

Article

The Role of the Ecological Awareness and the Influence on Food Preferences in Shaping Pro-Ecological Behavior of Young Consumers

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Abstract: Pro-ecological behavior of consumers on the food market is conditioned by many factors, among which the literature on the subject particularly indicates, is high environmental awareness. Among other factors, the influence of social groups is also emphasized, in relation to young consumers; these are mainly peers and friends, which was confirmed by the authors' research. The aim of the research was to identify the role of ecological awareness and influence on the food purchasing habits of young consumers in shaping their pro-ecological behavior. Based on the literature on the subject, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze the empirical material, reducing the number of dimensions through the use of factor analysis. Analyzing the collected material, the authors proposed three latent variables—ecological awareness (EA), impact on food preferences (IFP), and ecological behavior (EB). Hidden variables were defined by explicit variables, and the whole was characterized in the light of the literature. The research results indicated that there are significant correlations between all latent variables, however the strongest one could be observed between EA and EB. This proves that the ecological behavior of young consumers is strongly determined by their environmental awareness.

Keywords: ecological consumer behavior; ecological awareness; ecological food consumption; dietary habits; youth



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1. Introduction

For several years, in Poland, as in other European countries, a dynamic development of the organic food market has been observed. This has been due to the high potential of natural resources combined with the growing interest of consumers in high-quality food. In Poland, in 2019, 20,146 entities were active in the field of organic farming, including 18,656 organic farmers working on an area of 505,700 ha. [1]. The largest area of ecological agricultural land was occupied by cereal crops, followed by permanent grasslands. With regard to livestock production, the production of eggs and fish significantly increased, and the number of animals, especially poultry, also increased. In addition, the number of entities preparing organic products increased significantly and, despite the pandemic and the resulting increase in savings, a further increase in expenditure on ecological products was observed [1].

Despite favorable development trends, Poland is still, unfortunately, in a distant position compared to European organic food producers. In 2018, the market for organic food amounted to EUR 250 million, which is only 0.67% of the value of the EU organic food market, EUR 37,412 million [2]. Average consumer spending on ecological products in Poland is only EUR 7 per capita, per year, while the European average is EUR 50.5. It is worth noting that in Denmark and Switzerland, the average value of expenditure on

organic food is as high as EUR 312. These numbers indicate the distant position of Poland compared to other European countries in terms of organic food consumption [2].

The presented figures lead to the question of whether the situation will improve in the future. According to the authors of the study, the leading factor in the development of organic food production in regions with natural predispositions is shaping pro-ecological consumer behavior. Among the factors determining their development, ecological awareness should be assigned a key role. It refers to the human relationship with the natural environment and is a complex, diverse, and dynamic phenomenon.

Shaping the consumer's environmental awareness is a complex process, conditioned by numerous factors, among which demographic factors, including age, play an important role [3]. As the subject of the research, the authors chose young consumers who were assigned the role of a key segment, because the ecological awareness of young people and their related eating habits will directly affect the future of the ecological food market and the natural environment. The authors assumed that since many ecological projects have been implemented in schools in recent years and it is often young people who initiate climate protests, it should be expected that this will result in high environmental awareness and habits. These assumptions were confirmed by numerous studies conducted among young Poles, which showed that thanks to environmental education, the young generation has acquired the necessary knowledge in the field of healthy eating and has developed habits favoring respect for the natural environment and it has become more open to the adoption of alternative forms of consumption.

Similar trends, to those seen among Polish consumers, who were the subject of this research, have also been observed in other countries, where young consumers are beginning to notice the negative effects of excessive consumption, including food waste. In this spirit, young consumers strive to limit their consumption and adopt forms that are environmentally friendly [4,5]. The subject of this article fits into the presented discourse. The aim of the article is to identify the role of ecological awareness and influence on the food shopping habits of young consumers in shaping their pro-ecological behavior.

2. Review of the Subject Literature

The concept of ecological awareness has many aspects, and various approaches are dominated by the subject and methodology of research in individual scientific disciplines [6].

In a broad sense, ecological awareness means the entirety of recognized ideas, values, and opinions about the environment as a place of human life and development, common to specific social groups in a given historical period. In a narrower sense, ecological awareness is the state of knowledge, views, and perceptions of people about the role of the environment in human life, its anthropogenic load, and level of exploitation as well as threats and protection, including the state of knowledge about the methods and tools for managing the use, protection, and shaping of the environment [7].

According to Kielczewski, ecological awareness is understood as "a person's attitude towards the natural environment, a set of information and beliefs about it, as well as a system of values that this person applies to it in his behavior [8].

The term environmental awareness is often interchangeably used with other terms such as environmental consciousness or environmental concern. According to Ham et al. environmental awareness can be understood as "the attitude regarding environmental consequences of human behavior." [9]. At the same time environmental awareness "reflects people's concern for and knowledge of the impacts of their behaviors on the environment" [10]. It can be defined as "a state of being aware, having knowledge about, and being conscious of the environment in which people live, which tends to influence people's development and pro-environmental behavior" [11].

The consumers aware of environmental issues takes it into consideration in their purchasing decisions [12]. Many studies have analyzed correlations between environmental

awareness and purchasing behavior [13–17]. Hence, it can be stated that environmental awareness can be treated as a predecessor of pro-environmental behavior.

Environmental awareness is increasingly shaping consumption patterns, especially in developed markets [18], influencing habits and purchasing decisions in the organic market. The level of knowledge influences the perception of organic food [19]. The greater the knowledge of the environmental issues the bigger the chance of eco-friendly behaviors [20–22]. However, as Chan, Rokka, and Usitalo [23] note, even buyers with a very high level of environmental knowledge and awareness did not always purchase environmentally friendly products. Research indicates that age and education are related to responsible pro-environmental behavior [24].

The results of many studies conducted among consumers from different countries indicate that people with higher education are more likely to buy organic products than people with a lower level of education [25–28]. Among Polish authors, these dependencies were shown, among others, by Zrałek [29] and Witek [30].

Young et al., (2010) indicated that for consumers who choose a sustainable lifestyle, the purchasing process becomes more and more complex [31]. It requires the consumer to actively expand their knowledge of environmental problems and to assume responsibility towards the environment in the purchasing process. Environmental degradation and awareness of the effects of these processes should make the buyer appreciate the environment, which in turn should lead to interest in environmental problems and, consequently, take into account ecological criteria in individual activities, including the purchasing procedure. Therefore, the ecological consumer buys environmentally friendly products not because of fashion, but for reasons of interest and concern about ecological issues. Such a consumer checks the label as to whether the product is environmentally friendly. He is motivated to buy an organic product, even if it is of lower quality and higher price than the substitute product [32]. Companies can increase the level of knowledge through disclosure practices regarding environmental aspects which can lead to their increased profitability [33].

The pro-ecological behavior of consumers is the subject of many analyses, among which it is worth paying attention especially to the studies by Peatti [34], Steg and Vlek [35], Shaw and Shiu [36], Newholm [37], Cherrier [38], Szmigin and Carrigan [39]. The reorientation of buyers' behavior is related to the growing concern for the environment and people and is constantly gaining in importance. It is related to the emergence of new awareness among buyers, who more and more often pay attention to the environment, health, safety, higher quality, and other people's needs when buying food [40–42].

In discussion of the ecological behavior of buyers, it is emphasized that the value system plays an important role. It is an ordered set of values recognized by an individual, group, and society, taking into account also their multiple interrelationships. Many studies have shown a positive correlation between environmental, social, and ethical values of buyers and their purchasing behavior in the organic market [42,43].

Aertsens et al. based their explanation of buying and consuming organic food on values such as safety, hedonism, universalism, goodness, stimulation, self-control, and compliance [44]. Krystallis et al. found that transcendental values such as universalism and kindness are closer to regular buyers of organic food than to casual buyers [45]. With regard to other organic products, buyers willing to pay more for ecological products placed greater emphasis on transcendental values such as harmony with nature and social justice. On the other hand, a lower inclination was associated with egoistic values, when the surveyed buyers attributed the greatest importance to functional and economic values [46]. In particular, altruism, universalism, and kindness were identified as values that positively influence the intention to buy and the actual purchase of ecological products [47]. Moreover, it was found that individualistic values, such as health orientation and safety, as well as hedonistic values, positively influence purchases of organic products [48]. An important contribution from the point of view of explaining pro-ecological behavior is made by the concept of values by Schwartz, who defines values in terms of beliefs. Beliefs-values

concern the desired goals people set for themselves, and these are goals that go beyond specific actions and situations [49].

Although in the literature on the subject one can find many studies showing the influence of values on environmentally friendly behavior, it is also noted that the same values do not influence all types of ecological behavior and do not affect them in the same way [50–52].

The influence of the social environment has a direct impact on the behavior of buyers towards organic products. Each consumer functions in a social environment and is associated with various social groups, including family and professional and school groups.

Motivation related to identifying with a given social group or adjusting to social groups with a higher status or income may lead to ecological purchasing behavior [53]. The trend towards “Eco” also influences the purchase of ecological products, especially ecological food. According to Brisman, the willingness to follow trends in the case of a large group of buyers may have negative consequences, e.g., exclusion of those who do not have sufficient funds to buy organic products [54]. Consumers looking for social approval were willing to pay more for ecological products [55], which means that both friends and family [56], as well as well-known nutrition authorities will play an important role for them in shaping pro-ecological behavior [57]. At different stages of life, the importance of social interactions varies.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. *The Aim of the Study*

The aim of the research was recognition and evaluation of the selected aspects of ecological awareness and behaviors of the consumers related mainly to the choice of food. The research was conducted with the aim of addressing the question of to what extent ecological awareness has an impact on ecological behavior. On the other hand, the relationships between social influences on food preferences, ecological behavior, and ecological awareness were studied. The authors focused on the market of food products, which could be assessed from an environmental perspective. The paper recognizes the ecological awareness as well as the eco-friendly behavior of the young consumers which enabled the correlation that occurred to be recognized as well indicating the direction of suggested actions aimed at developing the eco-friendly and sustainable purchasing decisions and activities of the young consumers.

3.2. *The Questionnaire*

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of the questions divided into three sections (knowledge, practice, activity) as well as sociodemographic questions. The Likert scale was used in order to measure respondents’ attitudes. Despite the fact that the scale does not use natural measurement units, it measures attitudes which are of a continuous character. Thus, with symmetrical indicators, the points on the scale (ranging from completely agree to completely disagree) and a sufficient number of points (at least 5), the research made the use of the 7-point scale (the differences between the points on the scale matched similar differences in terms of frequency of the features).

3.3. *Sample and Data Collection*

The survey research was conducted in April to June 2020 on a sample of $n = 265$ young respondents under 28 years of age. The description of the respondents surveyed in the south-east of Poland is included in Table 1. The age range was proposed according to Bolton et al. [58]. The selection of respondents for the survey reflected the percentage share of urban and rural population in south-eastern Poland with 64% of those surveyed coming from the countryside and 36% from the city, which indicated the purposeful selection of respondents to the survey to reflect the percentage share of urban and rural population in the studied area. The majority of the surveyed were women (77.7%) since it is women who

are more often responsible for buying household food products [59] and they also seem more inclined to purchase ecological products [60].

Table 1. The characteristics of the respondents surveyed (under 28 years of age from Poland).

The Average Net Monthly Income per Capita in the Household *		Rural Areas			Urban Areas		
		Number	Column from N	% of N in the Table	Number	Column from N	% of N in the Table
Below the average of the surveyed area	Female	52	30.6%	19.6	20	21.1	7.5
	Male	9	5.3%	3.4	4	4.2	1.5
Within the average of the surveyed area	Female	64	37.6%	24.2	35	36.8	13.2
	Male	16	9.4%	6.0	10	10.5	3.8
Above the average of the surveyed area	Female	20	11.8%	7.5	15	15.8	5.7
	Male	9	5.3%	3.4	11	11.6	4.2

* The average net monthly income per capita in the household (approximately PLN 1400). Source: own case study.

In the process of analysis of the empirical material, descriptive statistics and multidimensional exploration techniques were primarily used. The resulting database characterizing ecological behavior of young people has become the basis for statistical analyses in IBM SPSS Statistics 26 and IBM AMOS 26 graphics. This software allowed the use of modern methods of empirical data evaluation and analysis. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was also used in the study. The applied SEM structural equation models were mainly used to verify (and not explore) the models, i.e., they related directly to identifying and supporting certain conceptual solutions built in empirical research [61].

The process of developing ecological awareness includes the specific levels of being more sensitive and the level of perception of the natural environment in the scale of dichotomy of the destroyed and not destroyed environment with respect to its protection, and concludes with obeying the eco-friendly norms of behavior. The sociological aspect of ecological awareness makes it possible to:

- recognize the values of a particular social group and the importance of ecological norms;
- evaluate the level of knowledge of the threats resulting from the destruction of the natural environment;
- study the correlation between the ecological awareness and specific behavior of people and their plan for the future [62].

In the research process the following hypotheses were put forward:

H1: *Ecological awareness (EA) is positively correlated with ecological behavior (EB).*

H2: *Influence on food preferences (IFP) is positively correlated with ecological behavior (EB).*

H3: *Influence on food preferences (IFP) is positively correlated with ecological awareness (EA).*

Starting the research process, the following research assumptions were made:

- the questionnaire and selection of research tools in the study were based on literature studies;
- the analysis of the collected research material conducted in the work focused mainly on qualitative variables measured with the use of the Likert scale (seven-point);
- the theoretical construct proposed in the work was developed on the basis of literature studies, while the empirical construct was based on our own research.

The maximum likelihood method (MLM), the generalized least squares method (GLS), and asymptotically insensitive method (AIM) are distinguished among the methods of estimating the SEM models. The AIM was used in the analysis, the sample size was 265 entities. The required number in this method ranges from 200 to 500 objects (265 in this

research). The model consists of two parts. A measurement model represents the exogenous measurements (whose variability is determined by causes outside the model which are not explained by other variables in the model. They are always independent variables; the arrows in the model always come from them) and the endogenous measurements (whose variability is explained by the impact of other variables in the model). They are always dependent on other hidden variables in the model of structural equations [63–66].

The internal model, also called the structural model, has the following form (Figure 1):

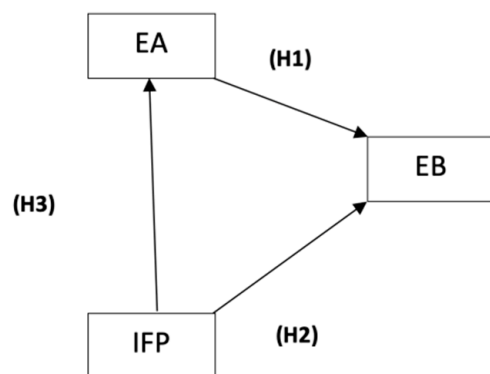


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the effects of ecological awareness (EA) and influence on food preferences (IFP) on the ecological behavior (EB). Source: own case study.

The hidden variable of the ecological awareness (EA) is represented by the observable variables of EA_1, EA_2, EA_3, and EA_4, whereas the variable of ecological behavior (EB) is represented by EB_1, EB_2, and EB_3. The variable of influence on food preferences (IFP) is represented by the following observable variables IFP_1, IFP_2, and IFP_3. Table 2 provides the characteristics of being the hidden and observable variables operating.

Table 2. Operationalization of hidden variables.

Designation in the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Diagram	Content of the Determinant	Assigned Hidden Variable	Factor Analysis FCA
EA1	I believe that an ecological product is worth any price and I am ready to pay up to 50% more for it in return for a guarantee of high quality	Ecological awareness (EA) Cronbach’s alpha (0, 80)	0.672
EA2	I consider myself a consumer who strongly prefers organic products, rejecting the offer of cheap, mass food		0.668
EA3	I agree to pay more for better quality organic food		0.568
EA4	For the sake of my health and physical condition, I try to reduce food purchases quantitatively in favor of higher quality products		0.508
IFP1	Famous, popular people, who are my authority, have a great influence on shaping healthy food purchasing habits	Influence on food preferences (IFP) Cronbach’s alpha (0, 55)	0.585
IFP2	My friends/peers play a great role in shaping healthy food purchasing habits		0.723
IFP3	My family plays a major role in shaping healthy food purchasing habits		0.550
EB1	If I have surplus food, I give it to others or to food banks	Ecological behaviour (EB) Cronbach’s alpha (0, 65)	0.811
EB2	I do not buy food with environmentally unfriendly packaging		0.714
EB3	I rarely eat meat due to a balanced diet and environmental pollution resulting from its production		0.736

Source: own case study.

4. Results and Discussion

The model's fit with the empirical data is described by the following set of standard diagnostic measures (the values in parentheses show the recommended thresholds for models with an acceptable fit based on Garson [67]):

Chi-square/df = 2.741 (<3)

p -value for the model <0.001 (>0.05)

GFI = 0.932 (≥ 0.9)

CFI = 0.896 (≥ 0.9)

AGFI = 0.884 (≥ 0.8)

RMSEA = 0.051 (≤ 0.08)

The model (Figure 2) can be considered acceptable taking into consideration diagnostic indexes of the degree of matching with empirical data (four indicators in the norm). The chi-square was 263,121, with a number of degrees of freedom (df) = 96 and a significance level of $p < 0.001$ (the chi-square measure allows for testing the null hypothesis about the lack of discrepancy between the observed covariance matrix and the matrix implied by the model). In the analyzed model, the relative chi-square was 2.972 (less than 3 for a well-fitted model to empirical data). Goodness of fit index (GFI)—an indicator of the goodness of matching the model to empirical data—was 0.932, which suggested that with other indicators at an acceptable level, the quality of the model may have been satisfactory. AGFI (adjusted goodness of fit index) was 0.884 (the suggested value is ≥ 0.8), while CFI (Comparative Fit Index) was 0.896 (the suggested value is ≥ 0.9). RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation) is a measure of the divergence of the model adjusted for its level of complexity, i.e., the number of parameters [68]. The RMSEA value for the obtained model was 0.051 (the recommended range is ≤ 0.08). The 90% confidence interval RMSEA ranged from 0.073 to 0.092 [69]. As a further diagnostic activity, no problems were found with the reliability of the measuring scales (high Cronbach's alpha values). The detailed description of the regression weights is presented in Table 3 (unstandardized estimates) and Table 4 (standardized estimates).

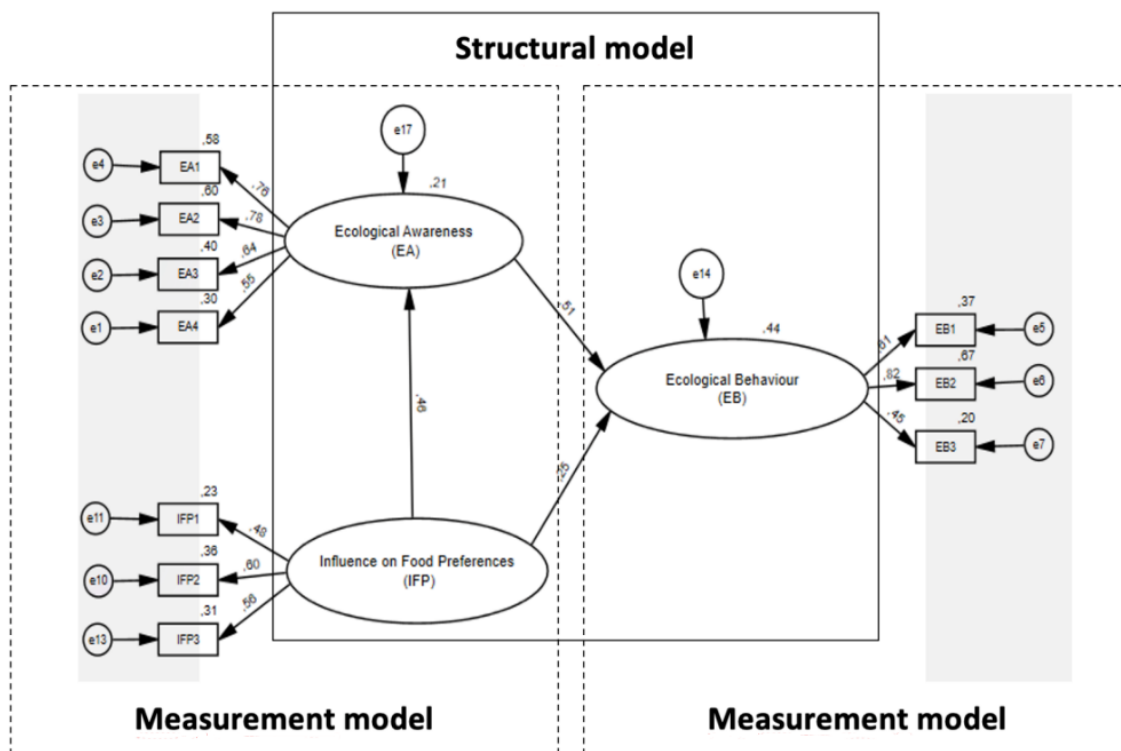


Figure 2. Structural equation model of customer ecological behavior (standardized estimates). Source: own case study.

Table 3. Regression weights in the model (unstandardized estimates).

Designation in the SEM Diagram			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	<i>p</i>
EA	←	IFP (H3)	0.461	0.124	3.235	0.001
EB	←	EA (H1)	0.597	0.134	4.452	***
EB	←	IFP (H2)	0.252	0.112	2.262	0.024
EA1	←	EA	1.000			
EA2	←	EA	1.113	0.154	7.240	***
EA3	←	EA	1.432	0.173	8.301	***
EA4	←	EA	1.533	0.195	7.846	***
EB1	←	EB	1.000			
EB2	←	EB	1.393	0.188	7.430	***
EB3	←	EB	0.868	0.146	5.924	***
IFP1	←	IFP	1.000			
IFP2	←	IFP	0.895	0.179	4.995	***
IFP3	←	IFP	0.995	0.227	4.379	***

***, show significance at $p < 0.001$. Source: own case study.

Table 4. Regression weights in the model (standardized estimates).

Designation in the SEM Diagram			Estimate
EA	←	IFP (H3)	0.462
EB	←	EA (H1)	0.508
EB	←	IFP (H2)	0.248
EA1	←	EA	0.550
EA2	←	EA	0.636
EA3	←	EA	0.778
EA4	←	EA	0.764
EB1	←	EB	0.607
EB2	←	EB	0.817
EB3	←	EB	0.452
IFP1	←	IFP	0.475
IFP2	←	IFP	0.599
IFP3	←	IFP	0.560

Source: own case study.

Analyzing the structural equation models (SEM), it can be observed that (H1) a significant and clear correlation (0.508, $p < 0.001$) of the ecological awareness (EA) which had a positive impact on the ecological behavior (EB). Analyzing the gathered data, it should be emphasized that there was a positive correlation (H3) (0.462, $p < 0.05$) between the influence on food preferences (IFP) and ecological awareness (EA).

The hypothesis (H2) (0.248, $p = 0.024$) that there is a positive correlation between the influence on food preferences (IFP) and the ecological awareness (EA) has been confirmed.

The influence of other people on food purchasing choices is clear. The influence of the peer group is particularly strong, which is in line with expectations, because young people most often try to adapt to the accepted social norms within their peer group. Parents' nutritional preferences favor the development of similar food choice habits by young people [70,71]. However, while in childhood the family and the close relationships

established within it are the most important, in adolescence, the peer group begins to play an increasingly important role in the consumer choices of young people [72,73].

The research shows that there is a relationship between IFP and EA. This may be related to the fact that people who are influenced by others in the field of ecological food choices are simultaneously educated in the same area and their level of knowledge increases, and thus their ecological awareness grows. At the same time, there is a relationship between the level of ecological awareness and the various manifested aspects of pro-ecological behavior. A significant amount of research also shows the existence of such relationships. Consumers with a high level of ecological awareness are more often involved in purchasing ecological products [74]. Raising awareness therefore helps to stimulate the demand for organic products [75]. Consumers who are more knowledgeable about the environment show a higher tendency to act positively on environmental issues [20,21]. However, the positive views of young consumers towards environmental protection are not always reflected in their activities [76,77]. It is also worth emphasizing that, according to some research, young people, especially those aged 18–24, care the least to be perceived as environmentally friendly [78,79]. The influence of age is also visible in relation to sustainable choices in the food market of traditional and regional products [80,81]. Witek's research showed that the older the respondents, the more organic products they buy. It is also worth stressing that for older people the choice of organic products is treated as a sign of prestige and higher social status [30]. On the other hand, Zrałek states that the Polish consumer of the 21st century is a person supporting sustainable consumption, not only in terms of food selection, but also specific pro-ecological behaviors related to everyday functioning. The author showed that with age, the popularity of some pro-ecological behaviors increases i.e., buying products without packaging, using shopping lists, limiting water consumption, and limiting wastage of water and food as well as waste segregation. Based on the conducted analysis, the abovementioned author concluded that the occurrence of sustainable consumption behaviors is favored by the mature-aged consumer [29]. Concern for environmental issues reaches the highest level among consumers in western countries, i.e., those responsible for the largest part of environmental pollution [82].

The last group of dependencies, i.e., IFP and EB, was also confirmed in the research. People who are susceptible to the influence of others may therefore be more prone to certain behaviors. Building certain habits related to the purchase of organic food may, as a consequence, translate into other, specific behaviors that can be treated as pro-ecological.

5. Conclusions

Pro-ecological behavior of consumers in the food market is conditioned by many factors influencing specific purchasing decisions and actions. One of the key factors determining pro-ecological behavior is ecological awareness, the shaping of which is a complex and long-term process. It is related to buyers' perception of the relationship between the state and character of the natural environment and the conditions and quality of human life. It cannot be reduced to knowledge only, it also contains ideas, views, values, and social patterns of behavior.

One problem of modern society is both excessive consumption and the consumption of inappropriate products that threaten health, the environment, and society as a whole. This is especially noticed by young people who feel responsible for the state of the natural environment in the future and who do not accept the thoughtless accumulation of goods, which results in waste, depletion of resources, and an increase in the amount of waste and pollution. Young buyers with a high degree of environmental awareness are ready to make many sacrifices.

The research conducted by the authors shows that young consumers reject the offer of cheap mass food and are ready to pay up to 50% more in return for guaranteed access to high-quality food products. This influences the quantitative reduction of food purchases in favor of higher quality aspirations. As the analysis showed, the variables "I believe that an ecological product is worth any price and I am ready to pay up to 50% more for it in return

for a guarantee of high quality" (EA1) (me = 3, dominant = 2) and "I agree to pay more for better quality organic food" (EA3) (me = 4, dominant = 4) suggest that young consumers of organic food are rational when shopping and are willing to pay more for organic food. Due to the fact that the vast majority of respondents did not have a stable professional situation, they might have been cautious in declaring paying up to 50% more for organic products. However, aware of the high quality of organic products, they recognized the willingness to pay a higher price. As shown by the analysis of the empirical material, the indications of respondents in the income group below the average for the studied region (n = 85, me = 3.95, dominant = 4) suggest that despite the environmental awareness, the income criterion is a factor limiting buying organic food of higher price. In the group where the respondents were within the average range (n = 125, me = 4.23, dominant = 5) the income criterion, the tendency to buy more expensive food was the highest in the entire surveyed population. The respondents from the group with the income above the average in the analyzed region (n = 55; me = 4.06; dominant = 4) agreed to pay more for organic products, nevertheless, the indications are lower than for the previous group.

An important role in shaping pro-ecological eating habits is played by people from the closest environment, as well as opinion leaders perceived by young people as authorities in the field of broadly understood sustainable consumption. It is noticed that peers and friends have the greatest impact on the formation of healthy eating habits among young people, which allows us to conclude that the young generation perceives the negative effects of excessive and unhealthy consumption more and more clearly. A manifestation of concern for the environment expressed in specific pro-ecological behaviors of the surveyed consumers was sharing food surpluses with others, giving up the purchase of food products with environmentally unfriendly packaging, or eliminating some products from consumption (e.g., meat), the production or transport of which poses a threat to the environment.

The conducted analysis of the literature on the subject and the results of our own research allow us to conclude that the ecological awareness of young consumers is increasing, which is reflected in their everyday purchasing choices and pro-ecological behaviors, which in relation to the food market, are manifested in the choice of organic products.

In the light of the growing interest in organic food among consumers, in the coming years, we should expect further development of organic farming, which will provide opportunities for development, especially in areas with an unpolluted environment and traditional farming methods, which applies to many regions of Poland. Organic farming should be developed especially where the areas used for agriculture overlap with legally protected areas. As at the end of 2019, the area of legally protected areas in Poland amounted to over 10.1 million ha, which is 32.3% of the country's area [83]. The agricultural production system performs a protective function in relation to protected areas and therefore in regions with a high rate of legally protected areas, organic farming is even recommended [84].

6. Limitations

The limitation of the research is that the construct has been formed based on data collected from young consumers only. The bigger picture connected with ecological behaviors could have been obtained thanks to the research of all age groups. At the same time, the choice of the target group makes it impossible to refer the results of the research to the whole population. The research was based on respondents' declarations which might have resulted in the answers being socially approved. Furthermore, accurate measures of Likert scales can be difficult to be obtained because of the acquiescent bias. What is more, the research was mainly based on qualitative variables. It could also have included the expenditure pattern related to food products and the place of ecological food product expenditure among all age groups. Another limitation might have been the fact that the research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak which could have had an impact on purchasing habits.

7. Future Research

Further studies may examine other variables that might affect the behavioral aspects of respondents' purchasing process. Taking into account the great importance of the question of the awareness of ecological possible to consider not only different social and economic factors but also cultural ones. In further studies the authors would like to deepen the education-related aspects and extend the research time period.

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