

PERCEPTION OF BEEF ATTRIBUTES BY POLISH CONSUMERS AS A FACTOR DETERMINING DEMAND FOR THIS FOOD CATEGORY

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Abstract. To get insight into Polish consumers' perception and prioritization of beef attributes there was a research conducted using qualitative approach. The results show that Polish consumers perceive beef as healthy, lean, with a high content of iron, tasty and festive meat. Nevertheless, consumers also pay attention to the negative aspects of beef and they claim that beef is difficult to prepare, expensive and tough. Female consumers also indicated that it is not easy to buy quality beef, and that children do not like that type of meat. The projective image of beef is positive and the most commonly mentioned association represented dimensions such as strength, activity, lightness, creativity, wealth, peace, elegance, happiness and health. These results maybe of relevance for creating communication strategies on the beef market.

Key words: beef, consumer, perception, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

In recent years consumers have been paying more attention to healthy life-style. As a result consumers expect that food should be of high quality, safe and should have proper nutritional and health value, high sensory attractiveness, but should also be easy to prepare [Gutkowska and Ozimek 2005]. Some of these expectations with regard to food are also important factors of food product choices. The expectations are a reflection of perceived and preferred values by consumers of food product, values which make some products more advantageous than others in terms of their competitiveness. The literature on the subject also shows that the most important factors affecting food choices of Polish consumers are as follows: price, quality, convenience, nutritive value and in further

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sequence: brand, country of origin and advertisement [Gutkowska and Ozimek 2005; Kowrygo 2000]. Of a relatively minor importance for choosing the food products are the following factors: lack or low sugar content, organic method of production, size of packing or low processing level. The research shows that the importance of quality increases with the age of consumers [Gutkowska and Ozimek 2005]. Younger consumers indicate the brand of product more often. Country of origin of food products is of relatively minor importance [Sajdakowska and Gutkowska 2002], although it is expected that it can become more important due to growing confidence in food produced in Poland, implied from worldwide food product scandals.

Based on own research it can be assumed that the most important factor affecting consumers' choices with regard to food products are their own preferences as well as preferences of their family members [Gutkowska and Ozimek 2008].

EUROPEAN CONSUMERS' OPINIONS ON BEEF – ITS POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTES

Contemporary consumers are becoming more and more demanding in relation to meat they buy and preferred attributes of red meat they buy and consume. Their behavior towards majority of food products confirm explicitly a simple truth that if food, including beef, is to be sold successfully it must meet consumers' expectations. A required product quality plays an important role among these expectations.

Quality is a concept that has been defined in a number of ways, although nowadays consumers' approach to defining food quality is dominating. It is reflected in the opinion that product quality involves a specific number of benefits expected from a product by consumers. Consumers are often willing to pay more for quality beef which has been proved by the authors of MSA system (Meat Standard Australia) [Polkinghorn 2008]. However, there are diverse possible ways to perceive beef and veal quality [Grunert 1997], which depend on various attributes of this type of meat, such as physical properties, level of safety, type of packing, production system, origin etc. Quality is also interpreted differently by particular operators in the area, such as producers, processing companies, traders and logistic operators. Food and agriculture production tend to be highly technologized, so the distance from consumers to producers increases which creates suspicions and misunderstandings related to production standards. In the same time a market niche has developed for quality guaranteed products (Quality Meat Products – QMPs), due to growing concern of consumers towards aspects relating to ethics, health, animal welfare, environmentally friendly production methods, local origin of products [Sylvander and Melet 1992; Grunert et al 1996; Nienhaus 1996]. It is noted that irrespective of cultural conditions in different countries similar quality factors affect meat consumption patterns, and the most frequent are taste, nutritive value, habits and origin (especially in Scotland and Spain). Low prices for beef are an important factor for Italians and the English, whereas Scots, Spaniards and the French are of the opinion that price is not of major importance because they prefer "to buy less meat but of high quality". A relatively important attribute of beef is also low fat content which – as the research shows – is especially important for Italians and young British consumers [Bernues et al 2003].

Consumer behavior research conducted in 2003 on a sample of 779 Polish consumers relating to evaluation of factors affecting choice of meat and meat products made it possible to establish their hierarchy. There were 16 different factors selected for research including brand, product, packaging and to end with availability and price [Walkowiak 2007]. According to consumers, the most important factors which in their opinion determine choice of meat and smoked meat brands include mainly appropriate taste of products, so it can be said that taste is a primary attribute of meat determining its purchase. The importance of taste as the factor determining meat and smoked meat choice is even more prevailing if the detailed percentage of particular indications is taken into account. The percentage of responses indicating that taste is essential (22.7%) or very important (63.8%) is by far higher than other figures. Price is the second factor whose importance is high and it is especially true for consumers having lower incomes. Moreover, respondents buying meat and smoked meat products take into account liking and preferences of other family members. Buyers of meat and smoked meat pay a lot of attention to their experience with a given brand, i.e. if the brand has been verified and products with the brand suit respondents and other family members, then the brand of the products is often chosen from among other products available on the market. As regards other factors affecting choice of the brand products which respondents believe to be essential origin of products should be mentioned, i.e. it is important if the meat or smoked meat products have been produced in Poland and if their brand is known. Thus one can find a relatively high level of ethnocentric approach in consumers' attitude towards meat and meat products, especially smoked meat. Buyers of meat and smoked meat products become attached to one or a few shops where they buy favorite and verified products and due to this very important factor their purchasing decisions include availability of the given brand in the shop where they usually do shopping.

The scope of knowledge on Polish consumers' behavior on the meat market is still low and to get insights into factors affecting their choices of meat and particularly beef there was a qualitative consumer research carried out within the project co-financed by the European Fund of Regional Development in the framework of Operation Program for Innovative Economy entitled Optimum beef production in accordance with the strategy "from fork to farm", using the method of focus group interviews (FGI). Basic objective of the research was to find out what are the attributes associated with beef in comparison with other types of meat, namely pork and poultry.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussion designed to obtain perception on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment [Krueger and Casey 2009]. Each group is conducted with 5 to 10 people led by a skilled moderator. To obtain information on Polish consumers perception of beef there were in total 20 FGI carried out each with approximately 8–12 participants selected on the basis of detailed recruitment questionnaire. The research sample included women aged 35–65 years, running households and evaluating positively material situation of their households. The recruitment criteria for participants of the group discussions included also their income

situation because beef consumption in the Polish households is essentially statistically different due to the level of income.

The composition of focus groups is listed below:

- 4 FGI – aged 55–65, retired women or professionally active women, secondary education minimum'
- 6 FGI – aged 35–45, professionally active women, managers or specialists, higher education, having a child up to 15 years old,
- 4 FGI – women, regular beef consumers'
- 4 FGI – women, potential beef consumers'
- 2 FGI – women declaring not buying beef at all or occasionally.

The sessions were run according to the guidelines including the core issues to be explored. During the session the projective techniques were used that are based on the underlying principle that unconscious desires and feelings can be inferred by presenting a subject with an ambiguous situation in which he or she has to use the ego defense mechanism of projection [Donoghue 2000]. Instead of questioning participants directly, the subjects may be asked to respond indirectly, either talking about other people, these other people's feelings, attitudes and opinions, or about objects or situations. Participants were asked to imagine yourselves that they live on a planet where people consume beef and describe it using various aspects. It was an attempt to elicit unconscious association with beef and to prove how much the objectively stated higher nutritive value of beef [Kunachowicz et al 2005] and higher content of vitamins and other nutritive elements in beef in comparison with other types of meat is confirmed by consumers and constitutes specific attributes of this meat category.

The entire interviews were transcribed and the data was analyzed using qualitative analytic approaches as described by Stewart et al [2007].

ATTRIBUTES ASSOCIATED WITH BEEF: POLISH CONSUMERS ON BEEF VALUES IN THE LIGHT OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH RESULTS

It can generally be stated that based on analysis of focus group discussion participants' opinions the most important attribute of meat is its "freshness". Apart from that the respondents emphasized that meat and actually meat dishes, have to be "tasty", "well made and seasoned" and also "quick and easy to prepare", "economic and efficient". The respondents also stated that meat dishes should be "healthy", "low in fat", "rich in vitamins" and "liked by children".

Participants of the group interviews also pointed out that meat should come from a secure source and should be useful for preparing a variety of dishes what is reflected in the statements cited below:

- *"Healthy and tasty – this is equally important"*;
- *"Not overpriced, economic"*;
- *"For example, I am guided by what is liked by family members even if they have different tastes, I cook what everyone likes"*;
- *"Time to prepare is also important, it is important that it doesn't take much time"*;
- *"Saving time is important, because we live so fast"*;

- *“I pay attention to healthiness and variety, so that everyone eats, time plays a role, and I try to diversify...”*

The consumers taking part in the group discussions noted that meat is the basis of nutrition and hence – in the opinion of respondents – it must be included in the menu every day. The basic attribute of meat is that it “gives strength and satisfies hunger for longer”. Because children often do not like meat it is essential to prepare it in such a way it is liked. This is not especially difficult according participants of focus group discussions since “meat gives great opportunities to diversify the ways of preparing”. Meat is also seen “as the most cost-effective component of a dinner given wholesomeness”. The participants also pointed out that meat can affect health, but only if it is fatty and prepared in an unhealthy manner such as fried meat. Basic values of meat include – according to participants of focus group discussions – the following positive attributes:

- *“It gives strength and energy”*;
- *“It is satiating, nutritious, substantial and appeases hunger for a long time”*;
- *“It is tasty”*;
- *“It gives calm”*;
- *“Contains elements necessary for proper development”*;
- *“It is easy to prepare”*;
- *“There are many ways to prepare it”*;
- *“It is economic, efficient”*.

Respondents also noted the negative features of meat related mainly to its health impact, convenience and prices what is reflected in the statements included below:

- *“It is the source of cholesterol”*;
- *“Unhealthy if fat”*;
- *“Unhealthy if fried”*;
- *“Full of calories, fatty”*;
- *“Some types of meat (e.g. beef) take a lot of time to prepare, so it is labour-consuming”*;
- *“It spoils quickly and is not fresh”*;
- *“It is not always known where it comes from and how it was stored”*;
- *“Some types of meat are expensive”*;
- *“It is not possible to check everything e.g. if it was stimulated by hormones”*.

However, in the course of discussion the respondents underlined that meat, irrespective of its type, is the basis of nutrition.

- *“We all like meat, it is tasty”*;
- *“Meat is very important/indispensable for health”*;
- *“Meat is rich of calories, especially some kinds of meat Some kinds of meat, for example pork, is reach of cholesterol and unhealthy fat”*.

To get insight how consumers conceptualize other types of meat they were asked to describe positive and negative aspects of pork and chicken meat. As regards pork, its positive values have been most often stressed, such as cheap, easy and quick to prepare, can be prepared in many ways. The respondents have also emphasized the fact of its undisputable presence in the national menu because pork is used to prepare the most typical Polish dish which is pork-joint cutlet. Regarding negative features of pork, the following have been mentioned most often: fat, unhealthy, source of cholesterol, sometimes smells when fried.

In case of poultry meat the following basic positive attributes were mentioned: “lean, easy for digestion, cheap, easily available, quick to prepare, can be prepared in many ways”. The respondents also stressed that children like poultry because “it is tasty and easy to chew”.

As regards basic negative features of poultry, the following were mentioned: artificial farming, high content of chemicals and hormones, not recommended by doctors, tasteless, spoils quickly. In the context of group discussion opinions on attributes of particular types of meat it can be said that beef has a rather favourable position as compared to other types of meat and its positive attributes relate particularly to health values which confirms that the consumers are aware of the abundance of nutritive elements which can be found in beef. It is reflected in the opinions expressed by participants included below:

- *“Rich in iron, healthy”;*
- *“Healthiest, lean. Veal and beef, when it comes to taste for me, these are the best”;*
- *“Most lean meat”;*
- *“Well, it is tasty in general”;*
- *“Beef is the basis of protein in general...”;*
- *“It has so much proteins and is one of the healthiest meats”.*

In the light of opinions expressed by participants of focus group discussions there is no doubt that consumers are well aware of healthy values of beef and perceive it as a special type of meat both due to its high nutritive value as well as specific taste. However, these positive connotations are confronted with negative opinions on beef, the most important of which are: there is no beef on the market of expected quality and the good quality beef which is available is too expensive. According to the participants of focus group interviews the main indicators of high quality beef are connected with appearance and particularly low fat content:

- *“Must be vivid color, bright red, juicy, but not too dark”;*
- *“Not dried”;*
- *“Low in fat, if the fat is visible it cannot be yellow”;*
- *“Young, not very large or large piece”;*
- *“Without veins, hypertrophy”.*

It is also worth noting that although it results from other research [Sajdakowska, Gutkowska 2002] that Poles have an ethnocentric approach to food, the “Polish origin of beef” has not been spontaneously mentioned. However, the respondents who were plied

with this question confirmed their preference for food of the Polish origin. Majority of consumers believe that the meat they buy is produced in Poland although they have never met such information, maybe because they most frequently buy unpacked meat.

CONSUMERS' NOTIONS ON BEEF IN THE CONTEXT OF RESULTS OF THE PROJECTION TECHNIQUE USED

In qualitative consumer research, projective techniques explore associations with brands, symbols, products, advertising, and images. It explores people's subconscious feelings, beliefs, and desires. Respondents project their feelings and beliefs about other people or objects. In doing so, they reveal feelings and beliefs about themselves. Projection techniques make it possible to obtain opinions which are not distorted by the burden of declarative aspect of personal observations due to concern about their evaluation by others. In the course of group discussion the respondents were asked to imagine a "planet of beef eating people" and present an opinion on the planet and its inhabitants. Generally speaking, the respondents' opinions both on the planet and its inhabitants are univocally positive. Beef consumers' planet is characterized as a clean, green and quiet place. The inhabitants – beef consumers are also perceived in a univocally positive way. Their characteristics can be divided into three main categories: physical, psychological and socio-demographic. Not all of the categories have been completed in the same extent with specific characteristics of the planet inhabitants – beef consumers. The fact that physical and psychological characteristics have been mentioned most often is connected with the earlier documented health and taste values of beef which are responsible for psychological characteristics of consumers, having the defined hedonistic feelings. Physical characteristics of the inhabitants of the planet identified with beef consumers mentioned most often were: "no overweight, strong and muscular". It was also stressed that they are thin, good-looking and healthy. The respondents also said consumers of beef and inhabitants of the planet had an easy life. The only socio-demographic characteristic that the participants of the group discussions mentioned as regards the inhabitants of the planet identified with beef consumers was "being well-off". This is worth noting due to the fact that in previous opinions the respondents mentioned that one of important features of beef was its high price. The results are of importance for creating communication strategies on the beef market since they underline various dimensions of this food category.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of qualitative research on Polish meat consumers are relatively consistent with previous findings of e.g. Bredhal et al [1998] who indicate that consumer identify tenderness, taste, juiciness, and freshness as main quality attributes, Although as Grunert et al [1996] suggested these quality attributes have been supplemented by health, nutrition and wholesomeness what is also a growing concern of Polish consumers. In the context of presented considerations supported by results of literature analyses and carried out research the following conclusions can be formulated. The image of beef is positive and

significantly more attractive than of pork or poultry, although it can be noted that in the group of women not buying beef, poultry had the most positive image. Basic elements of positive characteristics of beef are: being healthy and tasty. Negatively perceived features of beef, balancing its positive image are unpredictable quality and a relatively high price. As a result of the clash between values of beef that Polish consumers are clearly aware of and its high price and difficulty in preparing for consumption in a way expected by family members, especially the youngest ones, beef is not often consumed in Polish homes.

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POSTRZEGANIE WALORÓW WOŁOWINY PRZEZ POLSKICH KONSUMENTÓW JAKO CZYNNIK WPLYWAJĄCY NA WZROST POPYTU NA TĘ KATEGORIĘ ŻYWNOSCI

Streszczenie. W celu określenia atrybutów przypisywanych wołowinie i ich hierarchizacji zrealizowano badania z wykorzystaniem podejścia jakościowego. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują, że wołowina była postrzegana jako zdrowa, chuda, z dużą zawartością żelaza, smaczna i odświeżająca. Warto też zwrócić uwagę na negatywne aspekty. Wołowina w oczach respondentów jest trudna w przygotowaniu, droga i twarda. Konsumentki wskazywały, że nie jest łatwo kupić dobrą wołowinę i, że dzieci nie lubią tego mięsa. Podczas badań jakościowych zastosowano techniki projekcyjne, co pozwoliło na określenie, że wołowina kojarzona jest z siłą, aktywnością, lekkością, kreatywnością, zamożnością, spokojem, elegancją, szczęściem i zdrowiem. Przedstawione wyniki mogą być wykorzystane w strategii komunikowania atrybutów mięsa wołowego polskim konsumentom.

Słowa kluczowe: wołowina, konsument, postrzeganie, badania jakościowe

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