014]. Polish customers identify sustainable consumption with smart shopping. They also believe that ecological products are healthier. None of these ideas are perceived as elements of wider context while vast majority of Polish customers (74%) declare that their knowledge about sustainable consumption is deep or very deep [Puciato 2014]. Thus further education for sustainable consumption (ESC) should be introduced in Poland. The process “aims at providing knowledge, values and skills to enable individuals and social groups to become actors of change towards more sustainable consumption behaviours. The objective is to ensure that the basic needs of the global community are met, quality of life for all is improved, inefficient use of resources and environmental degradation are avoided. ESC is therefore about providing citizens with the appropriate information and knowledge on the environmental and social impacts of their daily choices, as well as workable solutions and alternatives. ESC integrates fundamental rights and freedoms including consumers’ rights, and aims at empowering citizens for them to participate in the public debate and economy in an informed and ethical way.” [CSCP 2011].

Basing on information and data cited above the following assumption can be made: to introduce sustainable consumption concept it is necessary to consider social processes that are involved but also individual needs and expectations that should be satisfied [Briceno and Stagl 2006].

## **VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES**

As the age of individualisation has passed customers tend to search for new communities that can be joined by them. They are usually created apart from family relations and traditional social ties. They are set on common emotions, life styles, beliefs and purchase decisions. In the literature they are called nowadays tribes [Kacprzak-Choińska 2011]. The reasons to use a world tribe to describe those groups of people were identified by Covy in the similarity of those groups to earlier stages of society evaluation. Nowadays tribes are characterized by: local affiliation, narcissism, lack of central institutional source of leadership, focusing on emotions, passions, as well as small range and perishability [Skorek, 2012]. A tribal approach in marketing require concentration on emotions and perceiving organisations as supporters of those relations [Dziewanowska and Skorek 2011].

Many types of virtual and real communities are identified. They are characterised basing on a scale of their activeness, territorial range and places where they are functioning. Communities has been developing as new communication technologies become more and more advanced. They are not based on personal interactions and their character is rather transient – most of them do not last long. As Stevenson indicated virtual communities has been constantly evaluating because of spiritual, emotional and intellectual levels of involvement of their members. In future they will base on diversification of their members but also on celebration of those differences in areas of ethnicity, life styles and aspirations [Stevenson 2002]. The groups are strong when their members feel that they are parts of a larger entity and do not act as individuals. Research indicate that feeling of affiliation is strengthening its social value [Casalo et al. 2010].

Internet users are searching for others who share the same interests and values. They create smaller and larger communities around brands or ideas. Thus they participate in groups sharing and promoting sustainable consumption patterns that are created by inter-nauts themselves. According to classification presented by Kaplan and Heanlein, those types of communities are characterized by low level of self-presentation and low level of media differentiation [Brzeziński and Jasiński 2014] – they usually gather their members in one social networking site. The communities that promote idea of sustainable consumption are created in social networks where, as Boyd and Elisson indicate, it is possible to: create public or semi-public profile, communicate with other users, view and cross lists of users. Virtual communities are promoted by recommendations of groups members' to other users whose participation would guarantee further functioning of a group [Casalo et al. 2010].

Promotion of sustainable consumption is also inspired by formally organized entities and in those cases it involves many communication channels and its presence is not limited to one place in virtual space.

## **VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES PROMOTING THE IDEA OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION**

In that part of the paper different examples of virtual communities created for promotion of different aspects of sustainable consumption are presented.

Firstly on the example of Unilever the way of businesses to create communities as a consequence of the company's sustainable strategy is presented. Later different virtual initiatives promoting sustainable consumption created by individual users and NGOs were researched. The examples illustrate sustainable consumption promotion in different markets (Polish and global) but they mainly consider food consumption. Also usage of different tools to build communities in Internet for that purpose, i.e. blogs, application and social networks profiles, is presented in that part of the paper.

To present activities of business that are aimed at promotion of sustainable consumption the case of Unilever was chosen because financial and organisations sources of that enterprise enable the wide range of activities introduction but also their integration and compliance with overall strategies. The scheme Sunlight is one of the company's main activities in that area. It gathers different projects and more than 140 million activities have been undertaken since it was introduced. The scheme is aimed at creation of community of people who want their lives to be sustainable and who want to help others. Every user can participate in any projects (at the moment there are 27 carried on) conducted within the Sunlight. Among different initiatives promoting sustainable consumption of food, called Growing gardens, reducing waste, can be indicated. It encourages and teaches how to grow own herbs up-cycling Hellmann's jars. Also other types as initiatives supporting development in poorer countries are introduced (i.e. hand washing promotion, limiting number of people suffering from hunger) by Unilever. As the company can afford usage of wide range of tools it also provides chefs with specially tailored application Wise Up On Waste that enables identification of moments when wastes are generated. It also includes other tools helping to minimize wastes of products in professional kitchens.

The actions undertaken by Unilever are exemplifying how businesses can promote sustainable consumption as an element of their strategy of sustainable development. As mentioned above companies are expected to create special platforms where interactions between customers will be possible and also they should inspire those interactions due to many-to-many approach. Thanks to the amount of money that Unilever can spend on its CSR activities it is possible to create professional internet platform that is able to handle traffic on that scale (Facebook profile of the scheme is liked more than 2.8 million times).

The Buycott application may be given as another example of initiative promoting sustainable consumption prepared for global market but performed on much smaller scale. The application enables identifying organizations within corporate family trees of producers after scanning a barcode on a package. This way some concerns and their products may be boycotted if their practices appear to be unsustainable or unfair. It should be admitted that the application was created to trace products of Koch Industries and Monsanto [O'Connor 2013]. Apart from the application, Buycott movement also disposes an internet platform where different initiatives promoting sustainable consumption have been introduced. The Demand GMO labeling is one of the actions undertaken on the platform. It is concentrated on the demand to label products that are modified. More than 250 thousand customers decided to join it. There are also smaller initiatives called Boycott whole foods for financially supporting child rapist with 400 participants. Users may create campaigns and others may support them. To register the Facebook account is used.

The Letter from America ([www.theletterfromamerica.org](http://www.theletterfromamerica.org)) may be an example of another global initiative promoting sustainable consumption. The letter is a result of movement that is warning citizens about consequences of genetically modified food and its impact on agriculture and global economy. Europeans are asked by Americans to spread the letter among consumers and authorities' members to protect Europe from genetically modified products. The letter has been signed by more than 56.7 million people.

But in the market there are not so many initiatives of that scales of activities. Most of them, especially the ones performed by individual users, gather no more than several dozen of followers. The situation within Polish market is similar because initiatives promoting sustainable promotion are rare and undertaken by individuals or NGOs.

For the study 50 Polish initiatives that could had been related to the idea of sustainable consumption were picked up basing on results provided by searching engines and as results of content linking (the web pages of projects and governmental institutions were excluded). When the list was created the detailed analyse of web pages content and FB profiles took place. It appeared that from the sample only 15 initiatives could be indicated as ones that are promoting sustainable consumption of food and 9 of them included at least two aspects of it in their contents. None of the initiatives concerned wider range of aspects of sustainable consumption. The research for the study was conducted between 3 and 16 of November 2014.

One of the platforms that is realizing the idea of sustainable consumption is managed by association GRUPA ODROLNIKA. The web page (and compatible Facebook profile) are prepared to enable direct selling of products from farmers to institutions and individual customers. They can contract adequate amounts of products that are delivered. The platform also provides readers with information about healthy diet and the Association.

Among the researched the ODROLNIKA was the initiative that could be indicated as the model one when promotion of sustainable consumption of food is discussed. There are some elements that could be improved in the web page but it is one of the best exemplifications of sustainable consumption introduction and promotion although its potential has not been used totally, yet.

The community of people who care about healthy life style can also be found in mamzdrowie.pl platform. The web page includes not only a shop with selected products and detailed information about their ingredients but also links to articles considering many aspects of life, not straightly connected with health problems. There is also information about sustainable consumption explaining that the idea does not include only shopping but also require changes in many aspects of everyday life. The webpage includes an area where registered visitors can meet and discuss. Similarly the ekolokalnie.pl webpage is operating. It is built basing on price comparison webpage. The webpage presents also different recipes for healthy meals. The Facebook profile created by the same authors, as a supplement to webpage, includes many interesting advices, courses etc., that promote sustainable consumption (for example projecting of sustainable habits).

Inspired by the Instytut Spraw Obywatelskich (INSPRO) foundation the Internet portal [www.chcewiedziec.pl](http://www.chcewiedziec.pl) was established. It is aimed at drawing customers' attention to the problem of clear marking of products that are genetically modified. The portal is prepared to contact people who are involved or want to participate in process of society, whose members are involved in public life, cooperate for common wealth, are aware of their rights and obligations, want and can cooperate, formulation ([www.chcewiedziec.pl](http://www.chcewiedziec.pl)). The content of the portal includes many information about sustainable consumption and the special declaration of support for campaign called Wolne od GMO? Chcę wiedzieć (GMO free? I want to know) may be signed there. The Facebook account of the initiative is aimed at constant communication with fans.

Users interested in the idea of sustainable consumption may also gather around blogs. There are many types of blogs that are linked to the idea of sustainable consumption although their content usually cover only parts of the concept. The following types of blogs of individual users and linked to the sustainable consumption can be indicated: the blogs that promote healthy life style, for example: Ziółowa Wyspa ([www.ziolowa.wyspa.pl](http://www.ziolowa.wyspa.pl)), Ziółowy Zakątek ([www.ziolowyzakatek.com.pl](http://www.ziolowyzakatek.com.pl)), słonecznybalkon.pl, niekupiejedzenia.blogspot.com; providing customers with information ([zdrowoinatemat.blogspot.com](http://zdrowoinatemat.blogspot.com)); promoting veganism: ([kasiaweganka.blogspot.com](http://kasiaweganka.blogspot.com)); self-helping ([organiczni.baranowscy.eu](http://organiczni.baranowscy.eu)).

Also NGOs make their members and supporters involved in initiatives aimed at promotion of sustainable consumption in Poland. For example Empatia – the association of vegans promoted some of its initiatives by its blog (<http://empatia.pl>) including “Tydzień weganizmu” (Veganism week) or collecting signatures for the petition asking the Canadian government to stop the annual seal hunt. The association of Polish entrepreneurs and employers (ZPP) prepared a blog where their opinion about limitations in production and selling of traditional and regional products is presented.

Sustainable consumers also gather as users of application prepared for them.

GreenLove is one of the applications. It is a kind of a virtual guide that helps users to find places (shops, restaurants, cafes) where healthy, ecological and vegetarian food is



offered. Good Guide is another application dedicated to sustainable customers. It enables smarter shopping. Customers scan barcodes of products and they can find out how green, safe and sustainable a product is. By e-food application consumers can find out what are ingredients of a product, their origins, what kind of jeopardy and benefits are brought by their consumption. The application is coupled with Facebook and it enables sharing the knowledge about products' ingredients with friends. Capital to develop the e-food application was raised through crowdfunding platform [www.polakpotrafi.pl](http://www.polakpotrafi.pl).

The study revealed that sustainable consumption is discussed by Polish customers who are active in Internet from very different perspectives. Thus the blogs, applications or webpages present different issues of healthy life style and diets (these are the most numerous initiatives), much less other elements of the concept of sustainable consumption are discussed. Most of initiatives promoting sustainable consumption are initiated by individual Internet users (10 out of 15 researched) and they are generally self-help initiatives (11 out of 15).

It must be underlined that it is difficult to estimate whether the results of study reflect general tendency in areas of sustainable consumption promotion in Poland. The number of communities and their members change quickly as mentioned. Communities are not based on any structures or leadership so estimation of exact number of them is impossible thus statistical analyses and quantitative data collection.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Recent technological changes have affected many areas of social lives of customers. Thus marketers need to change their attitudes towards products and brands and accept that they should be co-created by the most involved, the most competent and the most creative customers [Gołowski 2014]. Collaboration and co-creation have become a way of life and culture for many customers. Sharing experience but at the same time uniqueness, expression, freedom and possibility to realize ideas, discovering new people and experiences are expected [Sokołowski 2014]. Moreover many of participants of virtual communities do not expect any gratifications for their involvement. Sometimes they just want to be appreciated and esteemed by their peers. That mechanism is also characteristic for brand communities but involvement is maintained by companies in those cases.

The paper was a study on sustainable consumption promotion. The discussion in the paper was based on literature sources, secondary sources of data and some observations carried on in Internet. It was very difficult to estimate exact numbers when behaviour of customers, who are involved in the process of sustainability promotion, is discussed although some general tendencies were indicated. In Poland, although many consumers declare that their awareness of sustainable consumption is significant, there are not many initiatives that can be described as ones promoting the idea of sustainable consumption. In the paper also some examples of organizations that use Internet tools to promote sustainable consumption were presented. The scale of their activeness in the area is generally determined by sources they have in their disposal.

Nowadays behavior of customers' have been influenced by changes of communication patterns. The number of possible sources of information force customers to select

them and chose the quickest ways to do so. One of the way to selection is participation in virtual communities that provide members with information that is expected. Maybe the promotion of sustainable consumption cannot be effective when performed to widely. As observed most of people gather around issues interested for them and do not expect any wider perspective and maybe that would be a key to change customers' consumption for more and more sustainable – make progress in seemingly unrelated areas to reach the expected result of global change in patterns of consumption.

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## **PROMOCJA IDEI ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ KONSUMPCJI PRODUKTÓW SPOŻYWCZYCH PRZEZ SPOŁECZNOŚCI INTERNETOWE**

**Streszczenie.** Konsumentów coraz częściej wymieniają się informacjami i współpracują ze sobą po to, by w sposób bardziej efektywny zaspokajać swoje potrzeby. Następuje odejście od paradygmatu działalności B2C na rzecz rynku, na którym produkty są tworzone i oferowane z wykorzystaniem aktywności konsumentów. Celem artykułu jest prezentacja przykładów społeczności tworzonych w Internecie, zarówno z inspiracji organizacji, jak i indywidualnych nabywców, po to, aby promować idee składające się na koncepcję zrównoważonej konsumpcji w sektorze produktów spożywczych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekonomia współpracy, społeczeństwo postmodernistyczne, zrównoważony marketing, media społecznościowe, smart shopping

Accepted for print: 01.04.2015

For citation: Łazorko K. (2015). Promotion of sustainable consumption of food by virtual communities. *Acta Sci. Pol., Oeconomia*, 14 (2), 95–105.

