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# **SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR OF YOUNG POLISH CONSUMERS**

**Summary:** On the basis of a critical analysis of related literature, the article attempts to explain the concept and essence of sustainable consumption, a dynamically evolving consumer trend, and its connection with Fair Trade. The article seeks to identify young people's consumer attitudes and behaviours that can be defined as sustainable consumption. It strives to explain what most motivates young people to participate in sustainable consumption. The tool used to conduct the research was the original author's questionnaire comprising 50 closed-ended questions regarding alternative consumer trends, including sustainable consumption. The survey was carried out from 1st February to 1st May, 2018. In accordance with the research assumptions, 589 people aged 18-34, belonging to the Y and Z Generations, took part in the survey. The research has shown that young people's pro-environmental behaviours that can be classified as sustainable consumption depend on their gender, age, monthly disposable income, and place of residence.

**Keywords:** young people, sustainable consumption, consumer behaviour, conscious consumer, Fair Trade.

**JEL Classification:** D12, M31.

## **Introduction**

Today's consumption does not mean the use of material goods and services in order to satisfy the felt needs, but has also become an indicator of the standard of living, a criterion of the structure of society and a way in which individuals communicate their identity. In contemporary literature, many definitions of consumption put great emphasis on the social, biological, and psychological dimensions and determinants of satisfaction of human needs. The evolution of consumption as a consequence of globalisation, internationalisation, stimulation of

innovation and dynamic development of a knowledge-based economy has resulted in today's consumption beginning to play not only an extremely important but perhaps fundamental role, given its ever greater influence on the stimulation of contemporary economic processes and economic development. Nowadays, already the youngest family members are increasingly taking over active roles in the shopping process, becoming the main advisers and often decision-makers in the selection and purchase of various goods, in particular those used by families for enjoyment, such as modern and hi-tech equipment.

In order to counteract the degradation of the natural environment, more and more consumers are enthusiastic and convinced about the introduction of radical changes in their everyday life to reduce ecological footprint. Therefore, they make decisions taking into account the principles of sustainable development and being aware of the consequences of their choices for their health and the natural environment. Consumers today, above all, realise the effects of their decisions, chiefly due to broad access to information and active participation in social life. In addition, consumers know the quality of products and the price-quality relationship. They more responsibly shape the structure of their consumption and are able to assert their consumer rights [Bostrom, Klintman, 2011, pp. 3-7].

Pro-environmental consumer behaviour refers to the extent to which consumers undertake deliberate, rational, and reasonable actions to protect the natural environment [Zabkar, Hosta, 2013, pp. 257-264]. The pro-environmental attitude can therefore be regarded as an effect of knowledge and environmental sensitivity developed by a conscious human. The development of such attitudes and healthy lifestyles in society through affecting awareness is one of the main goals of education for sustainable development [UNECE, 2014].

The current state of research on the relationship between pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours and research methodology require a modern approach. Although the literature on such attitudes combines attitudes with consumer behaviours, the results of empirical studies are ambiguous in referring to the nature, strength and direction of mutual relations.

Young consumers were chosen for the research in view of their growing importance and decision-making power in today's households, and because they respond to the changing environment, globalisation and its impact on consumption, lifestyle, and emerging new consumer trends more intensely than other market participants. Undoubtedly, understanding their reasons, behaviours and market attitudes can help enterprises not only to decide on appropriate innovative marketing strategies but also to determine the right development path, allowing companies to remain in the market and make their product (service) offer

attractive to new customers, especially young ones, despite dynamic changes in consumption and ever faster development of mobile technologies and applications.

The article seeks to identify young people's consumer attitudes and behaviours that can be defined as sustainable consumption. The article consists of three parts: theoretical, methodological, and empirical. The first one explores the concept and essence of sustainable consumption and its relationship with Fair Trade. The methodological part synthetically discusses the conceptualisation of research and selection of the research sample. The empirical part examines young consumers' pro-environmental behaviours that can be defined as sustainable consumption. A conclusion of the analysis and major findings end this article.

## **1. Literature review**

### **1.1. The concept and essence of sustainable consumption – theoretical background**

The issue of sustainable consumption first arose at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The current policy framework for action on sustainable consumption and production is based on Johannesburg Declaration adopted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 and the Marrakesh Process initiated in 2003. The EU Sustainable Development Strategy, updated in 2006, recognised sustainable consumption as one of the seven key challenges to be tackled in the modern world. In 2012, the Rio+20 Conference held in Rio de Janeiro acknowledged that the implementation of sustainable consumption patterns should accompany the reduction of global poverty. On 25-27 September 2015, the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit was held in New York, where 17 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted for 2016-2030. One of them is Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns<sup>1</sup> [www 1].

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<sup>1</sup> Goal 12 is to be implemented through 11 specific targets concerning, among others: efficient use of natural resources, reduction of food losses, waste prevention, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and green public procurement (GPP) policies, technological support for developing countries, sustainable tourism, rationalisation of fossil-fuel subsidies, and development of awareness for sustainable lifestyles. As can be seen, the above goals include no provisions explicitly referring to the reduction of excessive consumption. This comes as no surprise since freedom of consumption is one of two fundamentals of human economic freedom and affects the way in which individuals dispose of their income. It can be recognised that the UN goals indirectly express the essence of sustainable consumption without limiting the freedom of individuals' choice.

The concept of sustainable consumption strongly emphasises the necessity of using a wide range of instruments to implement it. This approach was developed under environmental economics, where socio-economic factors in excessive exploitation of natural resources were spotted. The causes include [Rogall, 2010, pp. 63-74]: externalisation of environmental costs, treatment of natural resources as public (free) goods, factors such as the free rider problem, the tragedy of the commons, prisoner's dilemma, discounting future losses, population growth, geometric economic development, unsustainable consumption styles, psychological barriers (reluctance to change habits), and environmental risks caused by poverty.

In line with the economics of sustainable development, the concept of sustainable consumption does not perceive a human being as an economic actor making purely rational decisions. On the contrary, humans are recognised as not always acting for their own good, hence the state can use its instruments to intervene in consumer sovereignty (state interventionism). In addition, the key goal of sustainable consumption is to increase the quality of life rather than treating economic growth in a fetishist manner<sup>2</sup>. Although the concept of sustainable consumption relies mainly on the assumptions of the economics of sustainable development, it also uses some instruments of environmental economics (based on the sensitive durability principle), new institutional economics and sharing economy.

As a relatively new economic category, sustainable consumption has not been clearly defined yet. The related literature lacks consistency of definitions and terminology regarding sustainable consumption. This results both from the complexity of the consumption act and from the very concept of sustainable development to which consumption refers. There is still no agreement on the strategies to best develop sustainable consumption. As O. Mont and A. Plepys [2008, p. 532] rightly point out, there are still no clear answers to the questions: Should eco-effectiveness or sufficiency be supported more? Should green markets be developed or perhaps should environmental awareness be raised? How should services (servicisation) be developed or how should the possession of material goods be promoted through branding (presentation of the advantages distinguishing a particular brand and its products from competing brands)?

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<sup>2</sup> Sustainable consumption is one of the goals of green economy, which is an attempt to implement the concept of sustainable development in economics. It means an economy that improves people's well-being and social equality, while reducing environmental risks and the exploitation of natural resources. Green economy assumes a change in the production and consumption of goods. In line with the assumptions of this economy, the European Commission calls for an increase in efficiency, while reducing consumption of raw materials, costs and environmental impact.

The source materials suggest that the first working definition of sustainable consumption was coined in Norway in 1994 during the so-called Oslo Roundtable on Sustainable Production and Consumption, organised by the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment. According to the participants in that symposium, sustainable consumption can be defined as “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” [*Report of the Oslo...*, 1995, pp. 33-34]. It may thus be said that sustainable consumption is defined as a holistic approach that is aimed at minimising the environmental impact of social consumption and production systems and that involves individuals deliberately seeking to minimise adverse effects of consumption of consumer and investment goods and services through rationalisation and utilisation of production factors (resources) and reduction of generated post-production and post-consumption waste [Zalega, 2015, pp. 82-83; 2018b, pp. 132-133].

The definition of sustainable consumption formulated in Oslo was sharply criticised by many academic researchers and some politicians. The quoted definition does not explain clearly what should be understood by the “needs of future generations”. Furthermore, no attempt was made to explain the essence of this statement at the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In the second half of the 1990s, taking into account the shortcomings of the Oslo definition, many researchers dealing with broadly understood sustainable development began to suggest that sustainable consumption should be construed as the degree to which individual actions regarding choosing, acquiring, using and disposing of or prosuming goods support the creation or maintenance of exogenous conditions that enable all people to meet all their current and anticipated needs [Di Giulio et al., 2012; 2014].

According to J.H. Spangenberg [2014, p. 63], the concept of sustainable consumption encompasses all free consumer choices made within the available environmental space<sup>3</sup> which spans between the boundary of social sustainability and the boundary of environmental sustainability.

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<sup>3</sup> The environmental space was proposed by H. Opschoor in 2001 and then developed by J.H. Spangenberg. It defines the scope of consumer opportunities of market participants, with the upper limit imposed by the reproductive capacity of the environment and the lower limit imposed by the minimum quantity of resources needed for the proper functioning in a given society [more in: Spangenberg, 2002].

According to J. Moisander and S. Pesonen [2002, p. 336], sustainable consumption is such where its form and volume define a set of consumers' environmental values and attitudes that lead to green awareness (or broader social awareness) and an environmentally (and socially) responsible process of making market decisions. Therefore, it can be said that sustainable consumption as a response to consumerism promotes reduction of wastage, resource consumption, environmental damage, and even a decrease in the number of product components and functions. J.D. Mittelstaedt argues that the number of sustainable consumption supporters is growing year by year and as a result, consumer behaviour characteristic of this consumer trend will have an increasing impact on the economy [Mittelstaedt et al., 2014, pp. 253-264]. The author of this article believes that sustainable consumption means that individuals deliberately seek to minimise the adverse effects of consuming consumer and investment goods and services through rationalisation and utilisation of production factors (resources) and a reduction of generated post-production and post-consumption waste, with needs being satisfied in order to improve the quality of life. This consumer trend is based on the wish to reduce wastage as well as waste and pollution generation, and to choose goods and services which comply, as far as possible, with certain ethical, social, and environmental criteria. Without a doubt, sustainable consumption is possible only if consumers are well aware of environmental issues, and does not mean consuming less, but in a different, more efficient way that leads to improved quality of life. A prerequisite for practical implementation of the sustainable consumption concept is a reorientation of consumer behaviour, encouraging consumers to change their quality of life, i.e. make a shift from egocentric to ecocentric attitude, and to take into account other people's needs and environmental protection in their choices.

In practice, a distinction is made between the so-called weak and strong sustainable consumption [Seyfang, 2011, p. 56]. Weak sustainable consumption, also known as mainstream sustainable consumption, chiefly involves a reorientation of consumption towards its rationality and efficiency (especially the use of scarce resources) at various levels, in particular environmental, yet with a general increase in consumption. Furthermore, it is assumed that sustainable consumption will be achieved through improved energy efficiency of equipment and other technological solutions. On the other hand, strong sustainable consumption is based on the postulate of consumption reduction in general, requiring consumers to give up consumption at the current level for the benefit of future generations [Seyfang, 2011, p. 59]. Strong sustainable consumption assumes that in order for this to be achieved, significant changes must also occur in the levels and patterns of consumption. The concept of quality of life, good life, human

non-economic activity is also of key importance [Lorek, Spangenberg, 2014, pp. 33-34; Spangenberg, 2014, pp. 63-64]. In the literature, the dominant view is that instruments and conditions for weak sustainable consumption can be developed in the longer term, yet strong sustainable consumption is merely a postulate [Tukker et al., 2010, pp. 1-3; Lorek, Fuchs, 2013, pp. 37-40].

Similarly to sustainable development, sustainable consumption should be characterised by stability and (self-)sustainability. Stability means that consumption processes ensuring maximum consumer satisfaction become well-established within an unlimited period of time [Jackson, 2005, pp. 19-36; Krantz, 2010, pp. 7-9; Schrader, Thøgersen, 2011, pp. 3-8; Leßmann, Masson, 2015, pp. 64-72]. This implies that consumption processes should include mechanisms minimising the risk of internal disturbances that limit or prevent further consumption. Self-sustainability means the presence of mechanisms that minimise the risk of endogenous disturbances limiting or preventing further consumption. On the other hand, consumption sustainability requires balancing the following aspects [Kielczewski, 2008, p. 61]:

- economic: the proportion between current and future consumption is determined so that consumption processes do not materially disturb the economic equilibrium;
- environmental: maximisation of satisfaction with consumption while preserving the quality and utility of natural resources and the natural environment; the material level of consumption is adapted to the requirements of the circular economy, which is tantamount to the imperative to prefer such forms of consumption that are the least harmful to the environment;
- social: a fairly even distribution of consumption among all people, regardless of time and space, at least for socially desirable goods; such sustainability requires the preference for consumption forms that are the least socially problematic or that contribute to solving such problems;
- psychological: finding the optimum balance between material consumption and satisfaction of non-material needs, which requires an appropriate system of values, awareness and education to be developed;
- demographic: demographic determinants are not a permanent barrier to consumption growth, and membership of a demographic or socio-occupational group is not a significant barrier to consumption of socially desirable goods;
- spatial: possible ways of addressing needs should ensure that they do not interfere with the spatial order;
- intertemporal: these dimensions of sustainable consumption are achievable in the long run.

These aspects show that sustainable consumption primarily seeks to ensure that desirable forms of consumption prevail over undesirable ones and that mechanisms exist that would limit the occurrence and consequences of unsustainable consumption. Many authors [Hertwich, 2005, pp. 7321-7322; Dubey et al., 2016, pp. 78-89] simultaneously stress that the implementation of sustainable consumption requires sustainable action at all stages of the life cycle of goods and services (not only in the production phase), as often reflected as the terms “cradle-to-cradle” or “cradle-to-grave” in the literature.

## **1.2. Sustainable consumption and Fair Trade**

Fair Trade is a global social movement whose primary objective is to promote a fair exchange based on dialogue, transparency, and respect among all economic actors involved in international trade. The first international definition of Fair Trade was coined in 1999 by FINE<sup>4</sup> – an informal cooperation platform established in 1998, that coordinates and harmonises the activities of member networks, including lobbying for fair trade. According to the definition proposed by FINE in 2001, Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency, and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. In the related literature, Fair Trade is also understood in narrow and broad terms. The first approach sees Fair Trade as a rational consumer choice made in the realities of a neoliberal economy in the state of crisis and deregulation. In a broader sense, on the other hand, it is defined as an alternative to progressive globalisation based on the belief that consumer purchase decisions can change the society and, more generally, improve the terms of trade in the global market and result in the ethical behaviour pattern that places the doctrine of social solidarity above the liberal assumption of economic profit maximisation [Lyon, Moberg (eds.), 2010, pp. 21-24].

Fair Trade is closely linked with sustainable consumption. The reason is that many Fairtrade-certified products are produced organically, without the use of pesticides and other fertilising and pest-control chemicals. Also genetically modified (GMO) vegetable and fruit crops are prohibited.

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<sup>4</sup> FINE consists of four major network organisations working for Fair Trade: Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International – FLO, International Fair Trade Association – IFAT (now: World Fair Trade Organization – WFTO), Network of European Worldshops – NEWS, and European Fair Trade Association – EFTA. The abbreviation derives from the first letters of the names of the organisations which established this association in 1998.



Products with the Fair Trade logo are bought by the so-called competent (socially responsible) consumers. Through their lifestyles and consumer choices, such consumers primarily prefer eco-friendly forms of consumption and engage in activities falling within the scope of sustainable consumerism, which draws attention to global consequences of consumption growth, correlations between lifestyle and consumption style, clean production, etc. It is socially responsible consumers who are and can be initiators of future positive systemic changes towards sustainable development and sustainable consumption. Moreover, it should be noted that sufficiently strong and effective associations of socially responsible consumers may ultimately contribute to the rise of a sustainable society through their actions for sustainable consumption. According to T. Jackson and S. Szymne [1996, pp. 79-83], such a society may be described as post-industrial, having a high national income, educated, pro-environmental, living in a clean natural environment, with resource circulation, uncorrupted, with a high level of social and medical care.

Consumers most commonly buy Fairtrade-certified food products: coffee (beans and instant), tea, cocoa, yerba mate, chocolate, nuts (cashews, groundnuts and Brazil), dried fruit (mango, pineapple, guava, quince, dates, blueberries), bananas, honey, preserves, spices (sea salt, vanilla sticks, peppercorns), sweets (spelt biscuits, crispy bars), wine, cocoa oil, and ornamental plants. As regards non-food products, the most frequently purchased goods with the Fair Trade logo include: condoms, textiles (tablecloths, tapestries), clothing and home furnishings<sup>5</sup> [*Monitoring the Scope...*, 2017].

Consumers' interest in certified products largely ensues from the fact that many Fairtrade-certified products are manufactured organically, without the use of pesticides and other chemical fertilisers or pest-control substances. More environmentally conscious consumers also deem ethical aspects to be important such as:

- guaranteeing producers a minimum sale price of their products enabling them to run viable business in the long term;
- ensuring high labour standards and equal pay for women and men;
- complying with the principle of protecting children against forced labour.

It should be noted that more environmentally conscious consumers choosing fair trade receive not only high quality products but also improve the fortune of producers in developing countries.

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<sup>5</sup> A network of shops and cafés selling Fair Trade products across Poland can be found at: [www 2].

Sustainable consumption is also stimulated by the ever more frequent decline in the importance of consumption in the human value system where it is treated as a means rather than a key goal of life. However, such behaviours may be caused, in some cases, by the current fashion for eco-friendliness, not by strong ecological awareness.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research conceptualisation**

The tool used to conduct the research was the author's original questionnaire, comprising 50 closed-ended questions regarding alternative consumer trends, including sustainable consumption. The survey was carried out from 1st February to 1st May, 2018. The difficulty lay in appropriate definition of the study subject, because the category of "young consumer" is not clearly specified in the literature. Scholarly publications refer to various age ranges for the group of young consumers, for example 15-29 years [Szulce, 2009, p. 637], 15-34 years [Olejniczuk-Merta, 2001, p. 40], 18-25 years [Grønhøj, 2007, p. 243], 18-30 years [Kumar, Kapoor, 2017, p. 218], 18-35 years [Phillips, Stanton, 2004, p. 8; Ofosu, Gyanewa, Boadi, 2013, p. 288]. In this article, those between 18 and 34 years of age are considered to be the population of young people. The upper age limit, that is 34 years, is regarded as the end of youth in the Polish literature. The participants were recruited via the "ankietka.pl" website and social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, and e-mail. In order to partake in the survey, those interested had to visit a specific website containing the questionnaire. It was also distributed across special forums, university and private school fanpages. In accordance with the research assumptions, the sample included persons aged 18-34, representatives of Generations Y and Z<sup>6</sup>, who took independent

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<sup>6</sup> Consumers representing Generation Y (people born between 1978 and 1994) and Generation Z (those born after 1994) primarily communicate through social media such as Facebook or Twitter, and their purchase decisions are determined by their peers' opinions posted on online forums. What is characteristic of this group is impulse buying and a large share of online transactions. Generation Y consumers excel at modern technologies and feel good in virtual communities. They expect diverse products, competitive prices, new experiences and pleasure, and products and services tailored to their individual needs and preferences. Generation Z, on the other hand, is the youngest group of consumers in the market with such characteristics as: connected, computerised, always clicking, community-oriented, and content-centric. Compared to Generation Y, they use new technologies even more [More in: Cohen, 2009, pp. 57-59; Williams, Page, 2011, pp. 1-17].

purchasing decisions in the market. The article assumes that the subject of research covers all young consumers, not only those who are sustainable. In order to select the sample, the selective quota sampling procedure was used. The characteristics (quotas) covered by the research were: gender and age<sup>7</sup>. It should be noted here that the key methodological problems in the study of sustainable behaviour of young consumers result from non-random sampling and the chosen research technique, namely an online questionnaire. During the data processing, information from respondents was eliminated if the questionnaires were incomplete or incorrect (17 instances). From among 606 initial questionnaires, 589 were considered eligible, representing 97.19% of the total sample. Further, they were coded, and the data set thus created was processed by a statistical package. For the statistical analysis of the data, the statistical package SPSS, version 23, was used.

The key objective of the research was to provide some insight into sustainable consumption in consumer behaviour of young consumers in Poland. An attempt has been made to explain what most motivates young people to participate in sustainable consumption. With this in mind, three research hypotheses were put forward:

- $H_1$ : Sustainable consumption is most commonly practised by better educated young consumers living in large cities.
- $H_2$ : Disposable income is an important determinant of the positive attitude of young consumers to sustainable development. The higher the income, the more positive the attitude of young people to sustainable consumption.
- $H_3$ : Young women exhibit greater environmental awareness than young men. Hence, their consumer behaviours are more strongly aligned with the idea of sustainable consumption.

## 2.2. Selection and characteristics of the research sample

Studying consumer behaviours is an extremely intricate process. This is due to the complexity of consumption and consumer purchasing behaviours in the field of consumer decision-making. Such research encompasses an important

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<sup>7</sup> Due to the nature of the chosen research technique, it was impossible to define the composition of the sample before measurement. In order to determine the representativeness of the sample, the information from the report *E-commerce in Poland 2018* was used [*Gemius dla e-Commerce Polska*, b.r.]. As the distribution of the sample approximately corresponds to the structure of the studied population, it was assumed that the sample could be considered representative in terms of gender.

step to explain the phenomenon examined, namely adoption of specific indicators. This is essential because an indicator is used to define a certain characteristic of an object or phenomenon which is in such a relation with another characteristic that indicates the occurrence of the latter when it occurs itself. An indicator is a measurable, i.e. empirically available, variable. When consumer behaviours are investigated, indicators explaining the complexity of this phenomenon include demographic (gender, age, place of residence, household size) and socio-economic indicators (education, disposable income).

**Table 1.** The structure of respondents

Items	Number of respondents (N = 589)	Percentage share
<b>Age:</b>		
18–23	228	38.7
24–29	175	29.7
30–34	186	31.6
<b>Gender:</b>		
Female	325	55.2
Male	264	44.8
<b>Marital status:</b>		
Single	236	40.1
In a cohabitation or LAT relationship	278	47.1
Married	72	12.3
Divorced	3	0.5
<b>Education:</b>		
Primary	15	2.5
Basic vocational	57	9.8
Secondary	180	30.6
Bachelor/engineer	226	38.3
Master	111	18.8
<b>Monthly per capita income in PLN:</b>		
Less than 2000.00	75	12.7
2001.00–3000.00	214	36.3
3001.00–4000.00	166	28.2
More than 4000.00	128	21.8
I have no income of my own	6	1.0
<b>Place of residence:</b>		
Country	29	4.9
City of up to 20 thousand inhabitants	39	6.6
City of 20–100 thousand inhabitants	53	9.0
City of 101–200 thousand inhabitants	71	12.1
City of 201–500 thousand inhabitants	109	18.5
City of more than 500 thousand inhabitants	288	48.9

Source: Calculated by the author.

589 people took part in the survey, including 325 women and 264 men. Nearly half of respondents lived in cities of more than 500 thousand inhabitants. Every third participant had completed secondary education, less than 2/5 of respondents held a bachelor's or engineering degree, and every fifth held a master's degree. The average age of respondents is around 25 years. They were mostly students who combined studies with work, whereas the unemployed formed the smallest group. Almost half of respondents lived in cohabitation or LAT (Living Apart Together) relationships. More than 2/5 of them were single and one in eight was married. As regards monthly disposable income per capita, the largest group earned from PLN 2001.00 to PLN 3000.00. However, astonishingly many (almost half of respondents) assessed their current financial situation as good, and 5.9% as very good.

### 3. Results and discussion

Sustainable consumption is a trend that is becoming stronger in the context of consumer behaviour of young people. The research examined the attitudes of young consumers towards sustainable consumption. It essentially checked whether young people understood the concept and idea of sustainable consumption and whether their possible competences translated into practical behaviour. To this end, respondents were asked about their understanding of the term "sustainable consumption" (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Sustainable consumption as understood by the young consumers surveyed

Items	Number of respondents (N = 589)	Percentage share
Sustainable consumption means rational and efficient use of scarce resources at various levels, in particular environmental, yet with a general increase in consumption	117	19.9
Sustainable consumption means consumption involving its reduction in general, requiring consumers to give up consumption at the current level for the benefit of future generations	320	54.3
Sustainable consumption means making, as far as possible, sociologically and environmentally responsible consumer choices based on information on products and services, including practices used by their providers, production process and recycling possibilities	151	25.8

Source: The author's research.

In the light of the survey results, it can be stated that over half of young people understand sustainable consumption as its strong form. This answer was more often indicated by women (52.8%), mostly aged 24-29 (53.1%), young people with higher education (54.7%) and a monthly income of above PLN 3000.00 per capita (53.2%), most frequently living in cities of over 200 thousand inhabitants (53.4%). Over 1/4 of young respondents misunderstand sustainable consumption, identifying it with conscious consumption, also known as ethical consumption or responsible consumption in Anglo-Saxon countries. This answer was mainly indicated by young men (27.5%) and those aged 18-23 (27.3%), earning a monthly disposable income of below PLN 3000.00 per capita, secondary education graduates (26.9%), and those living in cities of up to 50 thousand inhabitants (27.6%). It should be made clear that the terms “sustainable consumption” and “conscious (ethical) consumption” carry different systems of meanings. While sustainable consumption involves environmental discourse, conscious consumption refers to individualistic and moral discourses. The survey found that only every fifth young respondent construed sustainable consumption as its weak form. This answer was more often chosen by women (21.4%) than men (18.4%), by respondents with secondary education (21.2%), a monthly income not exceeding PLN 3000.00 per capita (20.9%), living in rural areas (22.1%) and small towns of up to 20 thousand inhabitants (21.9%).

Another issue was whether young consumers follow the assumptions of sustainable consumption in their consumer behaviour (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Subjective perceptions of the young consumers surveyed on whether they put sustainable consumption into practice

Items	Number of respondents (N = 589)	Percentage share
My consumption is fully sustainable	116	19.6
My consumption is slightly sustainable	179	30.4
I cannot say whether my consumption is sustainable	59	10.1
My consumption is not sustainable	235	39.9

Source: The author's research.

The survey shows that young people implement the idea of fully sustainable consumption to a small extent. Only every fifth young consumer acts fully in line with its postulates when making consumer decisions. 2/5 of respondents answered in the negative. Every tenth of them found it difficult to say whether their

consumer behaviour was consistent with the assumptions of sustainable consumption. This share of indecisive consumers can be explained by their misunderstanding of sustainable consumption.

The consumer trend of sustainable consumption may form a certain lifestyle, and a specifically oriented way of buying products may (though does not have to) represent a particular ideology of life for some young people. The proportion of young consumers who declared that they acted fully in line with the idea of sustainable consumption was much higher among women (22.4%) than men (17.4%) as well as among university graduates (23.2%) and those earning a monthly per capita income of more than PLN 4000.00 and living in cities of over 500 thousand inhabitants (23.4%). In contrast, respondents who considered their consumption to be unsustainable were people with secondary education (43.2%), mostly men (44.7%), aged 18-23 (41.6%), with a monthly income not exceeding PLN 2000.00 per capita (41.9%), living in towns of up to 20 thousand inhabitants (41.9%).

Young consumers who follow the principles of sustainable consumption can be referred to as competent, conscious consumers who make deliberate purchase decisions ("I know what I am buying and I know who I am buying it for"). Through their lifestyles and consumer choices, such consumers primarily prefer eco-friendly forms of consumption and engage in activities falling within the scope of sustainable consumerism, which draws attention to global consequences of consumption growth, correlations between lifestyle and consumption style, clean production, etc. [De Pelsmacker, Driesen, Rayp, 2005, pp. 365-366; Crane, Matten, 2007, pp. 343-344; De Pelsmacker, Janssens, 2007, p. 369]. It is socially responsible consumers who are and can be not only initiators of future positive systemic changes towards sustainable development and sustainable consumption but also promoters of Fair Trade.

D. Goleman has recently developed the idea of ecological intelligence. He argues that man is not beyond nature, but is part of it. Man not only acts but also adapts to its system [Goleman, 2009, p. 44]. It can therefore be said that ecological intelligence, perfectly integrated into sustainable consumption, is construed as the ability to learn from experience and rationally deal with the environment, which understands and feels. This means that ecological intelligence makes it possible to use the environment and modify actions in such a way that will cause the least environmental damage and losses. In his theory, Goleman [2009] argues that ecological intelligence provides information about the consumer lifestyle that does not undermine the fragile balance between human activity and the ecosystem, thereby forming part of rational and environmental behaviour of consumers.

Young consumers' pro-environmental behaviour as part of sustainable consumption was measured by means of twenty statements (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Young consumers' consumer behaviour as part of sustainable consumption (% of answers)

No.	Statements	Whenever possible	From time to time	Never
1	I buy carefully, only as much as needed at the moment	40.1	44.7	15.2
2	Before I buy a product, I gather product information confirmed by other consumers	22.5	43.2	34.3
3	Before I buy a product, I always check its expiry date	78.4	14.7	6.9
4	Before I buy a product, I check if it is biodegradable (recyclable)	14.3	47.3	38.4
5	I use reusable bags	70.6	24.2	5.2
6	I choose products in green, minimised packaging	18.7	55.0	26.3
7	I avoid purchasing disposable items (plates, cups, cutlery, plastic bags)	58.7	23.9	17.4
8	I regularly sort waste	63.9	26.7	9.4
9	I use water sparingly	61.7	30.1	8.2
8	I throw out used batteries into special containers	48.4	27.4	24.2
11	I replace light bulbs with energy-saving ones	69.5	23.7	6.8
12	I limit gas consumption	63.1	27.8	9.1
13	I buy energy-efficient equipment	62.3	29.5	8.2
14	I use electricity sparingly	67.4	25.5	7.1
15	I throw out expired drugs into special containers	61.2	17.9	20.9
16	I collect waste separately	34.9	47.3	17.8
17	I return glass bottles to collection points	42.1	28.1	29.8
18	I buy drinks in recyclable packaging	21.7	27.4	50.9
19	I pay attention to eco-labels	22.4	40.2	37.4
20	I reduce car use for public transport or bicycle	27.3	37.5	35.2

Source: The author's research.

The survey results indicate that the behaviours forming part of sustainable consumption are exhibited (albeit with varying frequencies) by the majority of young consumers. The largest group of young respondents said that they used reusable bags (94.8%), with 70.6% doing so whenever possible. Many young consumers economically use electricity (92.9%), gas (91.9%), and water (91.8%). In the three cases, those who did so whenever possible were the dominant group (67.4%, 63.1%, and 61.7%, respectively). Nearly 91% of young consumers regularly sorted waste, of which 63.9% admitted doing so always. The responses show that those surveyed most commonly segregate plastic packaging,



metal, and paper. In line with the requirements of sustainable consumption, these actions are quite often taken up by respondents mainly for financial reasons (they save water and electricity, due to their low income, and use their own bags to avoid additional spending on disposable bags at the point of sale, etc.). The survey results confirm that money saving is, indeed, the key motive for young consumers' pro-environmental behaviours, but the resultant environmental protection is often an additional, secondary advantage.

The findings indicate changes in the attitudes of young consumers. Before making any decision, in particular before buying products, respondents who display consumer behaviours in line with sustainable development assess whether their purchase is actually necessary or whether it is solely intended to raise their own material status. Nearly 85% of them declare that they buy carefully – just as much as they need at a given moment, which reduces the risk of wastage. In the decision-making process, over 65% of young consumers gather product information confirmed by other consumers. Such behaviours should probably be assessed positively since they reduce the risk of buying a wrong product that is contrary to expectations. Over 3/5 of respondents say that they are more likely to buy an eco-friendly product that has eco-labelling. It should be highlighted, nonetheless, that this result should be regarded as a wish to present oneself as a more modern and responsible consumer whose consumer decisions are consistent with sustainable consumption rather than actual behaviour.

Sustainable consumer behaviour of young consumers is determined by demographic and social characteristics. In the light of the obtained results, the key statistically significant determinants of environmental behaviours include age ( $\chi^2 = 28.91$  at the significance level of 0.001), education ( $\chi^2 = 25.36$  at the significance level of 0.001) and monthly disposable income ( $\chi^2 = 20.18$  at the significance level of 0.002).

The described consumer behaviours of young people result in tangible economic benefits not only for respondents but also for their households. In addition, these pro-environmental behaviours largely overlap with a Poland-wide survey on such behaviours of Polish residents carried out in 2011 by CBOS on a representative sample of 1002 respondents. That survey reveals that pro-environmental behaviours declared by Poles, including young ones, that aim to protect the environment translate into everyday behaviours such as reduced energy (90%), water (83%), and gas (79%) consumption in households. Respondents think that eco-friendly habits also include: avoidance of buying products harmful to society (72%), segregation of household waste (71%) and recycling, that is collection of recyclable materials (waste paper, glass, cans) (41%)

[*Zachowania proekologiczne Polaków*, 2011, pp. 8-9]. In turn, the survey on environmental awareness and eco-friendly behaviour of Polish residents carried out in 2013 at the request of the Ministry of the Environment by PBS Spółka z o.o. reveals that respondents most often support environmental protection by using reusable bags (65%), buying fewer perishable and disposable products (51%), buying products in eco-friendly packaging (37%), reducing energy (32%) and water (31%) consumption, sorting waste (28%), and buying less food to prevent food wastage (25%) [*Badania świadomości...*, 2013, pp. 110-119].

Research by foreign authors demonstrates that the concern for rational use of available natural resources and the reduction of post-consumption waste generation are some key determinants of consumers' purchasing behaviours that ideally fit in sustainable consumption [Diamantopoulos et al., 2003; Young et al., 2010]. English-language literature describes the profile of a "sustainable consumer" by means of different variables, namely geographic and cultural indicators, personality and socio-demographic characteristics. Among young people, certain cognitive reactions and beliefs about environmental behaviours can be noted. Based on their research, some authors [Krantz, 2010; Schrader, Thøgersen, 2011; Leßmann, Masson, 2015] believe that such actions contribute to more rational management of scarce resources, reduced consumption of toxic materials and pollution emissions, thus allowing the current and future generations to live in a less polluted environment with all the related consequences.

The survey asked respondents to indicate the main obstacles to sustainable consumption. For the young survey participants, the most important obstacle to making decisions consistent with the sustainable consumption idea is the financial constraint (51.7%). This answer was most often indicated by respondents in financial difficulty, primarily students with a monthly income of less than PLN 2000.00 per capita (56.2%), mostly women (54.6%), aged 18-23 (55.1%), with secondary education (54.7%) and living in cities of up to 100 thousand inhabitants (51.9%).

It can therefore be supposed that the young consumers surveyed do not fully understand what sustainable consumption behaviours essentially involve. It can be concluded that sustainable consumption is too expensive for a relatively large group of respondents since it is generally associated with higher current expenditure on, for example, organic food, energy-efficient equipment, etc. At the same time, young consumers have forgotten about longer-term positive effects and savings arising from consumption of organic food, energy, gas and water savings, and more efficient use of items in their households. Another major barrier that was pointed out by every fourth respondent was poor information on

how to act in line with sustainable consumption. Following the economic barrier, it was the most important obstacle for those aged 18-23 (22.6%), chiefly men (24.3%) with secondary education (24.1%), earning a monthly income of up to PLN 2000.00 per capita (25.1%) and living in cities of up to 50 thousand inhabitants (24.7%). The least significant obstacles were those connected with the effort (14.7%) and time (12.9%) needed to stick to sustainable consumption assumptions. The latter were primarily reported by respondents aged 30-34, mostly men earning a monthly disposable per capita income of above PLN 3000.00 and living in cities of over 500 thousand inhabitants.











As mentioned above, what is indirectly connected with sustainable consumption is the idea of Fair Trade. The survey shows that more than 2/5 of respondents heard about this idea. These were mostly respondents aged 30-34 (42.6%), chiefly women (44.7%), those with higher education (48.3%), a disposable income of over PLN 3000.00 per capita a month (46.9%) and living in large urban agglomerations (46.7%). On the other hand, the fewest survey participants exhibiting consumer behaviour in line with sustainable consumption and the so-called ecological intelligence lived in rural areas (10.4%) and towns of up to 20 thousand inhabitants (11.8%). More than 30% of those surveyed said that they had attended an event promoting sustainable consumption or Fair Trade at least once in their life. They were primarily women (35.3%) aged 30-34 (33.6%) who had completed higher education (32.9%), earned a monthly per capita income exceeding PLN 3000.00 (33.8%), and mostly lived in cities of over 500 thousand inhabitants (36.2%). It should be noted here that the sustainable consumption movement is developing dynamically in Poland, in particular in large cities. Yet, in smaller towns and rural areas, this trend is still negligible.

Young consumers most commonly buy Fairtrade-certified food products: coffee (beans and instant), tea, cocoa, yerba mate, chocolate, nuts (cashews, groundnuts and Brazil), dried fruit (mango, pineapple, dates), bananas and sweets (spelt biscuits, crispy bars). As regards non-food products, the most frequently purchased goods with the FairTrade logo include craft products, mainly clothing and home furnishings.

The survey also reveals that less than 20% of respondents, when shopping for clothes and footwear or electronics, pay attention to information about compliance with employee/human rights in factories of clothing, footwear and electronics manufacturers and to eco and/or social labels (e.g. Fairtrade certificate, Ecolabel) informing that the product is organic and/or comes from Fair Trade. Slightly greater importance is attached to eco-friendliness and responsible production in the case of food, although it is nutritional values and composition of

the product that primarily matter. More than a third of respondents who buy clothing and footwear, electronics and food would be willing to pay more if they were certain that these products were manufactured in a more responsible manner. In the case of respondents buying clothing and footwear, this proportion was 33.1%, and 31.6% for electronics. This percentage stood at 40.8% for those buying food. Women (35.3%) aged 30-34 (35.7%) with higher education (35.3%), earning a monthly per capita income of above PLN 3000.00 (36.8%), living in large urban agglomerations (36.9%) declared eagerness to pay more for products manufactured in a responsible manner generally more often than their male counterparts (29.9%).

When buying products, in particular food, more aware consumers pay attention to eco-labels that can indicate both positive and negative impact of the product on the natural environment. The latter inform about the risks posed by production or use of the product [Connolly, Shaw, 2006, pp. 357-358; Koenig-Lewis et al., 2014, pp. 96-98]. There are also neutral symbols that are designed to inform consumers about environmental issues as such. They all raise environmental awareness of buyers (and also teach them how to read and distinguish such symbols) and help them choose the best products or services in this respect [Zalega, 2018a, p. 128]. More than 45% of young consumers claimed that when they saw various symbols and certificates placed on products, especially food, even if they did not have enough knowledge about their meaning, the mere presence of any label – including eco-labels – evoked their positive feelings.

In the context of the survey, it can be concluded that almost 39% of respondents pay attention to labels referring to ecology, the environment and fair trade<sup>8</sup>. Every fourth survey participant admitted that they did not pay any attention to eco-labels on packaging while shopping. Among ten labels that can be found on different products (Recycling , “Eko” , Organic farming , Ozone-friendly , Blue Angel , Energy star , FSC , Daisy , Fairtrade  and MSC , young respondents mostly recognise the following logos: “Recycling” (59.1%), “Ozone-friendly” (54.6%), “Organic farming” (42.6%), “Fair-trade” (37.6%), “Eko” (29.7%), and “Energy star” (25.4%). The least recognisable certificates are: “FSC” (4.9%), or Forest Stewardship Council, guaranteeing responsible management of forest resources, and “MSC” (3.8%), or Marine Stewardship Council, confirming that a given fish product comes from sustainable fisheries.

<sup>8</sup> The labels were chosen on the basis of their significance and the frequency of occurrence on the packaging of products available in the market.

Eco-labels are more often spotted by women (41.9%) than men (35.3%), respondents aged 30-34 (40.3%), university graduates (42.8%), those earning a monthly per capita income of above PLN 3000.00 (42.2%) and living in cities of over 500 thousand inhabitants (43.4%). In contrast, eco-certificates on various types of packaging are least often recognised by respondents aged 18-23, mostly male graduates of secondary schools, from the PLN 2001.00–3000.00 income group, living in rural areas or towns of up to 20 thousand inhabitants.

The survey conclusions regarding the frequency of involvement in various acts of sustainable consumption and the assessed eagerness to undertake specific actions are largely consistent with surveys conducted among young American consumers [Hafstrom, Chae, Chung, 1992; Kuchinka et al., 2018], young people living in Western Europe [Sener, Hazer, 2008; Vermeir, Verbeke, 2008; Papaoikonomou, Ryan, Ginieis, 2011; Fischer, Böhme, Geiger, 2017], Australia [Fien, Neil, Bentley, 2008] and Asian countries [Kang, Liu, Kim, 2013; Lee, 2014].

Taking into account the presented survey results, some limitations ensuing from a small research sample should be borne in mind. Following the conclusions made, they should not be treated as representative of the population of young Polish consumers. They only provide some insight into actual consumer behaviours of young people as part of sustainable consumption. Despite the indicated limitations, the obtained results allowed for partially filling the gap ensuing from the lack of primary research on sustainable behaviour of young Polish consumers.

This publication should contribute to a broader discussion and exchange of views on sustainable consumption, thereby encouraging other Polish scholars and researchers from various scientific and research centres to carry out extensive research in this area.

## **Conclusions**

Changes in consumer purchasing behaviour occur slowly, yet their pace is strongly dependent on economic, political, psychological, and sociological factors. Sustainable consumption means that individuals deliberately seek to minimise the adverse effects of consuming consumer and investment goods and services through rationalisation and utilisation of production factors (resources) and a reduction of generated post-production and post-consumption waste. This consumer trend is based on the wish to reduce wastage as well as waste and pollution generation and to choose goods and services which comply, as far as possible, with certain ethical, social and environmental criteria.

The majority of young respondents reported the discussed pro-environmental behaviours that are consistent with the sustainable consumption idea, albeit to varying degrees and with different frequencies. Pro-environmental consumer behaviours of the surveyed young people primarily include: saving electricity, gas, and water, sorting waste, throwing out used batteries into special containers, purchasing products in recyclable packaging, using reusable or biodegradable bags while shopping, and avoiding products tested on animals.

The increase in pro-environmental behaviours and actions of young consumers should be assessed positively. Simultaneously, it is worth noting that such behaviours are often driven by economic rather than environmental considerations.

Subjective perception of sustainable consumption by respondents is significantly differentiated – strongly correlated factors are: gender, education, place of residence, and perceived financial situation. The survey shows that the proportion of young consumers who declared that they acted in line with the idea of sustainable consumption was much higher among women than men as well as among university graduates, those earning a monthly per capita income of more than PLN 3000.00, and mostly living in large urban agglomerations. Furthermore, a preliminary analysis of the empirical material obtained in the survey reveals that sustainable consumption is not fully understood, as evidenced by the fact that nearly half of respondents indicated financial costs as the main barrier to sustainable consumption. In turn, for those with the highest income, the main obstacle in this respect was a lack of time.

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## ZRÓWNOWAŻONA KONSUMPCJA W ZACHOWANIACH KONSUMENCKICH POLSKICH MŁODYCH KONSUMENTÓW

**Streszczenie:** W artykule, w oparciu o krytyczną analizę literatury przedmiotu, podjęto próbę wyjaśnienia pojęcia i istoty dynamicznie rozwijającego się trendu konsumenckiego, jakim jest zrównoważona konsumpcja, a następnie jego powiązania z ideą Sprawiedliwego Handlu. Celem artykułu jest identyfikacja postaw i zachowań konsumenckich młodych polskich konsumentów, które wpisują się w ideę zrównoważonej konsumpcji. W opracowaniu podjęto próbę wyjaśnienia, co najbardziej motywuje młodych ludzi do uczestniczenia w zrównoważonej konsumpcji. Narzędziem wykorzystanym do przeprowadzenia badania był autorski kwestionariusz składający się z 50 pytań zamkniętych, dotyczący alternatywnych trendów konsumenckich, w tym zrównoważonej konsumpcji. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w okresie od 1 lutego do 1 maja 2018 roku. Zgodnie z przyjętymi założeniami badawczymi w badaniu wzięło udział 589 osób w wieku 18-34 lat, należących do pokolenia Y i Z. Przeprowadzone badania wykazały, że zachowania proekologiczne młodych osób, wpisujące się w ideę zrównoważonej konsumpcji, są uzależnione od płci respondentów, ich wieku, poziomu miesięcznego rozporządzalnego dochodu oraz miejsca zamieszkania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** osoby młode, zrównoważona konsumpcja, zachowania konsumenckie, świadomy konsument, Sprawiedliwy Handel.