

## RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION IN EUROPE: CAUSES AND HABITS

Jurgita PAUŽUOLIENĖ<sup>1\*</sup>, Ligita ŠIMANSKIENĖ<sup>2</sup>, Aušra PACEVIČIŪTĖ<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Klaipeda University of Applied Sciences in Klaipeda (Lithuania); j.pauzuoliene@kvk.lt,  
ORCID: 0000-0002-1034-2296

<sup>2</sup> Klaipeda University in Klaipeda (Lithuania); ligita.simanskiene@ku.lt, ORCID: 0000-0002-0548-0459

<sup>3</sup> Klaipeda University in Klaipeda (Lithuania); ausra.paceviciute@ku.lt, ORCID: 0000-0002-8234-3511

\* Correspondence author

**Purpose:** The main reason to do the research of consumption of society in Europe is the ever-increasing consumption, not sorting enough, which leads to problems on a global scale. Responsible consumption can be described as the behaviors and attitudes of the consumers to consume or less consume products and services that have the potential to directly or indirectly harm to society, economy, the world, and all living and nonliving things. The aim of the paper is to investigate the habits and causes of responsible consumption in Europe.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Analysis of research literature sources, systematization, synthesis, generalization, quantitative research and data processing methods was used. The collected empirical data were processed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program. In the data processing, descriptive statistics was used, such as percentiles, mean, mode and standard deviation. Research was done using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was compiled by the authors, based on the scientific literature. In the research, respondents participated from Lithuania (373 respondents) and other European countries (444 respondents from Latvia, Poland, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Bulgaria, France).

**Findings:** Results showed that the main reason why people choose to consume responsibly are taking care of their own and their family's well-being and a sense of responsibility for what is happening in the world. The results of the study revealed that, in principle, the respondents who took part in the survey consume quite responsibly, but do not volunteer much and participate in community activities. These activities would help to share both food and other goods without throwing them away.

**Research limitations/implications:** Only those respondents who use an internet connection could participate in the study. It was also a random selection of the respondents, so in the future it would be useful to do research that would cover all age groups and other demographical characteristics.

**Practical implications:** Although there are no direct recommendations for consumers on how to use responsibly, the results show what kind of responsible consumption methods they use, what inspires them to be responsible. This should help readers change their consumption habits to be more responsible.

**Social implications:** The results of this study will undoubtedly contribute to more responsible consumption and encourage people to act more responsibly. Research results shows that there is a relatively large part of people who care about the ecological situation of the whole world,

volunteer, their answers give encouragement, even in small steps, but to be responsible consumers.

**Originality/value:** The paper reveals the buying habits of consumers, which will help the readers of the paper (managers of organizations and, of course, consumers) to understand the meaning of responsible consumption in the world and encourage them to be more responsible consumers. This paper explains how sustainable consumption is compatible with the goals of sustainable development. The paper is also interesting that it compares the answers of respondents from quite different European countries. The results have both theoretical and practical implications for the search for measures for responsible consumption.

**Keywords:** causes, habits, responsible consumption, sustainable development goals, Europe.

**Category of the paper:** research paper.

## 1. Introduction

The negative effects of intensive production and growing consumption in the 21st century have led entrepreneurs and stakeholders to talk more about responsible consumption. The negative consequences of consumption for the environment and society encourage people to use their products more responsibly and carefully. Responsible consumption is a broad concept that has not only an environmental dimension but also an economic, social and health dimensions, that takes into account the foundations of sustainable development. Consumption, although often considered an individual choice, is deeply ingrained in behaviors, cultures, and institutions, and is driven and supported by corporate and government practices. Consumption is also at the heart of many of our most critical ecological, health, and social problems (O'Rourke, Lollo, 2015). This have encouraged various stakeholders, such as government regulatory agencies, relevant international organizations, and education and science institutions to incorporate sustainable consumption at their corporate and strategic planning levels (Wang et al., 2019). According to Glavič (2021) sustainable consumption is the use of products and services that have a minimal impact on the environment and enable future generations to meet their needs. It can be regarded on different levels including global, state, region, city, community, or enterprise, public institution, household or individual levels. Sustainable consumption is mostly regarding materials (especially critical raw materials), energy, water, resource efficiency, and (zero) waste. Promoting sustainable consumption is a crucial aspect of sustainable development, which depends on achieving long-term economic growth that could ensure environmental and social needs for both present and future generations (Sesini, Castiglioni, Lozza, 2020). According to Prothero et al. (2011) it is critical to understand consumption within its macro context and to move beyond understanding behaviors to influencing them through pro - active public policy. This is especially important given that many of the barriers to sustainable consumption behavior are rooted in public policy or a lack thereof. For example, changes in the availability and quality of public transportation,

the availability and affordability of sustainable products and housing, the development of appropriate product labeling schemes, and so on all depend on public policy actions. Without the enactment of effective policies, consumers are severely limited in the degree to which they can act on their pro sustainability attitudes.

A responsible consumer can be defined as a person basing his acquisition, usage, and disposition of products on a desire to minimize or eliminate any harmful effects and maximize the long-run beneficial impact on society. Webster (1975 from Prendergast, Tsang, 2018) defined a socially conscious consumer as, a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change. According Webb et al. (2008) socially responsible consumer is a person basing his or her acquisition, usage and disposition of products on a desire to minimize or eliminate any harmful effects and maximize the long-run beneficial impact on society. It can be state that responsible consumption is a way of consuming that is beneficial considering 3 different cornerstones, by no specific order. First, it benefits the economy, especially the local economy, as it allows goods and services to be traded, benefiting the agents involved in these trades. Secondly, it has a positive impact on society, as the products or services purchased are linked to a workforce that has fair wages and working conditions and they're also positively good for the buyers (in matters such as health). Finally, a responsible consumer also acknowledges the impacts associated with products' different stages (from its production, transportation, and disposal) and tries to buy the ones with a lower impact. Based on some researches consumers are becoming more socially conscious and are including ethical considerations in their purchase decisions (Prendergast, Tsang, 2019), as well as consumers are increasingly interested in various forms of responsible consumption (Schrader, 2007). Consumers have more product choices and, therefore, have more opportunities to reveal their social preferences when making purchase decisions (Auger et al., 2010). The responsible consumer understands that his choices bring about not only individual short-term consequences (satisfaction derived from consumption), but also long term individual and social results. More sustainable lifestyles cannot be achieved without marking changes in consumer attitudes and behavior (Francois-Lecompte, Roberts, 2006).

The topic of responsible consumption is analyzed quite broadly and with a specific focus on the 12th sustainable development goal which includes sustainable consumption and production. According to Rybarova (2020) problematic of sustainable consumption and production is a broad conception that is integrating application of advanced methods and techniques of business management, in all areas, including eco-design and innovation, sustainable marketing, risk management and strategic management with a focus on sustainable development for the environment.

In the paper we raise problematic question: What are consumers' responsible consumption habits and causes?

## **2. The essence of responsible consumption and production, theoretical framework**

Sustainable development is at the very heart of the European Union (EU). Every EU initiative is aimed at improving citizens' lives, on a healthier planet, for a sustainable future. Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) have been recognized as an integral part of the Sustainable Development Agenda until 2030 and is one of the 17 goals of sustainable development that has a significant impact on other goals. It is identified separately as objective number 12. Responsible consumption and production can be defined as using of materials in the manner that minimizes negative impacts on the environment, society and economy "doing more and better with less" increasing net welfare gains from economic activities by reducing resource use, degradation and pollution along the whole lifecycle, while increasing quality of life by involving various stakeholders (Lukman et al., 2016; United Nations, 2022a). Sustainable production is "the creation of goods and services using processes and systems that are non-polluting, conserving of energy and natural resources, economically viable, safe and healthful for workers, communities, and consumers". SCP is a well-established interdisciplinary research field with a wide variety of practical life-cycle approaches, including life-cycle analysis (LCA) (Katila et al., 2020). Typical activities include circular economy, cleaner production, pollution prevention, integrated pollution prevention and control (IPPC), best available techniques (BAT), responsible care, process optimization, energy integration, recycling, reuse, repair, regeneration, remanufacturing, renewable resources, factor X, eco-efficiency, industrial ecology, supply chain, life cycle assessment, doing more with less, environmental accounting, social responsibility, global reporting initiative, etc. (Glavič, 2021).

Goal 12 "Responsible consumption and production" is divided into 11 targets and focuses on ethic, equity, ecological and economic principles of consumption (United Nations, 2022b). Targets specify the goals and indicators represent the metrics by which the world aims to track whether these Targets are achieved. The implementation of SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production is still challenging in Europe (Eurostat, 2020b), while being instrumental to the realization of the Agenda 2030 as a whole. The ways in which most people consume today – large volumes at a high rate, along a linear trajectory and with significant wastage (take-make-dispose) – are not sustainable.

Over the most recent five years of available data, the EU made progress towards almost all the 17 sustainable development goals (SDG). Progress in some goals has been faster than in others, and within goals, movement away from the sustainable development objectives also occurred in specific areas (Rybarova, 2020). Insufficient progress towards the EU target under Goal 12 was recorded under the indicators: Primary energy consumption, Generation of waste excluding major mineral wastes and movement away from the EU target was recorded under the indicator Final energy consumption. It can be seen that the progress to promote sustainable

production and consumption is uneven. However, shifting to sustainable consumption and production patterns is a prerequisite to addressing global crises, including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, and is central to achieving sustainable development. There is a positive trend in the development of national instruments and strategies aimed at supporting this shift. By 2020, 83 countries and the European Union reported a total of 700 policies and implementation activities under the 10-Year Framework of Action. As of December 2020, 40 countries had reported on sustainable public procurement policies or action plans (or equivalent legal dispositions), which encourage the procurement of environmentally sound, energy-efficient products, and promote more socially responsible purchasing practices and sustainable supply chains (United Nations, 2021). Based on the Europe sustainable development report (2021) Europe faces its greatest SDG challenges in the areas of sustainable diets and agriculture, climate and biodiversity (SDG2, 12-15), in strengthening the convergence of living standards across its countries and regions and needs to accelerate progress on many goals. The European Union is still in progress and there are still significant challenges remain by achieving the 12th goal of sustainable development.

### **3. Methodology of the research**

**The research method.** The quantitative research method was used in the research. The questionnaire was prepared on the pollimill.com website, and the link was sent to respondents.

**The research population.** Residents of Lithuania. The survey was conducted among Lithuanian consumers. Residents of other European countries were selected as a control group (Latvia, Poland, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Bulgaria, France). In this survey participated 373 respondents from Lithuania and 444 from other European countries. A simple random sample was used in the research. The survey time February-March of 2021.

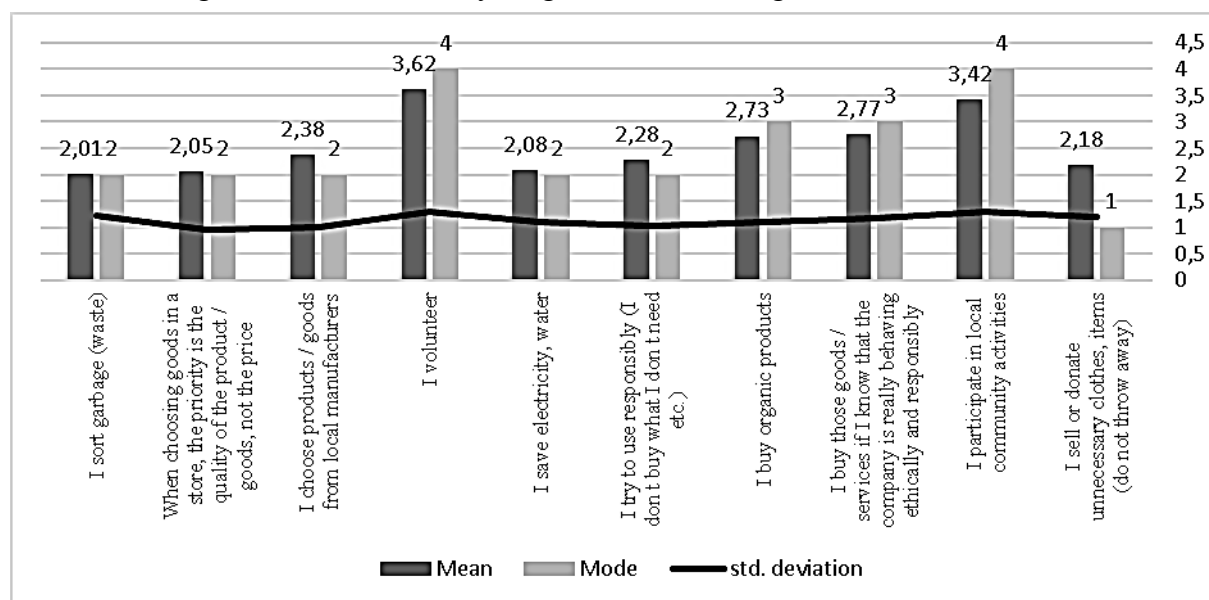
**Research ethics.** The research was guided by ethical principles:

- The principle of goodwill is ensured by the statements of the questionnaire, which are presented in a respectful style, without creating preconditions for respondents to lose privacy.
- Applying the principle of respect to the individual, the purpose of the study was explained to the respondents.
- Volunteering is the free will of study participants to participate or not to participate in a study.
- Research participants are guaranteed anonymity and data confidentiality.
- Honestly reported data, results, methods and procedures, and publication status.
- Avoided bias in data analysis, data interpretation, and decisions.

Data processing methods. The collected empirical data were processed using the SPSS 20.00 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The data processing descriptive statistics were used, such as percentiles, mean, mode, and standard deviation. The data was also processed by the Independent samples t-test where significant differences are when  $p \leq 0,05$ .

#### 4. Discussion on the research results

Research data analysis reveals that respondents are trying to be socially responsible consumers. Respondents' responsible consumption less manifested in volunteering (mean 3,63, mode 4) and participating in local community activities (mean 3,43; mode 4). Respondents often sort garbage (mean 2,01; mode 2); save electricity, water (mean 2,08; mode 2); sell or donate unnecessary clothes, items (mean 2,18; mode 1) and so on. Respondents rarely buy organic food (mean 2,73; mode 3) and buy those goods/services if know that the company is really behaving ethically and responsibly (mean 2,77; mode 3). From the obtained data we can see that individual consumption is connected to consumption patterns, life cycle thinking, and lifestyles (habits). The amount of waste generated can be reduced by changing consumption patterns through responsible purchasing planning, sorting waste, using it for a longer period of time or handing it over to others, recycling it and not turning it into landfill waste.



Note: Scale range : 1 – I always do that, 2 – I often do that, 3 – I rarely do that, 4 – I sometimes do that, 5 – I never do that.

**Figure 1.** Responsible consumption habits.

Source: created by authors based in the research data.

Research findings showed that there are significant differences between Lithuania and other European countries. Mean differences is provided in Table 1. The obtained results reveal that the residents of European countries, compared to the residents of Lithuania, more often voluntary ( $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ) and buy those goods/services if know that the company is really behaving ethically and responsibly ( $p = 0.040 < 0.05$ ). Respondents from Lithuania more often sold or donated unnecessary clothes, items ( $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ) and more often participate in local communities ( $p = 0.001 < 0.05$ ) compared with respondents from Europe countries. Such results suggest that, in general, respondents have relatively strong habits of responsible consumption. Of course would like more respondents to participate in volunteering and participate in local community activities.

**Table 1.**

*Responsible consumption habits (mean difference between countries)*

Country		I sort garbage (waste)	When choosing goods in a store, the priority is the quality of the product/goods, not the price	I choose products/goods from local manufacturers	I volunteer	I save electricity, water	I try to use responsibly (I pay attention to whether the products are packed in recyclable containers, etc.)	I buy organic products	I buy those goods/services if I know that the company is really behaving ethically and responsibly	I participate in local community activities	I sell or donate unnecessary clothes, items (do not throw away)
Lithuania	Mean	2,02	2,03	2,36	3,87	2,11	2,31	2,82	2,87	3,14	2,09
	Std. Deviation	1,167	,920	,951	1,271	1,106	1,007	1,120	1,154	1,398	1,071
	Sum	755	759	882	1442	788	860	1053	1071	1171	780
Other Europe country	Mean	2,00	2,06	2,39	3,40	2,07	2,27	2,65	2,69	3,28	2,21
	Std. Deviation	1,242	,980	1,054	1,259	1,090	1,041	1,075	1,180	1,191	1,260
	Sum	888	914	1058	1506	917	1005	1173	1191	1453	980
Significant differences between countries <i>p values</i>		p=0,537	p=0,092	p=0,112	p=0,000	p=0,889	p=0,162	p=0,247	p=0,040	p=0,001	p=0,000

Note: Scale range: 1 – I always do that, 2 – I often do that, 3 – I rarely do that, 4 – I sometimes do that, 5 – I never do that. Significant differences are when  $p \leq 0,05$ .

Source: created by authors based in the research data.

Respondents were asked to indicate other responsible consumption habits. Many responses were provided. It was most often mentioned that garbage is sorted, food is not wasted and consume responsibly. Some of answers are listed in the Table 2.

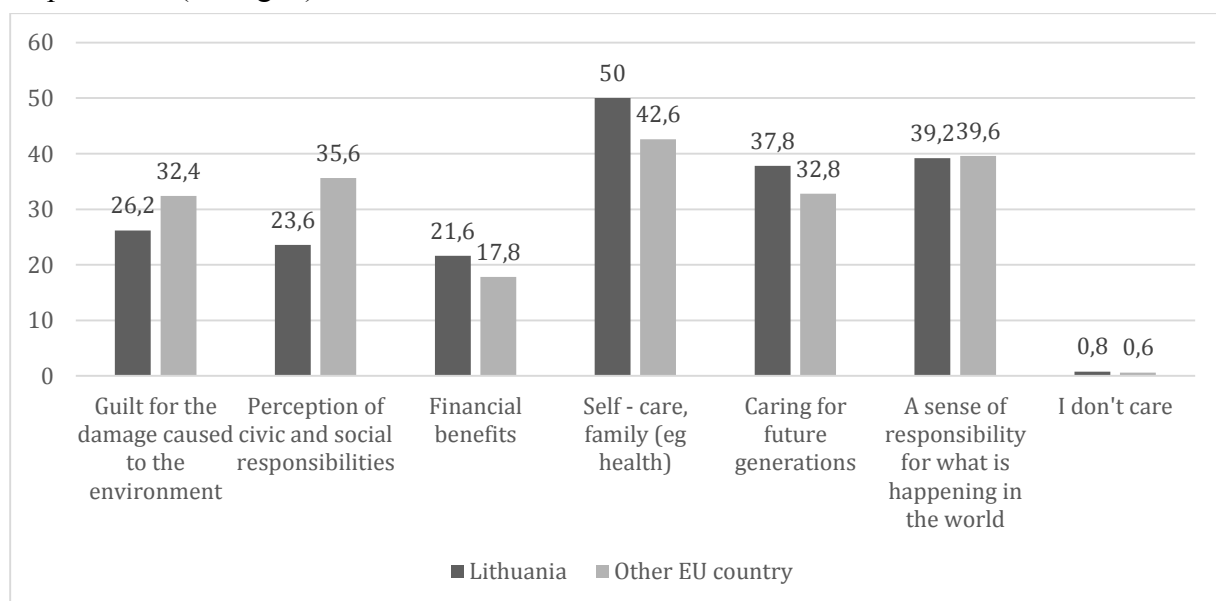
**Table 2.***Other responsible consumption habits*

Some provided answers
I shop once a week. I shop at the market from farmers.
I am taking my shopping bag with me.
I fix electronic devices and clothes instead of buying new ones. I avoid buying low quality products and choose those which will last longer and can be fixed (shoes, clothes, furniture etc.).
I prefer seasonal products and during summer time I like to make fruit jams at home to use over ripe fruits and avoid waste.
I do not buy gift bags, but use the ones that have been given to me and my family. I always have a fabric shopping bag with me. I try fixing broken boots and clothes. We collect waste paper.
I am trying to use my car with traditional engine as less as possible but this still is a challenge for me.
I try to buy a well-planned amount of food in order to avoid food waste.
I try to use my bike as much as possible, I switch off the lights when I am not in a room.
Using public transport or bike instead of own car.
I buy fair trade products.
I avoid using plastics.
I try to buy only what is necessary.

Source: created by authors based in the research data.

The United Nations provides several ways what consumers can do about responsible consumption. The first reducing waste and second, be thoughtful about what to buy and try to choose a sustainable option whenever possible. Don't throw away food, and reduce consumption of plastic—one of the main pollutants of the ocean. Carrying a reusable bag, refusing to use plastic straws, and recycling plastic bottles. Making informed purchases also helps. For example, the textile industry today is the second-largest polluter of clean water after agriculture, and many fashion companies exploit textile workers in the developing world. Try to buy from sustainable and local sources can make a difference as well as exercising pressure on businesses to adopt sustainable practices.

The respondents were asked: what are the main reasons that motivate or encourage to use responsible? (see fig. 2).

**Figure 2.** Causes that motivate to consume responsible (percent).

Source: created by authors based in the research data.



The research data reveal that the main reasons which motivate to use responsible for most of respondents are: self-care, family, a sense of responsibility for what is happening in the world, caring for future generations, perception for civil and social responsibilities. It can be said that respondents care about responsible consumption. They are not indifferent to these problems and try to solve them through responsible consumption.

## **Conclusions**

The negative consequences of consumption for the environment and society encourage people to consume responsibly and to choose carefully which goods to purchase. Responsible consumption is behaviour that includes the responsible use of natural resources, the efficient use of organic products, waste sorting, recycling, and so on. Practicing responsible consumption also means knowing better the products being bought and their environmental, social, or economic impact. The essential point of responsible consumption is to be aware of the impacts of consumption on various criteria and to act to make this consumption more positive. One of the greatest global challenges is to integrate environmental sustainability with economic growth and welfare by decoupling environmental degradation from economic growth and doing more with less.

Our study revealed that respondents' consumption habits are quite responsible, but global practice shows that most people still lack the knowledge and skills to contribute to responsible consumption and the well-being of society. People have little involvement in community activities or volunteering. Little attention is paid to the company's interest in socially responsible and ethical activities. Also, only some consumers pay attention to packaging to see if it can be recycled or not. It reveals that consumers make little change in their daily shopping habits, although they are well aware of the consequences of irresponsible consumption. The main causes that motivate people to consume responsible are self-care, family, a sense of responsibility for what is happening in the world and caring for future generations.

## References

1. Auger, P., Devinney, T.M., Louviere, J.L., Burke, P.F. (2010). The importance of social product attributes in consumer purchasing decisions: a multi-country comparative study. *International Business Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 140-159.
2. Europe sustainable development report (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.sdgindex.org/reports/europe-sustainable-development-report-2021/> 10.04.2022.
3. Eurostat (2020b). *Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns*. Retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/> 10.04.2022.
4. Francois-Lecompte, A., Roberts, J.A. (2006). Developing a measure of socially responsible consumption in France. *Marketing Management Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 50-66.
5. Glavič, P. (2021). Evolution and Current Challenges of Sustainable Consumption and Production. *Sustainability*, Vol. 13, No. 16, pp. 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169379>.
6. Jackson, T. (2007). *Sustainable consumption. Handbook of Sustainable Development*. G. Atkinson (ed.) et al. Cheltenham, UK – Northampton, MA, USA.
7. Katila, P., Colfer, C.P., Jong, W., Gallaway, G., Pacheco, P., Winkel, G. (2020). *Sustainable Development Goals: Their Impact on Forest and People*. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/5FA75743F80CCE33751BD2095E5754DC>.
8. Lukman, R.K., Glavič, P., Carpenter, A., Virti, P. (2016) Sustainable consumption and production – Research, experience, and development – The Europe we want. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 138 (Part 2), pp. 139-147.
9. O'Rourke, D., Lollo, N. (2015). Transforming Consumption: From Decoupling, to Behavior Change, to System Changes for Sustainable Consumption. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 233-259.
10. Predergast, G.P., Tsang, A.S.L. (2019). Explaining socially responsible consumption. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 361, pp. 146-154.
11. Prothero, A., Dobscha, S., Freund, J., Kilbourne, W.E., Luchs, M.G., Ozanne, L.K., Thøgersen, J. (2011). Sustainable Consumption: Opportunities for Consumer Research and Public Policy. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 31-38.
12. Rybarova, D. (2020). *Assessing progress towards responsible consumption and production*. SHS Web of Conferences 83: Current Problems of the Corporate Sector 2020. [doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20208301059](https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20208301059).
13. Schrader, U. (2007). The moral responsibility of consumers as citizens. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 79-96.
14. Sesini, G., Castiglioni, C., Lozza, E. (2020). New Trends and Patterns in Sustainable Consumption: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda. *Sustainability*, Vol. 12, No. 15, pp. 1-23. [doi:10.3390/su12155935](https://doi.org/10.3390/su12155935).

15. United Nation (2021). Retrieved from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-12/>, 20.06.2022.
16. United Nations (2022a). *Responsible consumption and production*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/>, 10.04.2022.
17. United Nations (2022b). *The 17 goals*. Retrieved from <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>, 10.04.2022.
18. Wang, Ch., Ghadimi, P., Lim, M.K., Theng, M.L. (2019). A literature review of sustainable consumption and production: A comparative analysis in developed and developing economies. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 206, pp. 741-754.
19. Webb, D.J., Mohr, L.A., Harris, K.E. (2008). A reexamination of socially responsible consumption and its measurement. *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 61, No. 2, pp. 91-98.