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PROBLEMS OF RESEARCHING CONSUMERS ON SENSITIVE ISSUES – SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE EXAMPLE OF EMULATORY BEHAVIOUR

The purpose of this article is to present specific character of so called 'sensitive research' on the example of studies on consumers' emulatory behaviour, since we argue here that for respondents an imitation represents a sensitive topic. The paper is aimed at presenting particular methodological difficulties encountered in such studies and at discussing possible solutions to these problems. The reflections are based on literature studies, author's experience in researching similar subjects and some chosen results of the primary research conducted by the author, referring among others to imitation in consumers' behaviour. The research was conducted in the form of a personal interview in autumn 2010 on a nationwide sample of 1,200 people. Some results of this study prove e.g. that there are differences between respondents' statements when projective and direct questions are used, so the researcher should find a way to interpret the divergent data. The article leads to a conclusion that such sensitive research projects as studies on imitation need specific approach, use of special measurement techniques as well as cautious interpretation of their results.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, consumer research, sensitive issues, emulatory behaviour

Introduction

In case of all scientific research the proper choice of research paradigms, methods and measurement tools is essential for the quality of their results. This in turn depends on the main research problem and its formulation, so above all it depends on the type and character of phenomena which are subjects of the research. A particular challenge for the social researcher make not only these phenomena that do not submit to direct observation, but also those ones that are – more or less consciously – hidden by the subjects (respondents). The reasons for concealing some types of information sought by social scientists may be diverse but one of the most important is the fact that such data are related to topics that are very personal, embarrassing or even discrediting for the respondents. To identify such research problems the term 'sensitive topics' is used, and this type of research is described as sensitive.

In this paper we argue that emulatory behaviour (imitation), being a specific phenomenon observed in consumer behaviour¹ can be classified as a sensitive topic and as a result the research on this topic generates many serious methodological difficulties, which should be overcome by the researcher if he wants to collect valuable and reliable information.

¹ Hereafter we use the term 'consumer behaviours' defined as follows: a coherent whole of activities and actions related to making the choices in the process of satisfying consumption needs, taking place in certain social, cultural and economic circumstances. These behaviours include a set of activities aimed at the acquisition of the means of consumption as well as their use to meet the needs and the assessment of the decision accuracy. Cf. Racjonalność konsumpcji i zachowań konsumentów, E. Kieźel (ed.), PWE, Warszawa 2004, p. 16.

Objectives and methods

The aim of this article is to present specific character of the research on imitation among consumers, treated as an example of the sensitive research, with particular emphasis on methodological difficulties encountered in such studies. The reflections presented here are partly based on the studies of literature, and partly they arise from the author's experience being the result of several years of researching similar subjects.

Furthermore the paper is aimed at presenting some methodological solutions used in the primary research conducted by the author, referring among others to imitation in consumers' behaviour, carried out in autumn 2010. The research was conducted² in 8 Polish voivodships³, in the form of the structured paper and pencil personal interview (PAPI), on the sample consisting of 1,200 adults. Quota sampling was used and the two criteria adopted to set quotas were respondent's age and sex⁴. Among the respondents, there were 630 women (52,5%) and 570 men (47,5%). Additional information about other characteristics of the sample was presented in tab. 1.

Table 1. Basic sample characteristics
Tabela 1. Struktura próby badawczej pod względem wybranych cech

Age	%	Household size	%
20-24 years	10,4	1 person	12,6
25-34 years	21,0	2 persons	23,8
35-44 years	16,3	3 persons	27,7
45-54 years	19,2	4 persons or more	35,9
55 years or more	33,1		
Total	100,0	Total	100,0
Education	%	Material situation	%
Elementary	2,1	Very bad and bad	4,7
Vocational	13,7	Average	45,3
Secondary	41,4	Good	42,4
Higher	42,8	Very good	7,6
Total	100,0	Total	100,0

Source: own research.
Źródło: wyniki badań własnych.

Literature review – sensitive research and imitation as a sensitive topic

R. Hill states that the term 'sensitive topic' still has not been precisely defined by marketing researchers⁵. However, other social scientists started with some definitions of sensitive research, ranging from those that reflect specific character of the topics of

² The field research was organized by Centrum Badań i Ekspertyz in Katowice.

³ As far as the territorial scope of the study is concerned it was decided (after consulting other researchers) that interviews would be conducted in 8 voivodships (mazowieckie, wielkopolskie, zachodniopomorskie, podkarpackie, dolnośląskie, śląskie, małopolskie, lubelskie) – 150 interviews in each of them. The main idea was to do the research in such a way that each region of the country would be represented.

⁴ The quota sampling was used despite certain limitations of this method. However organizational and financial restrictions didn't allow to use probability sampling. For the designation of quotas we used the most recent at that time (September 2010) data, published in the Main Statistical Office Demographic Yearbook 2009.

⁵ R. Hill: Researching sensitive topics in marketing: The special case of vulnerable populations, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 14/1995.

investigation to those that focus on the potential implications of the research for all being involved⁶. For the purposes of a current study we accept the definition proposed by R. Lee and C. Renzetti, according to which sensitive topics are those which “deal with behaviour that is intimate, discreditable, or incriminating”⁷.

One might argue that from such a perspective virtually any social studies (including marketing and consumer research) can be sensitive in some way. However, by taking this approach we want to stress that in our opinion sensitivity of the research should not be limited to topics referring to highly problematic questions as health information, religious or sexual preferences and behaviours or criminal records. If we take broader perspective, we can see that there are various issues related to consumer behaviour and consumption patterns that can be considered sensitive. Additionally, subjects defined as such may vary widely across cultures, situations and also individuals. As a consequence, each topic potentially sensitive in its nature, requires special consideration and specific methodological solutions, as it may be difficult to ask direct questions about this subject and - even more difficult - to obtain honest and complete answers from respondents. Nevertheless, for different reasons market and especially consumer researchers have to address such sensitive questions.

Sensitive research requires sensitivity throughout the whole research process – from setting research paradigms and formulating the problem, through design to implementation, dissemination and application of the results⁸. R. Lee additionally stresses that it is important to examine the methodological issues from the perspective of both researchers and participants⁹.

In conducting sensitive research, the resolution of important methodological problems involves not only searching for the most adequate research paradigms and procedures that yield valid results, but also considering other dilemmas, including ethical ones¹⁰. One of such dilemmas is connected with the covertness of the research, which might be treated as a kind of misleading practice allowing to keep respondents unaware of the goal and topic of the research. It is often assumed that an element of covertness is required in many types of consumer research, however in case of sensitive research, it seems crucial to hide the aim and the concept of the study, at least partly. This can be done by using specific wording (e.g. descriptive terms instead of direct names of the studied phenomena) as well as by adequate order of questions and specific questioning techniques.

In this paper we argue that imitation (as well as its motives and particular symptoms of emulatory behaviour) is a phenomenon which, because of its features, makes a sensitive topic in the field of consumer research, posing certain difficulty for a researcher.

At the beginning it is worth mentioning that in defining and researching the

⁶ V. Dickson-Swift, E.L. James, P. Liamputtong: *Undertaking Sensitive Research in the Health and Social Sciences. Managing Boundaries, Emotions and Risks*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, pp. 1-3.

⁷ *Researching Sensitive Topics*, C.M. Renzetti, R. M. Lee (eds). Sage Publ. Inc., Newbury Park 1993, p. IX.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹ R. M. Lee: *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*, Sage Publications Inc., London 1993.

¹⁰ J.E. Sieber: *Ethical Dilemmas in Social Research*, in: *The Ethics of Social Research: Surveys and Experiments*, J.E. Sieber (ed.), Springer-Verlag, New York 1982, p. 1-29.

phenomenon of emulation we take both narrow and broader perspectives¹¹. So by emulation (imitation) in consumer behaviour we understand particular emulatory behaviours (e.g. consumption decisions and market choices similar to those of other consumers) on one hand and a complex psychosocial mechanism on the other. In this second, broader approach, we assume that emulation is generated by a number of stimuli (e.g. certain motives felt by the consumer), occurs in certain circumstances (e.g. is connected with performing certain social roles), and in a certain way (e.g. by pursuing the life style which is characteristic for other people).

As we mentioned, emulatory behaviour is perceived in a very unfavourable way. Regardless of its commonness and significant benefits that it provides to consumers (like e.g. faster and more effective decisions), it is considered as negative, shameful, much worse than making completely independent choices. Consumers have an excellent understanding of what is publicly perceived as better, and what is seen as worse. Therefore they are more likely to attribute some 'ennobling' purchasing behaviours (reflecting their originality and creativeness) to themselves and at the same time they readily recognize symptoms of imitation while describing and judging others' behaviours.

Even these consumers who intentionally look for some patterns and decide to imitate others, are more likely to hide this from their friends than to brag about such a behaviour in front of them, especially when it comes to certain fields like clothing and decorating the house and when it refers to imitation in a broader scale, as in case of coping the whole consumption pattern. Though different media offer lots of examples of complete consumption patterns, showing both, celebrities and 'ordinary people' furnishing their houses, filling their wardrobes with stylish clothing and jewellery, spending free time in restaurants, spa or fitness clubs, it's highly improbable that an average consumer would publicly declare that she/he just followed somebody's example in a broader scale. Buying the same perfume as a friend or a bag used by the celebrity or even going for the same exotic trip as a co-worker may be and frequently is socially approved but copying somebody's style of dressing or house decoration is not. In these fields it is still more desirable and praiseworthy to be original, creative and, especially, unique. So, even if some popular TV series create ready-to-use models of houses, patterns of spending free time and clothing and makeup styles, people rarely confirm using these models in their consumer behaviours and market choices.

Given the public's negative image of somebody imitating others, possibility of labelling a respondent an imitator (which is a potential result of an interview) makes it a sensitive topic of the research. But there are additional problems which make the studies on emulatory behaviours even more challenging. One of them refers to the fact that people are frequently not aware of their imitation tendencies and motives as they are mostly internal and subconscious. Consumers are reluctant to admit they imitate someone, not only to others but even to themselves. They avoid honest look at their

¹¹ The discussion on the concept and possible definitions of imitation are presented e.g. in: A. Burgiel: *Naśladownictwo społeczne w badaniach konsumpcji*, in: *Konsumpcja i rynek w warunkach zmian systemowych*, Z. Kędzior, E. Kieźel (eds.), PWE, Warszawa 2002, pp. 63-67. The wider deliberation on the causes, determinants, manifestations of imitation and the related demonstration and imitation effects cf. e.g.: A. Burgiel: *Znaczenie naśladownictwa i wpływów społecznych w zachowaniach konsumentów*, Wyd. AE, Katowice 2005.

actions and easily reject or rationalize inconvenient facts in order to justify them or find an excuse for engaging in some types of behaviour, like purposive peeking at others and even observing them for a longer time in order to copy their decisions. Such a 'self-defence mechanism' causes that consumers don't realize and don't remember (as they don't want to realize and remember) the examples of imitating others' behaviours and possible motivations behind such actions.

Thus, the main difficulty in the studies on imitation results from the very likely discrepancy between the respondents' statements and their actual behaviour. The discrepancy may result from both conscious and purposive respondents' actions aimed at concealing the information as well as from their unconsciousness about motives and determinants of their behaviours. These differences are indeed the cause of the growing criticism of the traditional methods of marketing research coming from the increasing number of supporters of the use of neuroscience in the analysis of consumer behaviour¹².

Unfortunately, in case of the research conducted by the author, technical and financial unavailability of more advanced measures and instruments (e.g. equipment used in neuromarketing research) left us no choice and the only accessible option allowing us to examine imitation in consumer behaviour was the use of traditional methods based on communication. But in view of abovementioned problems it was necessary to adopt specific techniques, which would help to overcome the respondents' reluctance to disclose their true opinions and feelings. The most important one was the wording of questions so that they could bring to light what was hidden. Some methodological solutions adopted by the author are presented in the next part of the paper.

Methodological solutions adopted in primary studies on emulatory behaviour

The specific character of imitation affects both the general approach in this type of research studies, and the various aspects of the research procedure as well as the particular methodological solutions. At the beginning it must be stressed that the fundamental perspective that has been adopted in the research carried out by the author is the behavioural orientation which emphasizes the impact of external factors on consumer behaviour, including the influence of reference groups, social norms, opinion leaders etc.¹³ While deciding on the adequate research paradigm it was considered whether we should take the positivist or interpretative approach, and thus whether the study should be of a quantitative or qualitative character. This dilemma was very

¹² Cf.: G. Zaltman: *Jak myśla klienci*, DW Rebis, Poznań 2008, pp. 11–12; M. Lindstrom: *Zakupologia, Znak*, Kraków 2009, p. 27; *Nieuświadomiony afekt*, R. K. Ohme (ed.), GWP, Gdańsk 2007, p. 19 and following; D. Maison: *Utajone postawy konsumenckie*, GWP, Gdańsk 2004, p. 52. The discussion on the sense of continuing traditional marketing research has been going on for some time. There are many symptoms suggesting that we may be close to a paradigm shift in consumer research (G. Zaltman is one of calling for change in this field), but it will not be possible unless there is a change in thinking of both researchers and managers and unless neuromarketing research will be more accessible.

¹³ Compare: A. Sagan: *Konsument w układach sieciowych – specyfika podejść badawczych*, in: *Marketing przyszłości. Trendy. Strategie. Instrumenty. Przedsiębiorstwo i konsument w ewoluującym otoczeniu*. G. Rosa, A. Smalec, I. Ostrowska (eds). *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego nr 660: Ekonomiczne Problemy Usług nr 72*. WN Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2011, p. 96-97.

difficult to solve, especially since the development of new concepts and methodological solutions in the field of qualitative research (e.g. ethnographic approach, grounded theory) gradually eliminates the shortcomings of these studies, criticized by the supporters of positivism¹⁴.

And yet certain features of qualitative research determined the decision not to use it in the present study. The crucial factor determining the choice of quantitative approach was connected with the goals of the research, which included recognizing the behaviours characteristic for larger groups of consumers and seeking for regularities and tendencies in these behaviours. Additionally the time for the research was rather limited. That is why we took the opportunity to examine social phenomena in consumer behaviour (including imitation)¹⁵ with the use of quantitative methods. We assumed however, that although the study and interpretation of the results will be conducted using the positivist approach, it will sometimes be supplemented by the interpretative elements. It seems that the nature of social research, not only does not exclude such a multi-paradigm approach, but rather implies it¹⁶.

Because of the subject and scope of the research, a personal interview was chosen as a research method and structured questionnaire was used as a measurement tool¹⁷. While creating the instrument the aspect of covertness was also considered and ensured by using specific wording and sequence of questions. The questioning strategy was then presented to and used by the interviewers.

The desired character of the instrument was obtained by using mostly the descriptive wording and terms not directly associated with the imitation (e.g. 'buying things similar to those possessed by others' instead of 'imitating others' purchases'). The basic procedure aimed at overcoming the abovementioned problems of the sensitivity of the research on imitation included adopting some solutions used in motivational research and projective techniques. Firstly, some attitudinal scales were used to measure respondents' tendency to imitate others and the role of specific factors in the development of this tendency. In case of these scales the uniform format of questions was maintained, i.e. 7-point bipolar, balanced scales were used. Secondly, the projective questioning (third person technique, expression technique) was used as the key and in fact the only accessible projective technique, adaptable for quantitative research. This technique requires the subjects to give opinions of other people's actions¹⁸, feelings or attitudes and in case of the presented research, respondents were asked to describe behaviours of 'other people' (in general). Of course, the premise of this approach was to induce the projection of the respondents' own attitudes. In several cases, the author's

¹⁴ See more in: E. Babbie: *Podstawy badań społecznych*, WN PWN, Warszawa 2008, p. 329-340; P. Chlipała: *Podejście etnograficzne w gromadzeniu wiedzy o konsumentach*, in: *Marketing przyszłości...*, op. cit., p. 25-36. Cf. interesting example of the research referring to highly sensitive topic (i.e. cosmetic surgery) in which interpretive approach was adopted: R. Langer, S.C. Beckman: *Sensitive research topics: netnography revisited*, *Qualitative Market Research* 8/2005.

¹⁵ Apart from the imitation phenomenon the research referred also to some other psycho-social phenomena i.e. snobbery, conspicuous consumption as well as reference groups and their influence on consumers' behaviours.

¹⁶ Cf. interesting deliberations in: M.M. Kurowski: *Tożsamość socjologii*, www.is.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/tozsamosc_socjologii.doc, dn. 20.03.2012.

¹⁷ G.A. Churchill: *Badania marketingowe. Podstawy metodologiczne*, WN PWN, Warszawa 2002, p. 314–316.

¹⁸ S. Donoghue: *Projective techniques in consumer research*, *Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences* 28/2000

intention was to compare the results of the direct and projective questioning, so the pairs of questions referring to the same topic but having different form were included in the questionnaire. Selected results of these comparisons are presented in the next section.

Research results and discussion

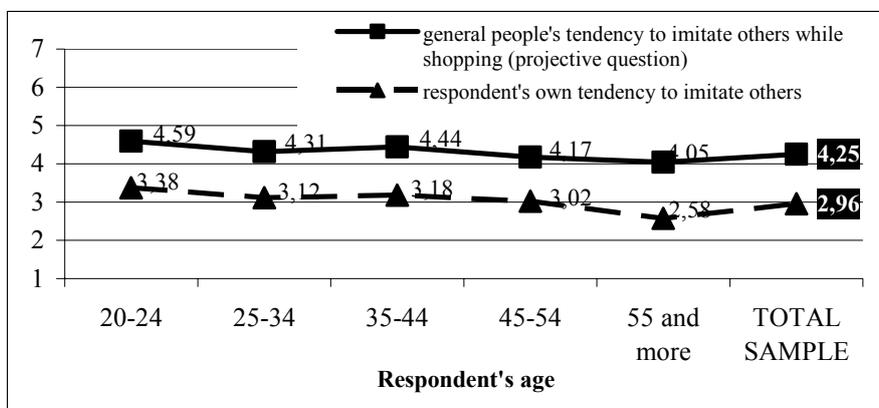
In this passage we will present two examples of differences in the respondents' responses arising from the use of direct or indirect (projective) format of questions. These differences on the one hand confirm the specific (sensitive) character of imitation as a research subject, and on the other hand they prove that such a research needs an adequate strategy in order to obtain information that respondents are more or less consciously trying to hide.

One of the most important issues examined both by a question relating directly to a respondent and by its projective version (with reference to 'other people') was a tendency to imitate other consumers when shopping. The results confirmed our assumptions as respondents' opinion about other peoples' tendency to emulate others was completely different than the evaluation of their own tendency to imitate someone else's behaviour. As an example Figure 1 presents the average rates for both types of questions, taking into account the age of the respondents.

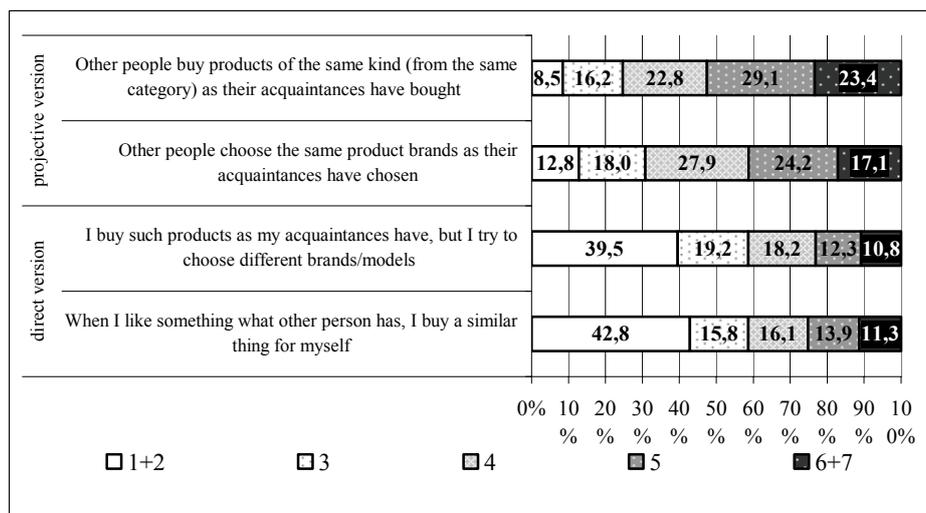
Projective form of questions caused that nearly half of the respondents attributed imitative tendencies to other consumers, and less than 30% declared that such a tendency is (completely or rather) unlikely to occur. At the same time, when assessing their own tendency to imitate others the respondents were much more restrained. More than 27% of them strongly denied that they ever followed others' examples, and another one third of the respondents also denied, though somewhat less categorically. On the other hand, only one fifth of the respondents admitted that they happen to engage in such behaviour, but only 6.5% did so without hesitation. As it can be seen, even though the level of the mean rates is different, the nature of their relation with the respondents' age is the same.

Another problem analyzed by using two different perspectives, was the consumers' inclination to specific imitative behaviours. The measurement was made on the basis of the respondents' declarations referring to the frequency of these behaviours (characteristic for themselves and for other people). This part of the results confirms the previous observations – imitation considered impersonally, as a general phenomenon, seems to be much more common than it could be estimated on the basis of the respondents' declarations about their own behaviour. As expected, consumers judging their own tendency to copy other peoples' decisions were reluctant to admit that it refers to them in any way. Sample data in Figure 2 show that the rates resulting from the direct question are much lower than those that have been granted in the projective version.

Approx. 40% of the respondents said they never or almost never behave in such a way, while only about 10% of the respondents expressed a similar opinion about other peoples' behaviour. At the same time nearly a quarter of the respondents pointed out that other people always or almost always buy the same products as their friends, but only one in ten admitted they also do it.



* graph presents means of rates on the 7-point scale, where 1- definitely no, 7- definitely yes
 * wykres prezentuje średnie z ocen w skali 1-7, gdzie 1- zdecydowanie nie, a 7- zdecydowanie tak
 Fig. 1. Mean rates of the tendency to imitate others (according to direct and projective versions)
 Wykres 1. Średnie z ocen skłonności do naśladownictwa (według wersji bezpośredniej i projekcyjnej)
 Source: own research.
 Źródło: wyniki badań własnych.



*in both questions 7-point scale was used, where 1 – never, 7 – constantly
 *w obu pytaniach użyto skali 1-7, gdzie 1 - nigdy, 7 - stale
 Fig. 2. Popularity of some emulatory behaviours according to direct and projective versions of questions
 Wykres 2. Popularność wybranych zachowań naśladowczych wg bezpośredniej i projekcyjnej wersji pytań
 Source: ibid.
 Źródło: ibid.

Summary and discussion

Based on the data presented, the following conclusions can be drawn:
 Firstly, in the face of abovementioned considerations there occurs a question

relating to the sense of conducting such a sensitive research, about which we know in advance that it is offering results which may not completely correspond with the 'objective' reality, involving observation and measurement of something which cannot (principally) be observed and measured, and using only imperfect instruments. But even if such a doubt occurs, the conclusion is obvious – yes, it is both reasonable and useful to conduct such a research. In all sciences and disciplines there existed and still exist specific obstacles which make the research projects more difficult and complex, and their results (especially at the beginning) are far from perfect, but researchers' efforts and perseverance cause that barriers are gradually removed, and errors are eliminated.

Secondly, awareness of difficulties associated with studying sensitive issues cannot lead to abandonment of this type of research, but it should oblige the researcher to adopt a particular perspective and to demonstrate caution when selecting research methods and techniques, as well as when analyzing the collected data.

Thirdly, the specific approach should also be applied in studies on imitation, because it is a sensitive and difficult topic for the respondents, and thus susceptible to distortion. The use of the projective approach in the presented study made it possible to obtain a broader picture of the critical phenomena, as they were captured from two different perspectives. One of them was revealed when respondents tried to enhance their image by hiding the unpleasant truth about their behaviour, and the other was evident when respondents 'unmasked' other consumers and with all sincerity shared their views on these 'other people' surrounding them. Thus, it was confirmed that the use of direct questions only would not be sufficient to describe the phenomenon of imitation.

The above observations certainly raise additional concerns. The debatable issue remains whether such an approach to the studying imitation was sufficient and how to interpret the divergent data gathered from the respondents. With regard to the first point, it can be seen that in the case of conducted research, due to its quantitative character the projective questioning was basically the only available option, apart from these ones which referred to the right wording and sequence of questions. The problem of information interpretation is much more complex. The data resulting from the use of two different versions of the questions certainly cannot be directly compiled and the more one cannot calculate the average rates out of them. But while presenting these two sets of data it seems important to recognize the 'middle', an equilibrium point. It is obviously lying somewhere between these two extreme perspectives. Identification of this point, however, requires further research, this time in-depth, of qualitative character. The author is planning to conduct such a research in the near future.

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Streszczenie

Celem obecnego opracowania jest charakterystyka głównych problemów związanych ze studiami nad tzw. drażliwymi kwestiami, a także prezentacja możliwych sposobów rozwiązania tych problemów na przykładzie badań dotyczących naśladowstwa wśród konsumentów. Podstawą rozważań są studia literatury, wieloletnie doświadczenie autorki w prowadzeniu tego typu badań, a przede wszystkim wyniki wywiadu osobistego, zrealizowanego jesienią 2010 r. na ogólnopolskiej próbie złożonej z 1200 osób. Wyniki tych badań potwierdzają, że istnieją istotne różnice między wypowiedziami respondentów, gdy wykorzystywane są pytania w formie projekcyjnej i bezpośredniej. Prowadzi to do wniosku, że studia nad naśladowstwem wymagają szczególnego podejścia i wykorzystania specjalnych technik, zaś rolą badacza jest właściwa i ostrożna interpretacja zgromadzonych danych.

Słowa kluczowe: zachowania konsumentów, badania konsumentów, drażliwe kwestie, zachowania naśladowcze

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