

## ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY MARKET BEHAVIORS OF CONSUMERS VERSUS SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

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**Purpose:** The purpose of the paper is to assess behaviors of consumers who implement sustainable consumption actions, conditions thereof and tools supporting environmentally-friendly attitudes shaping such behaviors.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The analysis of buying behaviors related to sustainable consumption was the main focus of the research. The research aimed at indicating the most important consumer behaviors related to sustainable consumption and factors that determine such behaviors. Also differences between declarations made by consumers and their actual behaviors were verified as well as their significance. Such diversity of attitudes opens up new opportunities for brands and institutions – it makes it possible to create personalized shopping experience that not only responds to the needs of various groups but can also affect their involvement in sustainable development in real terms.

**Findings:** A diagnostic poll method was applied, including an online survey technique which made it possible to reach a large number of respondents. The questionnaire included close-ended questions (single choice and multiple choice) as well as demographic questions. The questions pertained to, among other things, buying habits, environmentally-friendly actions taken by consumers, knowledge of ecology as well as factors that encourage and discourage environmentally-friendly consumer choices. The research was conducted at the end of 2024 and in early 2025 based on a sample of 350 persons (purposive sampling). The respondents included consumers aged 18 - 60, mostly the inhabitants of towns and cities).

**Research limitations/implications:** Sustainable consumption has become increasingly important and its impact on consumers' purchasing decisions has been increasingly clear. People have become more aware of the concept of sustainable consumption, a relatively new phenomenon in Poland, rational purchases to prevent food waste and *sustainable shopping* all of which have begun to affect daily habits. The above was confirmed by the conducted research.

**Keywords:** sustainable consumption, consumer market behaviors, determinants of consumption conditions.

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

## 1. Introduction

As environment problems such as climate change, air pollution and environmental degradation grow, pro-environmental attitudes have gained importance when it comes to actions taken both by institutions and households. Consumers play a special role in the process as their buying decisions have real influence on the functioning of the market and on environmental practices implemented by enterprises. Therefore pro-environmental actions taken by consumers have become a key element of sustainable growth, in that way supporting transformation towards a greener economy.

Apart from the product's price and quality, its impact on the environment is also important to modern consumers. Choosing environmentally-friendly products, avoiding plastics, relying on public transportation and limiting consumption are only some examples of actions taken by consumers who are ecologically aware.

The purpose of the paper is to assess behaviors of consumers who implement sustainable consumption actions, conditions thereof and tools supporting environmentally-friendly attitudes shaping such behaviors.

## 2. Conditions of sustainable consumption – a theoretical approach

To a large extent the concept of sustainable consumption refers to consumer behaviors that has not been clearly defined as an economic category. Reference books lack consistent definitions and nomenclature related to sustainable consumption (Neale, 2015).

The concept of sustainable consumption was adopted in Oslo during the Symposium on Sustainable Consumption in 1994. Sustainable consumption was defined as “the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of further generations” ([www.iisd.ca](http://www.iisd.ca)).

As A. Dąbrowska and I. Ozimekek stated (2010) sustainable consumption is not simply the problem of changes of consumption but it is a strategic concept the purpose of which is to reconstruct a natural capital.

J. Zralek (2012) defines sustainable consumption as: “the form and quantity that determine pro-environmental values and consumer attitudes leading to environmental awareness and environmentally responsible process of taking market decisions”.

Sustainable consumption requires counterbalance in all possible aspects (Łuczka, 2016):

- economic: effective proportion is set between ongoing and future consumption; hence consumption processes do not significantly distort economic balance,
- ecological: usefulness of consumption is maximized with the usefulness and quality of natural resources and natural environment being preserved, allowing to directly consume natural goods, favoring such forms of consumption which are less burdensome to the environment,
- social: consumption is relatively equally distributed, i.e. it is available to all people regardless of time and space at least in regard of goods in demand, favoring such forms of consumption which result in as few social problems as possible,
- psychological: consumption processes contribute to improving the quality of life, i.e. an optimal balance between material consumption and satisfaction of material needs,
- demographic: demographic conditions do not constitute a permanent barrier to increase in consumption; life expectancy increases, health improves,
- spatial: methods of satisfying needs do not violate spatial order,
- time: said dimensions of sustainable consumption can be achieved indefinitely.

Sustainable consumption in practice requires specific transformations of both demand and supply (Adamczyk, 2012). In the former case they involve changes of patterns of consumption that mostly refer to its ecological rationality, that is choosing goods and services to be consumed which help minimize the impact on the environment throughout their entire lifecycle. In the latter case they involve decreased consumption of natural resources in production processes thanks to the improved ecological efficiency of the production of goods and services and, consequently, lower pressure of consumption on the environment.

The aforementioned definitions of sustainable consumption are narrow and focus on its ecological aspects, whereas the two remaining aspects of sustainable growth, that is, the economic and social one, are considered less important.

### **3. Symptoms and costs of sustainable consumption**

The concept of sustainable consumption in reference books is used in regard of diverse components of consumers' market behaviors. Such approach to consumption means using goods and services that satisfy basic human needs and improve their life quality, at the same time minimizing the consumption of natural resources, toxic materials and the quantity of waste and pollutants that have been produced without jeopardizing future generations (Ryszawska-Greszczak, 2007).

Sustainable attitude to consumption can be seen in (Bywalec, 2007):

- the rational use of consumer goods,
- reducing the consumption of such goods that are highly absorbent of rare, non-recoverable resources of the Earth and at the same time produce hazardous consumer waste,
- buying and consuming goods that produce a very small amount of waste,
- consuming so-called ecological goods (mostly food) being goods that are not supplemented with imitations, e.g. artificial protein, artificial leather, artificial wood,
- consuming goods that do not come from non-humanitarian livestock farms as well as slave labor or poorly paid work.

According to K. Mazurek-Łopacińska and M. Sobocińska (2009) that issue involves “adopting an attitude towards the world as part of which consumer behaviors are consistent with principles of the protection of natural environment” (Mazurek-Łopacińska, Sobocińska, 2009). D. Kielczewski’s (2005) view of sustainable consumption is similar: “the greening of consumption should mean growing interest in ecological issues and health properties of goods being consumed as well as promoting respect towards natural environment” (Kielczewski, 2005). Sustainable consumption aims at minimizing the adverse impact of individuals’ consumer behaviors on the condition of the environment (Zalega, 2015).

Being a responsible consumer means being aware of the consequences of one’s decisions as well as being willing to limit their adverse effects and, consequently, benefitting from such action. Benefits resulting from decisions taken by the consumer may relate to the natural environment, standards of living of certain communities (limited child labor, unfair work conditions etc.) as well as the consumer themselves, their health, well-being, the situation of their family and friends or their local environment where they have been functioning. A responsible consumer is also aware of costs of taking decisions resulting from their attitude.

There are three pillars of sustainable consumption: a consumer’s environmental imperative, a change of how an individual functions as a consumer and environmental awareness, where the ecological imperative means taking into account goods of the natural environment throughout the entire process of satisfying consumer needs (Kryk, 2011).

Socially responsible consumers may demonstrate different behaviors (Bylok, 2016):

1. purchasing consumer goods that have been manufactured in a manner that is least harmful to the natural environment,
2. consuming so-called ecological goods (mostly foods) without artificial additives, preservatives etc.,
3. acquiring goods recognized as ethical, that is, paying attention to the ethics of their manufacturing process, e.g. fair trade coffee or products manufactured without violating the dignity of workers involved in the manufacturing process,

4. acquiring goods produced at lowest environmental and social costs, e.g. acquiring cleaning agents with a relatively low content of harmful chemical compounds, biologically neutral food for children,
5. promoting environmentally-friendly lifestyles, e.g. voluntary simplicity of consumption, slow food,
6. promoting awareness of being co-responsible for risks related to overconsumption and overproduction of post-consumption waste among other consumers, e.g. on social media sites,
7. participating in actions aimed at reducing consumption, e.g. in consumer co-operatives, pro-ecological movements”.

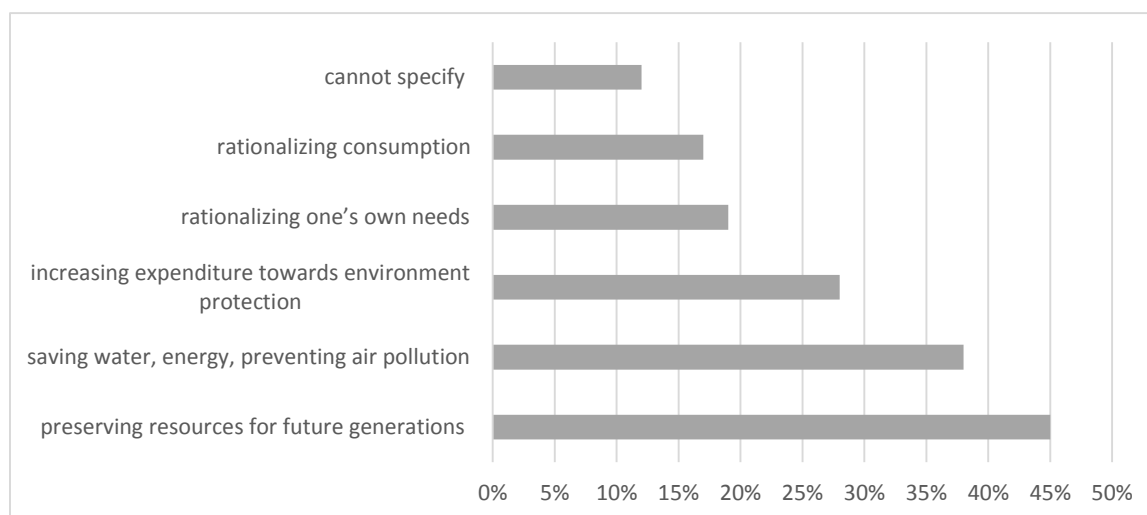
#### **4. Environmentally-friendly consumer behaviors – the author’s own research**

A quantitative survey was conducted in order to determine environmentally-friendly consumer behaviors and identify major factors impacting buying decisions that help protect natural environment. It allowed to collect statistical data on consumers’ pro-environmental behaviors and to identify relationships between variable. The quantitative method was selected with a view to obtaining cross-sectional data from a larger group of respondents and drawing generalized conclusions. A diagnostic poll method was applied, including an online survey technique, which made it possible to reach a large number of respondents. The questionnaire included close-ended questions (single choice and multiple choice) as well as demographic questions. The questions pertained to, among other things, buying habits, environmentally-friendly actions taken by consumers, knowledge of ecology as well as factors that encourage and discourage environmentally-friendly consumer choices. The research was conducted at the end of 2024 and in early 2025 based on a sample of 350 persons (purposive sampling). The respondents included consumers aged 18-60, mostly the inhabitants of towns and cities). Such selection of the sample made it possible to obtain diversified answers and analyze differences in environmental attitudes in various demographic groups. Although the sample is not representative for the entire population of Poland, it is a source of important information about trends and attitudes among consumers who are more environmentally aware as well as about an urban lifestyle.

Approximately 35% of the respondents stated that they understood the concept of sustainable consumption. The higher the education level, the larger the number of respondents who understand the concept (45% of respondents with higher education, 37% with intermediate education, 21% with lower education). The youngest respondents (18-24 years) hardly understood the concept which may be surprising because children as young as those attending

elementary schools are taught about environmental issues, e.g. about waste segregation. In the context of preserving natural environment for future generations, that age group is prone to suffering the most from adverse environmental changes. A demographic analysis also led to interesting conclusions. Namely, women and respondents with higher education are more inclined to adopt pro-ecological attitudes which is consistent with the results of other research in that area. The above shows, among other things, that educational activities need to be targeted at less environmentally active groups, e.g. younger men or people with lower education. The awareness of the concept of sustainable consumption increases with the increase of the income of the respondent and their household.

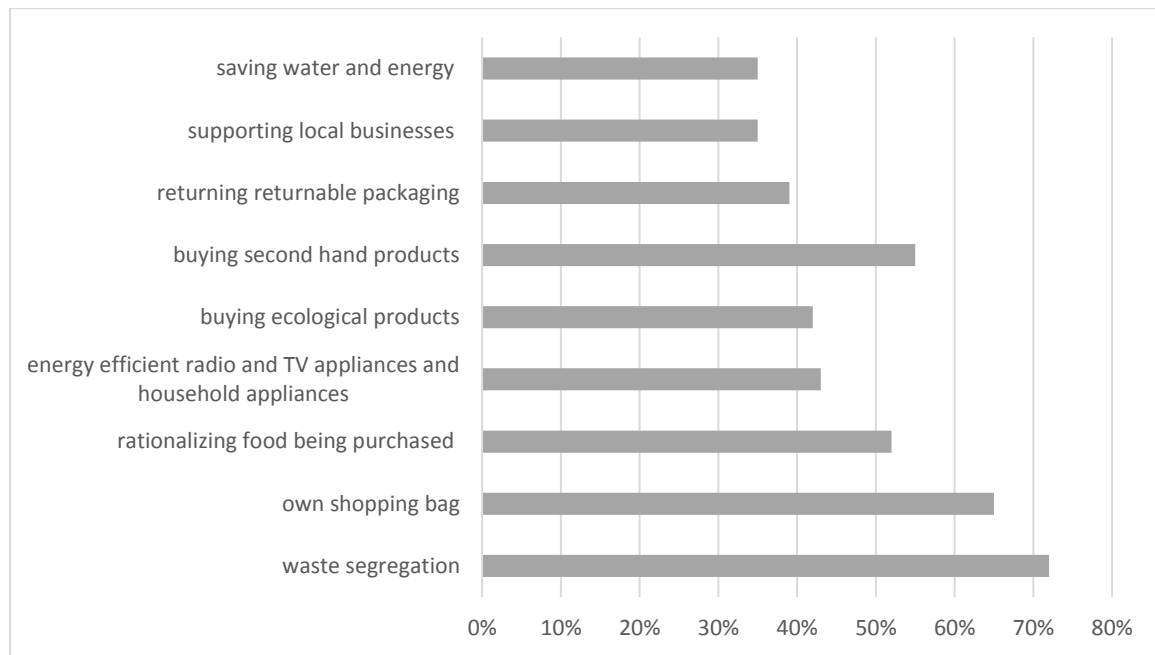
The respondents most often stated that sustainable consumption involved: saving resources for future generations (45%); saving energy, water, preventing air pollution (38%); increased expenditure towards the protection of natural environment (28%). Only approx. 12% of the respondents were unable to define sustainable consumption. In particular, the above referred to older people, including those poorly educated and less wealthy ones.



**Figure 1.** Understanding the concept of sustainable consumption.

Source: own research.

The respondents attached different contexts to sustainable consumption. Based on the definition of sustainable consumption as “responding to consumer needs so as not to jeopardize the needs of further generations”, 67% of the respondents confirmed that they live by the sustainable consumption concept, 35% of the respondents stated that they live by that rule to a large degree, whereas nearly 9% said that they did not. As regards income, education or place of residence, the respondents with higher education and higher incomes who live in larger towns/cities have been implementing the concept of sustainable consumption and satisfying their needs in accordance therewith. The research shows that ecological awareness of consumers is relatively high – as many as 73% of the respondents have noticed that their daily choices affect the environment. The above may show that the knowledge and interest in environmental issues in the society have grown, perhaps due to educational campaigns and the presence of environmental issues in media.



**Figure 2.** The implementation of the concept of sustainable consumption by respondents.

Source: own research.

In the course of the research the respondents were requested to specify behaviors that most accurately reflect sustainable consumption; the respondents most frequently listed the following: waste segregation (72%) and using their own shopping bags (65%). Those are the activities that do not require significant financial expenditure or changes in lifestyle which validates the thesis that the respondents are most eager to become engaged in environmental activities that are easy to implement and plausible. Other responses included: buying such quantities of products that the respondents are able to consume (52%), using energy efficient radio and television appliances as well as a household appliances (43%), saving water and energy (35%). On the other hand, the respondents were less eager to buy products marked as environmental, even though such products were important from the market perspective (less than 50% of the respondents). The above shows that there are still barriers, mostly those related to prices of and access to such products. As many as 64% of the respondents indicated a higher price as a major obstacle preventing them from pro-ecological purchases which, in turn, is the confirmation that the economic aspect remains to be a key obstacle in adopting an environmental attitude.

Some respondents stated that, as part of sustainable consumption, they return returnable packaging or buy second-hand clothing, compost waste or give things a second life by repairing or remodeling them or looking for their new applications. On the other hand, the respondents stated that they hardly use electric cars or support environmental campaigns.

## 5. Summary

The purpose of the research was to investigate consumer attitudes as regards pro-environmental behaviors and to determine factors that affect their buying decisions in the context of the protection of the natural environment. The analysis of the results of the research showed that the majority of the respondents had a high level of ecological awareness and were willing to engage in activities supporting sustainable growth.

Mostly the consumers are intrinsically motivated by values such as the concern about the natural environment and health. Also demographic differences turned out to be important – women and persons with higher education are more environmentally active.

A high level of ecological awareness does not always result in specific buying decisions, while high prices and limited access to ecological products are major barriers.

Most frequently consumers become engaged in environmental activities that are habitual and effortless. The above proves that solutions are needed that will facilitate making ecological choices in daily life.

There is a particular evident need to intensify educational activities in the area of the protection of natural environment, especially in social groups that are less environmentally active such as younger people, men and persons with lower education.

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