
Sustainable Consumption Among Youth Consumers

Submitted 14/07/21, 1st revision 11/08/21, 2nd revision 26/08/21, accepted 15/09/21

Karolina Ertmańska¹

Abstract:

Purpose: The main aim of this paper was to show different approaches to sustainable consumption and to assess the level of sustainable consumption awareness among young consumers in Poland. The goal is associated with specific objectives, which include showing the effects that consumers and consumption have on socioeconomic development, identifying factors determining consumer behavior, and assessing the impact of sustainable consumption patterns on consumer behavior.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The article is based on theoretical considerations supported by the results of own research, presenting tendencies and phenomena in the consumer behavior of young consumers characteristic of sustainable consumption. A survey with the CAWI questionnaire has been used to demonstrate the determinants of this phenomenon. An empirical study was conducted in January 2020.

Findings: The results of the survey are showing that young consumers declared behaviors in line with eco-consumption, consisting mainly of re-using of product packaging, shopping in an eco- and intelligent way, purchase and consumption of so-called ecological goods, choosing products coming from their own country. This indicates the awareness of sustainable consumption patterns among respondents, which shows positive changes in the approach of consumers themselves.

Practical Implications: The presented considerations are of great importance for practice. They constitute an indicator of which conditions influence the increase of consumption of products. The studies presented in the paper show that sustainable development aspects are not the leading purchase criteria for young consumers. Still, they are likely to remain significant brand differentiators for the buyers provided that their primary criteria for purchase are met, such as acceptable price and quality.

Originality/Value: The paper presents the attitudes of young consumers towards ecological products, environmental and social issues and identifies consumer behaviors that affect consumption sustainability. Over the recent years, sustainable consumption has been more and more covered by scientific research. The attitude of young consumers in this subject is of high importance. For that reason, the subject requires a joint approach with the inclusion of enterprises, governments, and consumers.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption, informed consumption, informed consumer.

JEL classification: D10, D12, D91, M31.

Paper Type: Research study.

¹West Pomeranian University of Technology Szczecin, Poland, kertmanska@zut.edu.pl;

1. Introduction

One of the characteristics of contemporary society is that individuals are increasingly perceived mainly as consumers. Consumer behavior studies are becoming a must if the successful functioning of economic and social systems is to be ensured. Many enterprises are now facing difficulties ensuring the efficiency of their marketing efforts caused by perceiving consumers as passive “end users” of the created value and neglecting their changing role and influence on market processes.

The consumers’ influence on their environment is sometimes referred to as ‘voting with the wallet’ and provided that the choices are responsible such consumption can be considered informed and sustainable. Although sustainable development and climate change have been present in the media and people’s minds for years, it has only now become possible to see how they affect how consumers are making their everyday decisions. This appears to be the most visible in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) area, as buyers often ponder the matters of waste generation or brand reputation before their next purchase. However, there are more methods for making informed purchase decisions associated with sustainable development.

This paper aims to show different approaches to sustainable consumption and assess the level of sustainable consumption awareness among young consumers in Poland. The goal is associated with specific objectives, which include showing the effects that consumers and consumption have on socioeconomic development, identifying factors determining consumer behavior, and assessing the impact of sustainable consumption patterns on consumer behavior. It presents research results into sustainable consumption-based both on external secondary sources and the author’s study.

2. Literature Review

The basic idea of the sustainable development concept is to promote the harmony between the human being, the economy, and the natural environment by the simultaneous achievement of economic, sociological, and ecological goals (Paluch and Sroka, 2013). The primary objective of sustainable development is to provide the appropriate quality of life (Kryk, 2013). It can be concluded that achieving sustainable quality of life requires sustainable consumption, which is correlated with consumers’ responsible behavior and consciousness in this subject.

A standard definition of sustainable consumption would be “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations” (Reisch, 1998). Another approach links the sustainable consumption ecological degradation, modern hyperconsumption, and leading economic and political institutions - the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP). Hyperconsumption occurs where “there is no logical

connection between the thing consumed and the consumption act itself – it is the consumption for its own sake" (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero, 1997).

Sustainable consumption is the consumption in which people can satisfy their basic needs in harmony with specific ecological and socio-economic standards, necessary for human development and improving the quality of life in short-, medium- and long-time perspective (Kronenberg, 2007; Dobson, 2007). A broad understanding of the concept has been presented in the United Nations report (UNEP, 2001), in which four strategic levels have been distinguished, addressing different change agents (Table 1).

Table 1. *United Nations Environmental Programme – broad approach to sustainable consumption*

Type of strategy	Focus on	Major agents
Efficient consumption	Improved product and process efficiency; higher resource productivity	Industry plus government and consumers
Different consumption	Changes in infrastructure and choice architecture	Government plus industry and consumers
Conscious consumption	More quality of life and less environmental costs through 'choosing and using' more wisely	Consumers plus industry and government
Appropriate consumption	Type and level of consumption and its contribution to quality of life	Society at large plus communities and citizens

Source: Scholl G. (2011). *What is Sustainable Consumption?* Retrieved from: <http://www.scp-responder.eu/pdf/knowledge/papers>.

The above approach shows that the more far-reaching scope, the more comprehensive the range of actors needed to be engaged. While the industry has a central role in realizing more efficient consumption patterns, the government delivers proper infrastructures. The responsibility of consumers and society increases to the extent that consumption patterns are addressed more deeply.

Sustainable consumption has an interdisciplinary nature, so it is difficult to develop one standard definition for various approaches. The result of particular authors refers mainly to individual aspects affecting sustainable consumption, including the use of products (Bocken, 2017), food waste (Morone, Falcone, and Lopolito, 2019), standards of pro-ecological behavior (Han and Kwon, 2019), consumption of organic food (Oosterveer and Spaargaren, 2012), material resources (Salo *et al.*, 2016), transport systems (Chekima *et al.*, 2015). The linking factor should be improving life quality in a long perspective (Kułyk, Michałowska, and Augustowski, 2020).

Sustainable consumption is an answer to widespread consumerism and is mainly developing in wealthy societies (UNEP, 2015), becoming more and more aware of the consequences of their purchasing behaviors. These behaviors are perceived as

covering the broadest possible range of acts – from making the purchase decision to the motives for that decision to the method of using the product, to the manner of proper disposal. However, the lifestyles and consumption patterns of millions of consumers in developing countries are now meeting those of developed countries. This is particularly the case among younger and well-educated elites (UNEP, 2015). The consumption patterns of the new consumer classes will result in larger houses and apartments fitted with new appliances, new modes of transport and increasing private car ownership, increased air travel, new diets based on much more significant amounts of meat and dairy, and a whole range of new manufactured goods. There is a significant opportunity to guide the transition in consumption toward sustainability through policy settings and frameworks that privilege environmentally friendly and socially just products and services. This can happen through labeling, subsidies, and information campaigns.

It seems very important to include the quality of life of a human being acting as a consumer in the new consumption paradigm. This inclusion suggests that sustainable consumption is conscious consumption based on responsibility-informed and responsible consumer choices and decisions and other values. This approach shapes the attitudes of the conscious consumer, exhibiting in his behavior the features of the sufficiency of consumption, its self-limitation, and consumer restraint and reduction of waste when satisfying needs (Czaja and Becla, 2011).

The new trends in consumer behaviors are linked to:

- the sense of weariness and disappointment with excessive consumption;
- the falling significance of consumption in the consumers' value systems;
- the growing awareness of the need for rational consumption associated with human health issues;
- the spreading pathologies related to consumption (addiction to tangible assets, shopaholism);
- the growing ecological awareness (Pieńkowski, Murawska, and Zaremba-Warnke, 2018).

The concept of sustainable development emerged nearly 30 years ago to create a framework for managing development. Development focused on maximizing economic and political gains has led to environmental, social, and even economic crises. In response to them, societies are now looking for solutions that are supposed to alleviate the direct symptoms of those problems. The informed consumption movement entails noticing the significant impact consumers have on the environment and how the production and distribution of goods and services are shaped on a global scale. In conceptual considerations on sustainable consumption, a significant part is its contradiction - unsustainable consumption. Such consumption usually has two aspects (Portilho, 2013). On the one hand, it manifests itself in excessive, unnecessary consumption of goods and services, and on the other, in insufficient consumption, consumption below the minimum level, making it impossible to meet even basic human needs.

Through their market behaviors, consumers create demand and determine the functioning of other market players. As part of the social behaviors presented by individuals, consumer behaviors are an essential component of consumption processes. They can be regarded as a set of actions aimed at obtaining, using, and disposing of products and services and as the decisions preceding and determining such actions (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard, 1995).

Consumer demand stimulates production development, while changes in the consumer goods market affect several social, economic, and cultural phenomena – both in positive and negative ways. Consumption that allows for satisfying individuals' needs can become the purpose of one's life and a factor stimulating their actions, whereas the freedom to choose which products to purchase allows for revealing their consumer preferences.

Increasingly, consumption structure determines the individual's place within the society and leads to a situation where one's self is expressed through their growing consumer aspirations. *Consumerism* is an attitude that involves obtaining tangible assets and services in a way that is not substantiated by the actual needs or legitimized by the ecological, social, and individual costs. It is also a view that regards such consumption as a marker of the quality of life. Consumerism is predominantly a characteristic of developed countries, although countries with lower income levels and living standards are gradually catching up.

Poland's accession to the European Union boosted the prosperity gap between this country and the better developed EU Member States. The rate of change about the main measures describing Poland's socio-economic situation and, simultaneously, affecting the consumption level in the individual consumer and household group has been characterized by a steady growth over the last ten years, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The rate of change of selected macroeconomic indicators for Poland between 2010 and 2019 as compared with the previous year (=100)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
GDP	103.6	105.0	101.6	101.4	103.3	103.8	103.1	104.9	105.1	104.1
Total consumption	102.8	102.0	100.5	100.8	102.8	102.8	103.5	104.1	104.1	103.9
Household consumption	102.6	103.3	100.8	100.3	102.6	103.0	103.9	104.5	104.3	103.9
Household gross disposable income	101.9	101.4	100.9	100.8	102.8	103.5	106.0	103.2	102.7	no data
Average net salary	101.4	101.4	100.1	102.8	103.2	104.5	104.3	103.7	105.4	104.8
Registered unemployment rate	12.4	12.5	13.4	13.4	11.4	9.7	8.2	6.6	5.8	5.2

Source: Developed by the author based on: GUS - Statistics Poland, 2020.

The data in Table 2 shows that the growth in the main parameters characterizing economic development translates directly into an improvement in the population's living conditions, while the higher income provides more consumption opportunities and increased financial independence.

Consumer behaviors play critical roles in the country's socio-economic development. For the first time, the growing role that consumers are playing in that development was pointed to at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1999. As the "Rio Declaration on Environment and Development" (the so-called Rio Declaration) provides, human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development and are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature (United Nations, 1992). Efficient use of natural resources, cultural heritage, and civilization progress must guarantee that contemporary societies' needs are met without detriment to future generations. However, it was only in the 21st century that the essence of this attitude was understood, and actions have been intensified (Olejniczuk-Merta, 2016).

The current role of consumers in socioeconomic development can be described as gaining insignificance. The roles of the manufacturer and the consumer are increasingly aimed at counterbalancing each other. According to A.G. Becker, since production is about transforming some resources into others, the same applies to consumption. It does so, as consumption entails transforming products into other goods or values. Such goods and values can be either positive (e.g., satisfaction with the purchased product) or negative (e.g., post-consumer waste) (Becker, 1990). Another aspect of consumption, as well as production, is that of rationality. Rational consumption fits within the consumer's budget, is compliant with their values, and does not contradict the interests of other individuals at the same time (Bywalec, 2007).

In the case of enterprises, sustainable development is identified with corporate social responsibility (CSR). The media in recent years have been reporting abundantly on unethical conduct in business, such as financial statement fraud, unfair advertising campaigns, corruption, conflicts of interest, and practices of covering blameworthy actions of global corporations in developing countries with image-building efforts in developed countries, etc. Consequently, in their social responsibility, communication enterprises commonly began to stress the ethical dimension of CSR. Their actions are designed to build trust among consumers, business partners, and other stakeholders. They highlight that ethical conduct in business pays off and so makes a responsible approach.

Consumers often demonstrate relatively low esteem of the actions that enterprises undertake in the sustainable development domain, which is a consequence of their growing expectations towards businesses in the recent decades, and they are increasing ecological and social awareness. These phenomena are translated into their objection to reprehensible practices, which frequently leads to boycotts on products or services offered by defaulting companies. In response to the pressure from consumers,

enterprises are undertaking activities designed to benefit sustainable development by eliminating environmental and social problems, thus reducing that pressure.

However, businesses are more and more frequently doing that because of the advantages they recognize rather than merely by way of a response to the pressure from external stakeholders. One of the most manifests of such advantages is cost reduction stemming from energy and resource-saving. Appreciation of a company's sustainable development measures also makes it appear more attractive as an employer.

In the first place, sustainable development requires a long-term approach. In the long run, social and environmental problems may have a detrimental impact on business operations - thus leading to reduced demand or hindered access to factors of production. On the other hand, an ideal social situation and a clean environment are desirable contributors to business and create new opportunities to thrive.

Today, corporate social responsibility is looked upon from a far broader perspective. Along with the developing civilization, the ban on child labor has become one of CSR's fundamental rules, especially highlighted by enterprises doing business globally, including in developing countries. Ensuring the welfare of workers, not only in the context of their working conditions but also in education and leisure, is one of the four pillars that corporate social responsibility is built upon. The other three are minimization of the environmental impact, responsible and ethical business behavior about partners, suppliers, and customers, and acting as the so-called good neighbor, which includes accepting responsibility for the influence exerted on the local community and supporting its prosperity and development, all to obtain and sustain the so-called license to operate (Kronenberg and Bergier, 2010).

Nevertheless, enterprises in their promotional communication include sustainable development messages that do not correspond to what they do. This phenomenon has been labeled as 'greenwashing' or 'bluwashing,' where an attempt is made to picture the company as greener or bluer than it is in fact. Such behavior is frequently denounced by non-government organizations, consumers, or even market competitors. Deceptive operations are thus risky - if revealed, they can backfire against the dishonest enterprise, which may ultimately lead to boycotting its products.

According to Scholl (2011), sustainable living of the contemporary consumer can be achieved by: energy efficiency in the home and the workplace, sustainable travel; sustainable food; waste reduction; and sustainable products and supply chains. Another point of view is presented by Łuczka (2016), who mentioned three dimensions shaping sustainable consumption: economic, ecological, and social. In the case of narrowing the concept to the ecological dimension, sustainable consumption is demonstrated in such consumer behavior as:

- buying and consuming certified ecological goods,
- economical use of water and electricity,

- using household appliances that allow to reduce the consumption of these resources,
- segregating rubbish,
- recycling common items and materials use,
- limiting the purchase of products manufactured in conventional manufacturing processes.

Apart from ecological dimension, the following symptoms of sustainable consumption can be distinguished:

- deconsumption - i.e. quantitative reduction of the level of consumption,
- collaborative consumption - joint use of goods,
- responsible consumption - taking into account social and environmental aspects in purchasing decisions in the entire life cycle of a product,
- prosumption - connecting by consumers the role of producers (Łuczka, 2016).

Devinney, Auger, Eckhardt, and Birtchnell (2006) indicated two ways to express responsible consumer behavior: purchasing or non-purchasing. Among purchasing behaviors, there are actions as shopping at local or small businesses, buying green products (Goryńska-Goldmann and Gazdecki, 2018), reducing one's consumption, buying from CSR companies (Robinot, Ertz, and Durif, 2017).

Consumers are more and more aware of their shared responsibility for the environment, sustainable development, and other problems exposed by the media. Declaratively, the awareness of such issues has been growing in Poland – in 1992, 25% of the respondents realized their responsibility for the condition of the environment, while by 2008, the figure grew to 51%. 42% of them claim that they recognize how important the behavior of 'ordinary people' is for improving the status of the environment (Bołtromiuk and Burger, 2008). When making their consumption decisions, they are still mainly concentrating on the price and are hardly trustful of others, making them more reluctant to engage in everyday activities to benefit sustainable development.

Each decision is of grave importance if one accounts for the scale of all decisions made simultaneously and those made throughout one's lifetime. Therefore, this phenomenon has been dubbed 'the tyranny of small decisions' (Janikowski, 1999). Similarly, all decisions made by consumers, including those aimed at minimizing the negative impact on the environment, accumulate. The tyranny of small decisions thus applies to all decisions made by consumers, particularly those related to the purchase ('should I buy?'), the choice of specific products or services ('what should I buy?'), the choice of the point of sale ('where should I buy?'), the usage ('how should I use?') and the method of disposal after the useful life of the product ('how should I discard?').

The purchase of a product relatively less harmful to the environment may in a way relieve consumers from responsibility and cause them to use it more often and less

efficiently than they would not knowing that the product was less harmful than the one they used before (e.g., in the case of energy-saving light bulbs).

While making such decisions, consumers determine the scale of their environmental impact and consequently contribute to the aggregate effect exerted by all consumers and by themselves throughout their lifetimes. Although in the context of environmental impact, these questions are still relatively rarely asked by Polish consumers, as their decisions continue to be mainly driven by the price, the one most frequently asked of these is 'what should I buy?' The questions 'how should I use?' and 'how should I discard?' are in the first place asked about expenses associated with the operation or disposal of the product. The essential question 'should I buy?' is probably the rarest (Bołtromiuk and Burger, 2008).

Any such consumer behavior study should account for the fact that the declared behaviors do not always correspond to reality. A Eurobarometer survey (Bołtromiuk and Burger, 2008) showed that although 75% of consumers expressed their willingness to buy more environmentally friendly products, even if they were to be more expensive than their conventional counterparts, only 17% of them had made such purchases in the month before the study. Similar declarations were made by 77% of Poles, with only 13% have done so.

Responsible consumer behavior, first of all, consists of refraining from buying specific products or services ('should I buy?') or choosing products or services displaying particular characteristics ('what should I buy?'). The former case may involve consumers boycotting products from a specific enterprise (e.g., one accused of environmental abuse), a selected group of products, or products manufactured in a given way. The latter case may involve consumers choosing products that carry an additional value, such as an opportunity to solve some social or environmental problems. One example of these could be fair-trade products designed to ensure sustainable development for suppliers from developing countries.

Additionally, there is a new dynamically developing approach to informed consumption emerging – the so-called collaborative consumption. It is based on the idea of sharing and focusing on the product's function rather than owning it (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). Collaborative consumption ranges from a simple exchange of favors between neighbors to various types of libraries, community fridges, city bikes, and car-sharing systems. It allows for reducing individual consumption and unnecessary purchases, simultaneously reinforcing social ties and integration.

In December 2018, the research agency Nielsen published its Global Sustainable Shoppers Report (2019). Thirty thousand consumers in 64 countries were surveyed. 81% of the global respondents claimed that enterprises' implementation of sustainable development programs is of extreme importance - the need for such corporate actions is implicated most frequently by the so-called Millennials (the generation of people born in the 1980s and 1990s). A large majority of the respondents declared that they are

definitely or very likely to change their purchase behaviors and thus reduce their environmental impact. The research has shown that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of what they eat and use; they are also interested in buying – or even paying more for – environmentally friendly products. The report states that there is a growing need among consumers for sustainable local and natural products and products that make life easier. This complex demand for convenient, suitable products for the consumer and good for the world offers vast developmental opportunities for retailers and manufacturers alike who have a good understanding of how these factors combine. However, despite the growing interest in sustainable development, consumers do not usually treat it as one of their primary criteria for purchase, as the price, function, efficiency, quality, and convenience still prevail.

3. Research Methodology

For the purposes of the present article, a survey on informed consumption was carried out in January 2020. The study group included full-time Economics and Management majors at the Economics Department, the West Pomeranian University of Technology, Szczecin, Poland.

The survey questionnaire consisted of three parts, the introduction, the substantive part and the respondent's particulars. The substantive part of the questionnaire contained a set of questions regarding the tendencies characteristic for respondents in the sphere of consumption and their opinions on sustainable consumption. Respondent's particulars considered such characteristics as gender, age, place of origin, financial and professional situation. The majority of questions contained in the questionnaire were closed, and the answers were presented in the form of an alternative, a closed set of many possible answers or a semi-open set, which allowed the respondent to add other options. Computer-assisted web interviewing technique has been used.

The group comprised 152 persons aged 19-23, of whom 60% were women and 40% men. All respondents are students of the West Pomeranian University of Technology in Szczecin. As the place of origin, 54% of them indicated towns below 50 thous. of inhabitants, 43% - city with 300-500 thous. of inhabitants. 54% of respondents indicated their financial situation as at least 'good'.

4. Results and Discussion

The primary analysis focused on the answers from respondents declaring themselves as informed consumers – these accounted for 71% of the study group (including 52% of women and 48% of men). 60% of them were from small towns and villages (with populations of up to 50 thous.) 56% of the respondents described their financial situation as at least good. 52% of the respondents combined their education with odd jobs, while 44% did not.

Only 44% of the respondents from the informed consumer group declared they were buying organic or bioproducts – and these were the consumers, most of whom (75%) described their financial situation as good or very good. 48% of the respondents claimed they chose fair-trade products.

Most (63%) of the respondents referring to themselves as informed consumers read the ingredient lists on their food products before purchase. Only 44% of the study group choose products in packaging made of biodegradable and natural material. When buying fruit and vegetables, 63% of the respondents used plastic bags to pack them. As many as 78% of the respondents admitted to using used product packaging several times or processing it for their own needs. Only 47% of the respondents knew the concept of community fridges, while none (0%) used them as suppliers, and a mere 7% were on the receiving end. 55% of the respondents said they were likely to deliberately pass over products of large corporations known to harm the environment. 41% of the respondents stated that for food products, they were choosing Polish brands. Only 22% of the respondents claimed they were buying too much or too often. 74% of the respondents claimed their parents (at least 1 one of them) were informed, responsible consumers, while only 26% said so about their grandparents. The respondents' sex had no significant effect on their answers to any of these questions. As the causes of why people are not informed and responsible consumers, the respondents pointed to a lack of interest in the subject (74%), a lack of knowledge (67%), and the high costs of such activity (15%). The respondents were also asked to assess the importance of different areas of corporate social responsibility; here, most votes were on human rights and environmental protection. Detailed results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Corporate social responsibility areas of importance to the informed consumers surveyed (5 - very important, 1 - unimportant)

Area	Assessment (1-5)
human rights	4.63
environmental protection	4.46
relationship with customers	4.46
fair market practices	4.32
labor relations	4.23
organizational governance	4.22
social involvement	4.00

Source: Developed by the author.

As for environmental activities within the framework of informed consumer choices, a mere 48% of the respondents answered that the youth environmental movement initiated/put into the spotlight by Greta Thunberg was necessary. Of these, only 54% declared they were taking any related activities.

The above analysis of the results concerns, as mentioned earlier, the responses of only some of the respondents - those who defined themselves as informed consumers.

Finally, these results have been compared with those of people who indicated they were not informed, consumers. The summarization has been presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of results between two groups of respondents – informed consumers and not-informed consumers

	% of results of informed consumers	% of results of not-informed consumers
buying organic or bio products	44	63
buying fair-trade products	48	45
reading ingredient lists before product purchase	63	54
choosing biodegradable / natural packaging	44	45
not-using plastic bags (ref. to fruit and vegetables purchasing)	33	45
re-using product packaging	78	81
knowing the concept of community fridges	48	54
using community fridges as a receiver	8	17
boycotting products of large corporations harming the environment	56	73
choosing Polish products	41	54
assessment of CSR areas – highest value	4,63 (human rights)	4,90 (human rights)
having parents as informed consumers	74	54
having grandparents as informed consumers	26	27

Source: Developed by the author.

Surprisingly, the group results that defined themselves as non-informed consumers are in many areas 'better' (highlighted in gray) than the other group's results. This result may indicate that people in the not-informed group are more strict in judging their actions. One of the questions in the questionnaire concerned the identification of the companies of enterprises that respondents associate the most / the least with CSR activities – 7/15% (respectively) of informed consumers indicated any what could show their not very high knowledge in this area. Thus, the analysis of the research results divided into two separate groups may be debatable. However, when analyzing the survey results, it needs to be stressed that they are mere declarations and do not necessarily correspond to actual behaviors. So, finally, the results of all respondents have been shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Declared actions of sustainable consumption among respondents

	% of results
re-using product packaging	81
reading ingredient lists before product purchase	62
boycotting products of large corporations harming the environment	62
not-using plastic bags (ref. to fruit and vegetables purchasing)	54
buying organic or bio products	51

buying fair-trade products	49
choosing biodegradable / natural packaging	46
choosing Polish products	46
using community fridges as a receiver	10
using community fridges as a supplier	0

Source: Developed by the author.

The survey results show that young consumers declared behaviors in line with eco-consumption, consisting mainly of re-using product packaging, shopping in an eco- and intelligent way, purchasing and consuming so-called ecological goods, choosing products coming from their own country. This indicates the awareness of sustainable consumption patterns among respondents, which shows positive changes in consumers' approaches.

5. Conclusion

Population growth and economic development are the driving factors of global consumption. Billions of consumers – especially in China, India, and other emerging markets – continue to boost demand for goods and services. The latest research shows that globally, humanity has exceeded Earth's ability to support our consumption-based lifestyles for over 20 years now (WWF, Living Planet Report, 2006).

Sustainable consumption is appealing to wider social groups. Societies are looking for ways to solve their problems related to environmental, social, and economic crises. However, by concentrating merely on economic or biodiversity recovery, they fall into the short-term effect trap, eventually causing another temporary solution. Sustainable development provides an opportunity to avoid such short-term actions by integrating three areas: the economy, society, and the environment.

The studies presented in the paper show that sustainable development aspects are not the leading purchase criteria to consumers. Still, they are likely to remain significant brand differentiators for the buyers provided that their primary criteria for purchase are met, such as acceptable price and quality. Therefore, by offering sustainable products and services that simultaneously meet consumers' main criteria for purchase, enterprises can both respond to the society's expectations and pursue their business objectives: their concern for sustainable development helps their customers and employees recognize the values they identify with, at the same time creating a long-term value for business owners and investors alike.

Whether green or more socially beneficial, the mainstreaming of more sustainable products is already taking place in some market sectors and has growing consumer acceptance. So the simplistic statement that the consumer is not interested is no longer valid. There is not enough evidence that green consumers can change mainstream product markets. However, these consumers may have played a role as early adopters, but the translation to the mainstream depends on several other factors. If more

sustainable products are to be mainstreamed, they need to be equivalent to the norm in price, quality, or availability.

Where the market is not able to achieve this product parity spontaneously, then government intervention is needed. The conclusion for the government is that there is a broad range of regulatory options available to make more sustainable products the accepted norm. Big-brand manufacturers can shift their product portfolio towards sustainability if they see a supply-side saving or a new market stimulated by growing public concerns or created by policy or public procurement. Companies consider hundreds of innovation opportunities a year and filter these before they are launched. Relative sustainability should be one of these filters.

Sustainability considerations will impact all markets at some time in the future. This may be now or still some time away. However, the impetus for market change is often outside the control of business or government. External events may come at the most unexpected times and seriously change attitudes. Products that anticipate these potential changes will be the leaders of tomorrow, and companies that prioritize these will increase their chances of long-term success and survival.

The operation of contemporary companies amounts to many pro-social and pro-ecological activities. Such an attitude results from the fact that the modern consumer is the decision-maker taking into account the principles of sustainable development. He is becoming more and more aware of the consequences of his own decisions in the context of global consumption. Therefore it is crucial to examine both theoretical and practical aspects of sustainable consumption – concerning the sustainable mindset of consumers and companies.

As the final comment, it appears legitimate to ask how crucial sustainable consumption is to consumers nowadays - faced with a global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, how the new priorities and habits favor or undermine sustainable development, how the pandemic is affecting consumers' interest in the issues of health and well-being, and how companies could take advantage of the present crisis to invest in innovation aimed at achieving sustainable development.

The statement can be ventured that the coronavirus pandemic has arbitrarily imposed sustainable development on the world. The reduced consumption caused by the lockdown leads to market crashes and a spiraling economic downturn. Some consumers have started working from home, others have lost their jobs, while their budgets have shrunk considerably, leading to smaller expenditures. These are negative aspects, although they have positive consequences for the planet – factories have been closed, transport intensity has diminished, and business has slowed down, which has contributed to, for example, improved air and water quality. However, these do not appear to be lasting trends. There is a fear that when the lockdown is lifted, consumers will resume their former habits, although some of them will have to be changed. In line with government guidelines in different countries, new consumer behaviors have

emerged: the falling expenditure is one; another one has unfortunately harmful effects, e.g., the widespread use of personal protection means such as disinfectants, or gloves and face masks. A significant proportion of these products, the demand for which has recently grown dynamically, are disposable or quickly expiring goods that generate an abundance of waste.

As one of the pandemic's possible results, consumers may become more sensitive to health and environmental protection matters. Consumers are more aware that our global and very severe interference with the natural environment brings about numerous risks, including to people, and that environmental protection provides us with defense tools. Another concern about the post-pandemic future is a recession that may encourage governments to support their economies at the expense of environmental policies and cut environmental expenses.

The spread of the coronavirus has halted sustainable development undertakings by enterprises as they have switched to the survival mode. Nevertheless, in the long run, the pandemic and the resulting crisis may bring substantial benefits to those enterprises that follow the sustainable development path.

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