

PERCEPTION OF CONVENIENCE FOOD BY OLDER PEOPLE LIVING IN WARSAW (ON THE EXAMPLE OF VEGETABLE SOUPS)

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In order to evaluate the perception of convenience food by 96 elderly people aged 65 and over, an interview using the Repertory Grid Method (RGM) was carried out. Additionally, apart from the interview, some detailed information about the importance of nine factors influencing the respondents' choice of foods when shopping and their attitudes towards food-related quality of life was collected. Half the respondents lived alone, and the others with at least one person in a common household. Five convenience vegetable soups and two conventional ones were used as experimental material. No taste assessment (*i.e.* sensory analysis) was done. The empty packages of soups or photographs were randomly presented to the respondents in three triads. As a result, 14 different constructs describing sensory, health and convenience properties were obtained. The constructs were then grouped into six classes of similar characteristics. This analysis showed that older people perceived the convenience food as less healthy and tasty than the traditionally made meals. Taste and health aspects were found to be crucial determinants for convenience food. There were no statistically significant differences in regard to sex and age for the 7 soups' scores for the following attributes: *tasty*, *convenient* and *healthy*. Only the living situation had a significant influence on soups' scores for the attribute *convenient*: those living alone considered all ready-made soups and a deep frozen one as more convenient in comparison to the people living with others.

In general, people who were participating in this study were pleased with their food and meals. They rather did not see any problems, obstacles nor disappointments when thinking of their next meal. In consequence, they were not really interested in convenience food.

INTRODUCTION

The major demographic trends towards ageing populations in industrialised countries result in older people becoming a "strong" consumer segment. Many adults over the age of 60 create demands for specific food products, since the body performance is known to weaken with age. They are often functionally impaired with little or no outside support. Moreover, sometimes these people express lower interests in food-related activities, such as cooking traditional meals. Therefore, convenience food seems to be a good solution to meet their needs and, consequently, to help to improve the quality of their life. Despite a lack of consensus in regard with the definition of convenience food, the common understanding of this term ("convenience food") is that it can minimise preparation, cooking and cleaning-up time [de Boer *et al.*, 2004].

Understanding how the older group of consumers perceive convenience food is important especially as there is relatively little known about the preferences of older people and the extent to which these preferences influence their food choice, including convenience foods.

The primary objective of the study was to investigate the perception of convenience foods (on the example of vegetable soups) by a group of free-living elderly people, aged 65+ and those living either alone or with at least one person in a common household. Additionally, complementary data were gathered about the importance of different food choice factors and food-related quality of life of older people.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Recruitment procedure. In autumn 2003, 400 elderly Warsaw citizens aged 65+ were randomly selected, on the basis of a personal identification number. They were then invited by letter to participate in the study. Out of them, about 17% of seniors accepted the invitation (n=67), and another 29 persons were recruited using a snow-ball method.

Subjects. The final subject group consisted of 96 Warsaw citizens, without extreme visual and/or hearing impairments, aged 65+, who volunteered to participate in the study. The seniors were divided according to three criteria: sex, age and living situation: 48 females, aged 65-74 (n=24, BMI=27.3±0.69) or 75+ (n=24, BMI=28.2±0.84)

and 48 men, aged 65-74 (n=24, BMI=27.1±0.62) or 75+ (n=24, BMI=26.5±0.72). Half the respondents lived alone, and the others with at least one other person.

Prior to the study, the subjects were informed in detail about the principles of the research and after the study, their contribution was rewarded with a small gift.

Procedure. To cover the goals of this research, it was conducted in two consecutive parts as presented in Figure 1.

Both parts were conducted mainly at respondents' home. Only eight seniors wished to visit a University laboratory instead.

All interviews were carried out by one trained interviewer.

Interviews. In the first part of the research, a screening

questionnaire was carried out and then the respondents indicated the importance of several food choice factors on a 1–5 point scale ranging from “not important” to “extremely important”, whereas the level of agreement with the statements for food-related quality of life was indicated on a 1–7 point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

In the second part of the research, seven different vegetable soups of different convenience levels were selected by the project coordinators (Table 1). The classes of convenience for 5 soups were constructed according to Costa *et al.* [2001], combined with different levels of storage methods and type of packaging. The remaining two soups (traditional, made of cut mixed fresh vegetables and mixed fresh vegetables available in season) were considered as ‘low’ and ‘zero’ convenience products, respectively.

FIGURE 1. Study scheme.

Part 1 (complementary information)			Part 2 (primary):
<i>General questionnaire</i>			
to be absolutely sure that quotas are met where appropriate	<i>Food choice factors question</i>		
to get info about subjects' involvement in food shopping and meals preparation.	to measure the importance of 8 food choice factors when shopping: habit and routine, price, quality & freshness, taste, easy to chew, easy to prepare, easy to store, brand of products.	<i>Food-related quality of life short questionnaire</i>	
		to determine 4 statements on food-related quality of life (e.g. preparing meals, part of food and meals in the life, satisfying food and meals)	<i>Repertory Grid Method (RGM) on convenience food</i>
			to determine perceptions of convenience foods on example of vegetable soups

TABLE 1. Characteristics and classification of 7 vegetable soups used as the examples.

Soup	Class of convenience	Storage method until preparation	Type of packaging	Preparation time/way	Soup symbol
Sauerkraut	ready to heat (H)	Cupboard (C)	can with ring-pull (CAN)	1 min; ready to eat after heating (in another container)*	H-C-CAN
Vegetable	ready to heat (H)	Cupboard (C)	paper sachet (PAPER)	15 min; cold water has to be added and boil it*	H-C-PAPER
Minestrone	ready to heat (H)	Cupboard (C)	tetra pack carton (CARTON)	1 min; ready to eat after heating (in another container)*	H-C-CARTON
Vegetable with noodles	ready to heat (H)	Cupboard (C)	plastic cup (CUP)	3 min; boiling water has to be added (to the same container)*	H-C-CUP
Minestrone with deep frozen vegetables	ready to end-cook (C)	Freezer (F)	plastic sachet (PLASTIC)	usually more than 20 min**; needs to be prepared in another container and water to be added to boil it	C-F-PLASTIC
Cut mixed fresh vegetables	Low (LOW)	Refrigerator	on a tray, covered with plastic foil	usually about 1 h**; the product is already cut into small pieces; other ingredients may be added	LOW
Vegetables available in season	Zero (ZERO)	Refrigerator	without packaging	more than 1 h**; all need preparation (washing, cutting etc.)	ZERO

* according to producer instructions; **according to own experiences of researchers

All soups were chosen out of many soups available on the market at the time of the research.

The Repertory Grid Method (RGM), used in the second part of the research, required the formation of product triads and consisted of two phases of an interview: a construct elicitation and a rating for each construct [Kelly, 1955].

In this part of the study, no sensory assessment was carried out; only opinions on vegetable soups were collected, so empty packages of 5 convenience soups and photographs of 2 conventional soups were presented to the subjects.

Firstly, the soups were shortly described on separate “profile cards”. The description was prepared on the basis of the label information, e.g. the name of soup, brand, size, fat content. The price of 7 products was not presented.

Secondly, the triads were composed in a fixed manner, whereby 3 soups were selected randomly to form the first triad, and then, the second triad was built by randomly selecting one of the soups from the first triad and adding two more random soups (out of 4 remaining products). The third triad was built in the same manner. The final triads are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Triads presented to participants to elicit personal constructs.

Triad	Soups symbols*
1	H-C-CARTON ==> C-F-PLASTIC ==> LOW
2	C-F-PLASTIC ==> H-C-PAPER ==> H-C-CUP
3	H-C-PAPER ==> H-C-CAN ==> ZERO

* for symbols see Table 1

Three triads of empty packages of soups or photos, together with the descriptive cards, were presented to each subject in triads, one-by-one, during a face-to-face interview, which usually lasted 1–2 h.

After seeing the first triad with respective descriptive cards, the respondent was asked to rank the three soups in his/her order of preference, starting from the most preferred product (i.e. most likely chosen to eat). Then, the respondents were asked to justify their choice, by explaining, why they had preferred one soup over the other. All answers were written down accurately by the interviewer and then, the whole procedure was repeated for the next 2 triads. After that, on the basis of respondents opinions, a list of personal constructs was built by the interviewer. The list included all kinds of product attributes that had been earlier mentioned by the respondent. Such a procedure led to elicitation of constructs with both negative and positive preferences (perception).

At the end of the interview, the respondent was requested to score all 7 soups with respect to his/her individual attributes, as elicited during the RGM session. A 5-point scale was used, with 1 regarded as “do not agree at all” and 5 as “agree extremely”. If the respondent was reluctant to give an answer or did not know what to say, it was coded by the interviewer as “0”.

Data analysis. The data obtained were analysed using SPSS v. 12.0. (Chi² test, Spearman correlation coefficients among categorical variables, analysis of variance). All results reported were adjusted for age, sex and living circumstances. To this end, the STATGRAPHIC PLUS 5.1. was used.

The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed in the statistical sensory package ANALSENS to show the relationship among the class constructs of soup samples and to investigate specific patterns for the results.

RESULTS

Subjects characteristics

Data from the general questionnaire revealed that 67.7% of seniors prepared their own meals every day, and 11.5% occasionally. As far as shopping was concerned, 68.8% of respondents declared doing food shopping alone and 16.7% accompanied by someone else. In regard to both sex and living situation, there was a significant difference in the involvement in food preparation ($\chi^2=24.32^{***}$, $\chi^2=28.98^{***}$, respectively). It appeared that mostly females (regardless of their age) and seniors living alone prepared their meals every day and this frequency was significantly higher when compared to other respondents.

Those seniors who did the shopping alone prepared their meals every day more often than the others ($r_s=0.593^{**}$).

Food choice factors questionnaire

As it can be seen in Table 3, a “quality and freshness” and “taste” of foods were rated as the most important by all seniors; “dieting” (e.g. diet according to health recommendations) and “price” were also relatively important for the elderly consumers. According to a three-way ANOVA, there were no differences with regard to age for importance of any food choice factor. Living circumstances had a strong significant influence on the importance of “brand of products” and “dieting” (F=18.97^{***}, F=4.52^{*}, respectively). In particular, those living alone considered “brand of products” as a more important factor and “dieting” as a less important one than the seniors living with others. Sex affected significantly “easy to prepare” factor (F=7.82^{**}). Surprisingly, this factor was more important to females.

Food-Related Quality of Life questionnaire

In general, 81% of respondents agreed with the statement that *food/meals have a positive element* in their lives and 88.5% of them were *pleased with food*. At the same time, more than a half of the seniors (56.3%) were of the opinion that *food and meals give them satisfaction in daily life*. Only 5.2% of the respondents saw *problems, obstacles and disappointments* when thinking of their next meal.

The results of a three-way ANOVA indicated that sex significantly influenced the following food-related quality of life items: *food/meals have a positive element* (F=6.19^{*}) and *food and meals give me satisfaction in daily life* (F=5.02^{*}): more men than women agreed with these statements. However, there was no significant effect of either age or living situation on any of the food-related quality of life statements.

Perception of convenience food on an example of soups.

Each subject generated up to 10 different constructs. Across the whole group of subjects, the total number of different constructs elicited was 14. These 14 individual constructs were then grouped into 6 construct classes of similar characteristics or uses, as given below: *tasty* (used by 83 respondents); *convenient* (used by 75 respondents) mean-

ing “easy to prepare; little time needed to prepare a meal”; *healthy* (used by 71 respondents) meaning all attributes related to health directly as well as quality and freshness, trust to this specific kind of soup, proper fat content, nutritional value, etc.; *universal usage* (used by 17 respondents) meaning all attributes related to the possibility of preparing other meals/dishes on the basis of the original soup; *appealing look* (used by 15 respondents) meaning all attributes describing package properties such as type, size, label; *trust to the producer*, used by 10 respondents).

Those attributes that were mentioned by just one or two individuals (such as: price, hygienic preparation of meal, no need to clean after the meal etc.) and could not be readily assigned to an already existing class, were considered as “other” and ignored in the further analysis.

Findings of the RGM indicated that the most frequently (up to 70% of total) used attributes to describe the soups were: *tasty*, *convenient* and *healthy*. As it can be seen in Table 4, there were significant differences in terms of the following construct classes: *tasty*, *convenient*, *healthy*, *universal usage*. The fresh soup of zero convenience (ZERO) was considered as the most tasty, just as both a fresh soup of low convenience (LOW) and a deep-frozen soup (C-F-PLASTIC). It was quite surprising to see that both fresh soups (ZERO and LOW) were regarded in seniors’ opinion as similarly convenient to the canned soup (H-C-CAN). The reason for this was that they probably experienced some difficulties when opening a can, even if the can was equipped with a pull-ring for easier use. On the other hand, the elderly considered other soups, e.g. in a paper sachet, carton or cup, as more convenient than the others. Consequently, a fresh soup prepared step-by-step by a respondent (ZERO) and both LOW and C-F-PLASTIC soups were scored as the healthiest. Both fresh soups (ZERO and LOW) and a deeply frozen one (C-F-PLASTIC) were regarded as facilitating further modifications.

According to a three-way ANOVA, there were no differences with regard to sex and age for the three first construct classes (*tasty*, *convenient* and *healthy*). Only the living situation (living alone vs. living with others) had a significant

influence ($F=3.90^*$) on soups’ scores for *convenient*. In particular, those living alone considered all ready-made soups and a deep frozen one as more convenient in comparison to the people living with others.

The remaining constructs were not statistically analysed due to a low frequency of occurrence.

The results were also analysed using the PCA (Figure 2). A model including the first two factors explained almost 100% of the total variance. The construct classes as *tasty* and *healthy* were positively correlated with factor 1, whereas *convenient* with factor 2. Samples ZERO and LOW belonged to *healthy* and C-F-PLASTIC characterised as well as *tasty* and *healthy* one. The other four samples of convenience food were located on the other side of the figure (i.e. the left side) and therefore they were negatively correlated with factor 1. These two construct classes contributed most to the total variance (95.9%). *Convenient’s* contribution to the sample diversity was very low (only 3.7%).

DISCUSSION

In view of our findings it is quite clear that Polish older consumers regarded convenience food (excluding the deep frozen soup) as less healthy and less tasty than the traditional step-by-step home-made soups. On the basis of both parts of this research it can be stated that the main aspects of convenience soups for seniors (as potential determinants) were *taste* and *health* (meaning: consumption of this kind of soup is healthy). The elderly also expressed sort of neophobic tendencies towards modern ready-made meals (a soup in can with a ring-pull or a soup in a tetrapack carton). From their point of view, the convenience was considered as a slightly important factor at food preparation therefore they tended to use ready-made foods in case of emergency only. On the other hand, living circumstances (living alone vs. living with others) did not affect the convenience perception significantly.

Similar results were observed in the survey conducted by Creed [2001]. He has shown that the possibility for extending the use of ready-made meals is limited by many attitudes related to the age of the consumers, how often they eat out and their social class. Only 27% of older people in the UK (over 65 years old) perceived the actual foodservice practice as acceptable as “traditional” methods. Older people form one of the vulnerable groups of consumers, often reliant on others for nutritious meals, who could benefit from the convenience of cook-freeze, cook-chill or sous vide meals. This survey indicated that the oldest group had many prejudicial attitudes to their acceptance of these foods as well as all those factors limiting the choice of food caused by ageing [Herne, 1995]. They are also more likely to reject foods prepared by new methods because of neophobic tendencies. This trend for neophobia was to increase with age and with decreasing frequency of eating out. The attitudes expressed by the oldest age groups would have been affected by early experience during the 2nd World War [Creed, 2001]. Prescott *et al.* [2002] confirmed that older consumers as a whole were significantly more neophobic than the younger consumers. There was a tendency for the over 65 age group to perceive any methods other than conventional preparation as less acceptable. Poor consumer attitudes towards meals prepared by food-service systems are based on the misconception that freshly

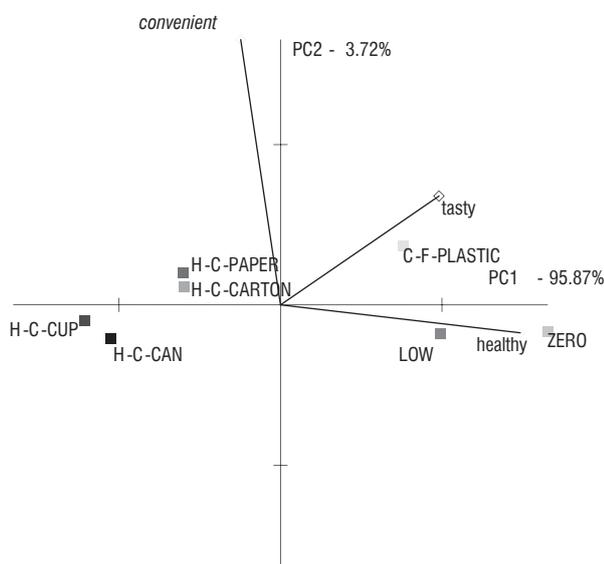


FIGURE 2. The similarities and differences between soups of different degree of convenience using PCA analysis.

cooked meals are made from unprocessed components and not the mixture of methods that form actual foodservice practice [Glanz *et al.*, 1998].

Furst *et al.* [1996] observed – after conducting interviews with 29 adults on their food choice - that often the dominant value, sensory perceptions were driven mostly by taste, and varied widely among individuals. In describing why they chose a particular food, people would often say “taste” and “flavour” with no further explanation or elaboration, apparently expecting that their first priority would be understood by anyone. People are most likely to consume foods that they evaluate as tasty. Taste, therefore, can be considered as a minimal standard for food consumption [after Zandra *et al.*, 2001]. Taste was also often weighted against convenience [Furst *et al.*, 1996]. In spite of taste Roininen *et al.* [1999] found that older respondents were, in general, more interested than younger respondents in healthy dietary practices and in using natural products. On the other hand, Oakes [2003] indicated that the elderly females (compared to the younger participants) used more nutrient characteristics when evaluating the healthfulness of food descriptions (*e.g.* fat, fiber, vitamins, minerals including sodium). Ritson & Hutchins [1990, after de Boer *et al.*, 2004] stated there is a notable change in demanding foods which were more convenient and healthier.

All those findings are consistent with the results presented here and derived from a questionnaire on food choice (Table 3) and RGM technique (Table 4).

TABLE 3. The importance of food choice factors scored by older people

Food choice factors	Means in decreasing order (SE)*
1. quality and freshness	4.28 (0.078) ^a
2. taste	4.05 (0.084) ^a
3. dieting	3.14 (0.147) ^b
4. price	3.05 (0.142) ^b
5. habit and routine	2.88 (0.137) ^{bc}
6. easy to store	2.68 (0.135) ^c
7. easy to prepare	2.28 (0.135) ^d
7. brand of products	2.30 (0.133) ^d
8. easy to chew	1.82 (0.120) ^c

* values sharing the same superscripts are not significantly different

TABLE 4. Results of scoring (1–5) of seven soup types.

Construct class	F p-value	Convenience soups vs. conventional soups ^						
		H-C-CAN	H-C-PAPER	H-C-CARTON	H-C-CUP	C-F-PLASTIC	LOW	ZERO
Tasty	24.89 <0.001	2.71 (0.14) ^a N=70	3.13 (0.11) ^b N=79	3.06 (0.13) ^b N=70	2.56 (0.14) ^a N=72	3.76 (0.08) ^c N=80	3.76 (0.10) ^c N=83	4.04 (0.08) ^c N=82
Convenient	3.89 <=0.05	2.90 (0.18) ^{abc} N=69	3.15 (0.16) ^c N=71	3.11 (0.17) ^c N=70	3.07 (0.18) ^{bc} N=70	3.19 (0.13) ^c N=70	2.66 (0.14) ^{ab} N=70	2.62 (0.16) ^a N=69
Healthy	41.93 <0.001	2.07 (0.16) ^{ab} N=55	2.40 (0.14) ^b N=58	2.38 (0.15) ^{ab} N=58	2.02 (0.13) ^a N=58	3.44 (0.13) ^c N=58	3.61 (0.14) ^c N=59	4.16 (0.09) ^d N=58
Universal usage	18.48 <0.001	1.67 (0.13) ^a N=15	2.06 (0.23) ^a N=16	2.00 (0.29) ^a N=15	1.75 (0.21) ^a N=16	3.63 (0.26) ^b N=16	4.19 (0.16) ^b N=16	3.75 (0.17) ^b N=16
Appealing look	2.48 NS	2.50 (0.36) N=14	3.67 (0.25) N=15	3.33 (0.25) N=15	3.20 (0.34) N=15	3.40 (0.28) N=15	2.80 (0.34) N=15	2.79 (0.41) N=14
Trust to producer	3.61 NS	3.20 (0.80) N=5	3.30 (0.47) N=10	3.75 (0.37) N=8	1.75 (0.75) N=4	4.30 (0.21) N=10	3.00 (0.38) N=8	3.29 (0.61) N=7

^ for symbols see Table 1; NS – not significant; means (SE); means sharing the same superscript are not statistically different (according to ANOVA).

Additionally, a family situation, especially living alone vs. living with others, has been shown to be another determinant, with single households being more convenience oriented [after Scholderer, 2005]. It has also been reported by Gof-ton [1995, after Olsen, 2003] that single persons have more time available, however they are less inclined to use their time shopping, preparing food and cooking for themselves. Such behaviour is in line with findings of de Boer *et al.* [2004], who noticed that no enjoyment in cooking for oneself alone contributed positively to the purchase of ready meals. Those results are in line with those presented herein.

At the same time it seems worth stressing that a situation in Poland is different in comparison to many other countries, including those mentioned in the above discussion. Food choice in regard with convenience foods is smaller; also, instant soups were introduced relatively late and due to addition of sodium glutamate were often seen as products with the same taste, regardless of the product’s brand. And last but not least, it is very typical of the Polish elderly at the age chosen for the study to be used to homemade meals, prepared from basic fresh ingredients, which in turn may make them less interested in any convenience food products.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In general, the older people were pleased with their food and meals. They rather did not see any problems, obstacles and disappointments when thinking of their next meal.

2. *Quality and freshness* and *taste* as food choice factors were very important for all seniors independently of sex and age.

3. Soups freshly made from fresh vegetables (with zero and low convenience) were considered as most tasty and most healthy when compared to other soups.

4. Frozen deeply soup among convenience food would be a good alternative to soups made of fresh vegetables.

5. There were no statistically significant differences in regard to sex and age for the 7 soups’ scores for the following attributes: *tasty*, *convenient* and *healthy*. Only the living situation had a significant influence on soups’ scores for the attribute *convenient*.

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PERCEPCJA ŻYWNOŚCI WYGODNEJ PRZEZ OSOBY STARSZE MIESZKAJĄCE W WARSZAWIE (NA PRZYKŁADZIE ZUP WARZYWNYCH)

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Aby poznać opinie osób starszych (powyżej 65 lat) na temat żywności wygodnej na przykładzie zup warzywnych przeprowadzono wywiad metodą RGM (Repertory Grid Method). Dodatkowo, metodą wywiadu kwestionariuszowego zebrano informacje dotyczące istotności dziewięciu czynników, decydujących o wyborze żywności przez badaną grupę osób starszych oraz ich postaw wobec żywności i posiłków. Badania przeprowadzono w grupie 48 kobiet w wieku 65–74 i powyżej 75 lat oraz 48 mężczyzn, w wieku 65–74 i powyżej 75 lat. Połowę badanych stanowiły osoby mieszkające samotnie, a pozostała część mieszkała przynajmniej z jedną osobą we wspólnym gospodarstwie domowym. Materiał do badań stanowiło 5 zup jarzynowych, reprezentujących żywność wygodną i 2 zupy jarzynowe przygotowane tradycyjnie. Prezentowano respondentom losowo (w trzech triadach) opakowania zup lub ich fotografie. Na podstawie wypowiedzi badanych osób uzyskano 14 różnych atrybutów opisujących sensoryczne i zdrowotne właściwości zup oraz wygodę przygotowania i uniwersalność stosowania, które następnie pogrupowano w 6 klas o podobnych charakterystykach. Na podstawie uzyskanych wyników stwierdzono, że osoby starsze spostrzegają żywność wygodną jako mniej zdrową i smaczną niż tradycyjnie przygotowane posiłki. Walory smakowe i zdrowotne żywności wygodnej były uważane za jedne z najważniejszych determinantów jej wyboru (tab. 3). Nie stwierdzono istotnych statystycznie różnic biorąc pod uwagę płeć i wiek dla 7 badanych zup pod względem następujących atrybutów: *smaczny*, *wygodny* i *zdrowy*. Jedynie sytuacja zamieszkania (samotnie vs. razem z innymi) miała wpływ na atrybut *wygodny*: *osoby mieszkające samotnie uważały żywność gotową do spożycia oraz głęboko mrożoną jako wygodniejszą w porównaniu do osób mieszkających we wspólnym gospodarstwie domowym* (tab. 4). Jednocześnie osoby badane twierdziły, że są zadowolone ze spożywanej żywności, a samodzielne przygotowanie tradycyjnych posiłków nie stanowi dla nich problemu, a co za tym idzie nie były zbyt zainteresowane wykorzystaniem w żywieniu produktów o większym stopniu przetworzenia (z grupy żywności wygodnej).