Consumer characteristics and ethnocentric attitudes towards food products. Evidence from Poland.

Abstract
The aim of this paper is to analyze the consumer ethnocentrism towards food products. In particular, we were interested in the relationship between age, gender and income of respondents and consumer ethnocentrism level. This is underdeveloped area in marketing literature. The results of the study suggest that the relationship between the level of consumer ethnocentrism and consumer characteristics is weak. Gender and income were found not to affect the level of ethnocentrism, while the influence of age was weak. In general, ethnocentrism towards food products was found to be weak, yet it showed tendency to grow with consumer’s age.

Keywords: consumer ethnocentrism, consumer characteristics, food products
1. Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Consumer ethnocentrism

The construct of ethnocentrism was introduced by Sumner (1906), who defined it as a general predisposition of an individual to base evaluations of external phenomena in relationship to standards of a group an individual belongs. In sociology, ethnocentrism is regarded as a universal trait, which implies behaviors that are discriminatory in nature (Chinen, 2010). When ethnocentrism level is high, everything perceived as “in-group” is perceived as normative and superior, while “out-group” or “external” as inferior. Ethnocentrism is associated also with cooperative behaviors within a group and reluctance or rejection of cooperative relationships with out-groups (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2008).

Shimp and Sharma (1987), who adopted the construct to marketing, defined consumer ethnocentrism as personality trait, founded in generally stable beliefs that dictate what is considered right, or moral, in the context of foreign product purchase. Consumer ethnocentric attitudes seem to direct decision making process towards purchase and consumption of products known or perceived as domestically produced rather than against the foreign ones. Although ethnocentrism is typically linked to discriminatory behaviors, it can be also analyzed as in-group favoritism (Smyczek & Glowik, 2011). This perspective is consistent with anthropological and psychological perspectives that differentiate between ethnocentrism (in-group favoritism) and xenophobia (hostility towards out-group (Brown, 2004); Kwak, et al., 2006).

According to Rawwas et al. (1996) strongly ethnocentric consumers tend to advocate domestic products and discount the value of foreign ones. Rawwas and Rajendran (1996) indicated that high levels of consumer ethnocentrism led to overestimations of the value of domestic products, and underestimation of imported ones.

1.2 Consumer characteristics and ethnocentric tendencies

It is generally agreed that the key factors that strengthen ethnocentric tendencies are product category and attributes. According to Watson and Wright (2000), high level of consumer ethnocentrism may be moderated by specific, desired product attributes. However, within the extant literature on the consumer ethnocentrism, the relationship between consumer characteristics and the ethnocentrism is rather underdeveloped. It is not clear whether consumer characteristics such as the age, gender, and income allow prediction of consumer ethnocentrism levels and how they moderate decisions (Josiassen, et al., 2011). The recent empirical evidence available is rather mixed and confusing (Shankarmahesh, 2006). Shankarmahesh discussed six studies that have found older consumer more ethnocentric than younger, and two studies which revealed the opposite relationship. For example, Bannister and Saunders (1978) found that younger consumer are more ethnocentric, but they also found attitudes of consumers in the UK became more favorable towards domestic products when their age increased. The same confusion concerns the relationship between gender and ethnocentrism. While several studies suggest that female consumers are more ethnocentric, some found no significant differences between genders (Caruana, 1996), and some indicate that men tend to be more ethnocentric (Bannister & Saunders, 1978). Mittal and Tsiros found that female consumers rate imported products more favorably, but this could be affected by other factors (Josiassen, et al., 2011). Studies by Balabanis et al. (2011) and Sharma et al. (1995) suggest that men are less ethnocentric than women. Gender may not only affect consumers’ ethnocentric tendencies, but also their propensity to act upon these. This is confirmed by several studies in marketing, which suggest that women are not only more consistent between their attitudes and behaviors, but also
between their attitudes and intentions (Burton, et al., 1995). Josiassen et al. (2011) argue that women tend to be more ethnocentric because they tend to be more conformist, conservative and collectively minded.

There is also no agreement regarding the influence of income on consumer ethnocentrism. The assumption prevailing in marketing literature is that higher income makes consumers less ethnocentric, as they tend to be more cosmopolitan (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2011). Studies by Sharma et al. (1995) and Caruana (1996) indicated negative relationship between income and consumer ethnocentrism. Han and Terpstra (1988) found no income effects, and Tan and Farley (1988), and Balabanis et al. (2011) reported positive relationship. The recent study by Jossiasen et al. (2011) found no significant influence of income on consumer ethnocentric tendencies.

The review of literature on consumer characteristics and ethnocentrism supports the claim that the empirical evidence is inconsistent and mixed (Shankarmahesh, 2006). In fact, many studies of consumer ethnocentrism continuously repeat the errors that add to the confusion. These were brilliantly analyzed by Jossiasen et al. (2011), who pointed at conducting research on students, applying product-country images as a proxy for consumer ethnocentrism, and erroneous cross-referencing without careful verification of previous studies. This, in result, limits not only our understanding of how consumer characteristics allow predicting consumer ethnocentrism, but also managerial relevance of research in this area.

1.3 Consumer ethnocentrism and food products

With the few exceptions, the majority of research is dedicated to other than food products (Orth & Firbasova, 2003). Typical objects of investigation are product categories such as electronics, apparel and automobiles. Studies investigating food products are rare, with some notable exceptions, such as Orth and Fribasova (2003) and Chryssochoidis et al. (2005). Orth and Fribasova found that among various demographic characteristic, age was most significantly linked to consumer ethnocentrism and the resulting consumer choice, supporting the results of the earlier studies (Grunert & Valli, 2001).

The majority of empirical evidence, however, focuses on Country of Origin Effect (COO) rather, then on ethnocentrism as such. Food product purchase is considered by most of the authors as not very involving and, therefore, not engaging consumers into long information searching and processing. Since the attribute information is often limited at the point of purchase, one can expect the final decision to be based on price, packaging and COO (Orth & Firbasova, 2003). However, food consumption is very specific, so these assumptions may be oversimplification. Eating habits reflect not only complex biological processes, but are also culturally, historically and socially determined. Food consumption represents one of the most complex consumption forms at all, with strong symbolism. It is generally agreed that eating habits are characterized by limited rationality, not only because of limited information availability, but also the influence of cultural factors. Decisions regarding food purchases are made within social context, like family, and are affected by individual factors such as experiences and knowledge of individuals. Eating habits result from consumer socialization process at the early stage of an individual’s development. They tend to emerge in the early age and endure, due to consumer conservatism. Therefore, the preferences towards food products may consolidate in relatively young age. In result, there could be no significant differences between 30 and 70 years old consumers within specific social group. The sense of taste, motivating the choice of food products, is strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors such as family or religion (Gutkowska, 2004).

The contradicting and limited evidence motivated our investigation into the relationship between consumers’ characteristics and consumer ethnocentrism in the food context.
2. Purpose of the Research and Methodology

The aim of the study was the identification of consumer ethnocentrism level towards food products, as well as their attitudes towards their purchase and consumption. In particular, we were interested on the relationship between age, gender and income of respondents. Given the contradictory empirical evidence reported in marketing literature, we propose a set of hypotheses regarding the role consumer characteristics on consumer ethnocentric tendencies:

H1: The level of consumer ethnocentrism grows with consumer age.
H2: The level of consumer ethnocentrism depends on consumer’s gender.
H3: The level of consumer ethnocentrism decreases with growth of consumer’s income.

To validate the above research hypotheses we conducted CAPI and CAWI surveys. The convenient sample consisted of 435 respondents, classified into 4 groups. The first two groups included “seniors”- above 60 years old (age average – 67.3, age median 67), who were students of so called “Third Age” universities in Warsaw (135 respondents) and Sokół Podlaski (43 respondents; this group was included to control the location factor). The third group comprised 121 young adults (students of Kozminski University) (age average 21.3, age median 21). Fourth group included 125 adults (professional courses students of Kozminski University) (age average 35.5, age median 33.5). In the “senior” group 91% were women, 5%- men, which reflects, in our opinion, the general demographic tendency in this age group. In the third and fourth groups women constituted 54% respondents, men- 45%. The survey was conducted in November 2013 and March 2014.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first included modified CET Scale (CETSCALE, Consumer Ethnocentric Tendency Scale) (Shimp and Sharma, 1987). CET scale was modified to 10 questions (maximum scale’s value was 50). Five – level Likert item scale was used (where “1” meant “Strongly disagree” and “5” meant “Strongly agree”). The modifications were necessary to facilitate elder respondents participation, as suggested by the results of the pilot study. The second part of the questionnaire included questions relating to consumers’ attitudes towards foreign and Polish food products. No specific food product category was specified, since the aim of the study was to analyze the general ethnocentric tendency (general categories such as “food”, “food products” and “dishes” were used interchangeably). No specific country of origin was indicated in this part of the questionnaire. Instead “Polish- foreign” dichotomy was employed.

The third part of the questionnaire included questions relating to consumer behaviors, in particular purchasing and consumption of foreign food products. These questions related to issues such as buying, in- home preparation of “foreign” dishes and participating in “thematic” in – store promotions of “foreign” cuisines in the selected retail chains.

3. Findings

Table 1 presents summary of research findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnocentrism level</th>
<th>Young adults (20-25 years)</th>
<th>Adults (26-59 years)</th>
<th>Seniors (60+’ Warsaw)</th>
<th>Seniors (60+: outside Warsaw)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>22,25758</td>
<td>22,48351</td>
<td>28,78519</td>
<td>34,21429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>7,969279</td>
<td>8,40899</td>
<td>12,63352</td>
<td>8,691911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ethnocentrism level was higher and more diversified in the two groups of seniors, where 6 respondents scored maximum value on the scale adopted (50). There was no significant difference between “young adults” and “adults”, where no maximum score was recorded. There was no correlation between consumer ethnocentrism level and gender. Similarly, there was no correlation between consumer ethnocentrism level and income. Therefore, hypotheses H2 and H3 were not supported.

Pearson correlation for consumer ethnocentrism and age was very low (r=0.371, p<0.001). Considering, however, other findings, this was the strongest relationship indicated. Additional analysis of averages and medians indicates differences between respondents’ groups. In both cases, ethnocentrism level was higher for “seniors”. This allows to conclude that consumer ethnocentrism level grows with the age, and to support hypothesis H1. However, it must be noted that the relationship between age and consumer ethnocentrism is weak.

The attitudes of respondents towards Polish and “foreign” food products are presented on Chart 1.

**Chart 1. Consumers’ attitudes towards Polish and “foreign” food products (in four groups, scale- 1 strongly disagree, 5 strongly agree).**

1. Polish food is easier to prepare than foreign.
2. Polish food is healthier than foreign.
3. Polish food contains less harmful substances than foreign.
4. Polish food tastes better than foreign.
5. Polish food is cheaper than foreign.
6. I have good knowledge of Polish food products.
7. Polish food is more accessible in shops than foreign.
8. The quality of Polish food products is adequate to their price.
9. Polish food is easy to consume.
10. Polish food is good for my health.
11. Polish food is natural.
12. Traditional Polish dishes remind me of my childhood.
13. Polish food products have better packaging than foreign ones.
14. Polish food products are more ecological.
15. I find traditional Polish dishes pleasant.
16. Polish dishes are easier to prepare than foreign.
17. Foreign dishes require ingredients that are difficult to find.
18. Foreign dishes are difficult to prepare.

All four groups of respondents agreed that traditional Polish food reminded them of their childhood and was well known. “Seniors” perceived preparation of “foreign” dishes difficult, and disagreed that Polish food was more difficult to prepare in comparison to “foreign”. Packaging of Polish food products was not regarded as better than “foreign”. The most significant differences were observed between “adults” and “senior” groups, which showed biggest discrepancies in their perception of Polis food’s quality, health benefits, and price. “Adults” disagreed that Polish food products were cheaper, the adequacy of its quality to price, its “naturalness”, and positive impact on health. One may hypothesize that this results from their more extensive shopping and food preparation experiences, compared with the other groups.

Younger respondents purchase “foreign” food products more often (90%, “seniors”-75%). The most popular product categories included fruit, liquors, coffee and tea. When it comes to seniors, the most often purchased “foreign” products were fruit, coffee and vegetables. “Thematic” promotional actions more often attract “young adults” and “adults” then seniors (83% compared to 60%). Trial of “foreign” food by younger respondents is motivated with curiosity, while “seniors” - price. The most popular foreign cuisine in Poland is Italian, pointed by 91% of respondents as “favorite”; the second choice was Spanish (41%).

4. Conclusions, Limitations and Implications

The results of the study suggest that the relationship between the level of consumer ethnocentrism and consumer age is weak. Gender and income were found not to affect the level of ethnocentrism. In general, ethnocentrism towards food products was found to be weak, yet it showed tendency to grow with consumer age. This confirms the results of some earlier studies, in particular Jossiasen et al. findings on relationship between age and ethnocentrism, and the lack of thereof between income and ethnocentrism. However, there are limitations to the study, that need to be taken into consideration.

The main limitation of the research results from the sampling method. The convenient sampling used does not allow for generalization beyond the population of respondents surveyed. The choice of sampling approach was dictated by time and cost limitations. The quality of research conducted was ensured by data and methodological triangulation (4 groups, 1 outside Warsaw, 2 methods of data collection). “Seniors” included in this study were students of so called “Third Age” universities. This is a specific group, taking into consideration their psychographic profile. They tend to be more active, mobile, with more diversified personal interest and in general in better psychophysical condition, contradicting negative stereotypes of the elderly. This may affect their consumer ethnocentrism level, that was found only slightly higher than of the younger respondents. Moreover, research of consumer ethnocentrism towards food products should be extended with investigation of the impact of broader cultural, social and psychological factors on ethnocentric tendencies. It would be also interesting to study consumer ethnocentrism in relationship to consumer nostalgia.

The results of the study suggest that the general ethnocentrism level does not always correspond with the level of ethnocentrism towards food products. It may suggest only declarative ethnocentric tendency, which may not reflect actual behavior when purchasing specific food product. The results in general confirm the findings available in the literature. The acceptance level of point-of-purchase promotions of foreign food products was generally high, which suggest that Polish consumers are open to foreign products. However, while younger consumers may better react to “novelty” factor, seniors may be attracted to price.
References


