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RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION IN THE PURCHASING DECISIONS OF YOUNG CONSUMERS

This article aims to identify the importance of responsible consumption in the purchasing decisions of young consumers. For this purpose, an online survey and individual in-depth interviews were conducted among Polish students; a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods provided insights into consumers' views and buying habits. The results show that the most important factor in purchasing decisions is economic rationality. Students demonstrate responsible behaviors that are also economically rational: purchasing fewer and longer-lasting products, only buying what they need, using products for as long as they remain functional, repairing them, and purchasing second-hand goods. On the other hand, the results of the qualitative research provide an understanding of consumers' doubts about responsible consumption. Such findings will enrich the portrait of the Polish consumer already known from previous research.

Keywords: consumption, consumer behavior, responsible consumption, sustainability, young consumers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Responsible consumption has been drawing rising attention of policymakers and researchers in recent years. That is because production and consumption of goods bring harmful effects on the natural environment and societies: excessive use of natural resources, pollution, and poor working conditions in producing countries. Thus, there is pressure to reduce negative impacts. Responsible purchasing behavior is an efficient way to do it. Consumers are becoming more aware of environmental and social issues and more concerned about them. They are becoming more conscious of the necessity of more rational and ecological consumption and are developing more positive opinions towards sustainable products (Su, Watchravesringkan, Zhou, Gil, 2019). However, consumers' knowledge does not always translate into actual behavior due to many factors (Davari, Strutton, 2014; Dursun, 2019). To better understand consumer decisions it is important to identify how and why consumers engage in particular behavior and which factors influence them.

The question of responsible consumption has become the subject of an increasing number of academic studies. Some of them focused on young consumers as they represent a relevant consumer group considering their important spending collective power and they

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constitute a category that will shape the future of consumption. Young consumers pay particular attention to global issues and have a more favorable orientation toward sustainable behavior than older consumers (Rossi, Rivetti, 2020). The article focuses on responsible consumption in the purchasing decisions of Polish young consumers. The objective is to determine how important responsible consumption is for them and what are their opinions and behaviors in this regard. This issue is particularly interesting because of the timing of the research – after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, after Russia's attack on Ukraine, and during high inflation in Poland. How do Polish consumers, who previously paid much attention to consumerism (Dąbrowska, 2015) and presented low ecological awareness (Patrzałek, 2017), behave in these new conditions?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The understanding of responsible consumption is ambiguous in academic sources. Concepts such as conscious consumption, rational consumption, sustainable consumption, and anti-consumption can be found in publications in this field (Weng, 2017). Sustainable consumption is often defined as consumption that meets the basic needs of the present generation, without limiting the capabilities of future generations, doesn't cause irreversible damage to the environment, uses resources efficiently, improves the quality of life, and avoids consumerism and overconsumption (Weng, 2017). Similarly, Epstein identifies sustainable consumer behavior as a behavior based on awareness of the long-term effects on the natural and social environment (Epstein, 2008). Conscious consumption is often understood as attention to the problem of effects that consumer decisions have on society and the environment (Pappalardo, Cerroni, Nayga, Yang, 2020). Researchers often use the terms conscious, responsible, and sustainable consumption as synonyms, there is no clear distinction between them.

Responsible consumption represents consumers' implementation of a wide range of behavioral practices during the acquisition, usage, and disposal of products to reduce the negative impact of consumption on the environment and society (Gupta, Agrawal, 2018). Gupta and Agrawal's 'conscious consumption' scale includes behaviors such as avoiding wastage, moderately using things, generating less waste, and buying amounts of products that will be used (Gupta, Agrawal, 2018). Sustainable consumption also means preferring green products that have an eco-label. Conscious consumption can also manifest itself in refraining from buying products that use a large amount of energy, lead to unnecessary wastage, and are associated with cruelty to animals (Elkington, 1994).

Attitudes towards sustainable consumption are determined by several factors. Positive attitudes towards the environment correspond with responsible consumer decisions (Young, Hwang, McDonald, Oates, 2010). Consumer behavior is related to consumer values, which determine personal norms (Jan, Ji, Yeo, 2019). Also, environmental beliefs positively impact environmentally responsible behavior (Patwary, 2022). Consumers who believe that the consequences of their current behavior influence future generations are more likely to engage in responsible consumption behaviors (Urien, Kilbourne, 2022). Moreover, certain types of sustainable behavior may be correlated with each other. A consumer engaged in one type of that behavior is more likely to engage in another type (Whitmarsh, 2009).

One of the factors aimed to motivate consumers to buy in a more responsible way is green communication (Shao, 2019). Many companies are developing strategies like green marketing, green advertising, and eco-labeling. They are considered an influential means

of communication in shaping attitudes, perceptions, behavioral intentions, and consumption (Alamsyah, Othman, Mohammed, 2020; Green, Peloza, 2014; Pagiaslis, Krontalis, 2014). However, consumers differ in their level of receptivity to green advertising. Some of them, who have responsible consumption values, are more ready to receive and accept that kind of communication (Bailey, Mishra, Tiarniyu, 2018).

The main barrier to responsible purchasing decisions is the high price of sustainable products (Gleim, Lawson, 2014). The greatest reluctance towards more expensive, responsible products is shown by consumers with limited financial resources. Also, price sensitivity plays a role in the decision-making process when buying these products (Joshi, Rahman, 2015). In the Polish context, other barriers to sustainable consumer behavior are the inconsistency of information, the insufficient level of knowledge of green products and their labeling, conflicts of beliefs, or inadequate marketing activities (Witek, 2019). As far as Polish consumers are concerned, the insufficient level of knowledge of sustainable consumption was stated also by Kieźel (2018) and Patrzalek (2017).

3. METHODS

The main objective of the research conducted was to answer the question: what is the importance of responsible consumption in the purchasing decisions of young consumers? Specific questions were also posed:

RQ1: How do students define responsible consumption?

RQ2: What behaviors related to responsible consumption do students exhibit?

RQ3: What doubts do students have about the trend of responsible consumption?

The study involved young consumers – full-time students of the Faculty of Law and Economics at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz. It was considered that a high level of awareness of consumption trends is characteristic of this social category. Two complementary research approaches were used: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative part is based on a diagnostic survey method using a CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) online survey. 302 completed questionnaires were collected in this way, and the resulting data were subjected to statistical analysis using Statistica. Factor analysis and correlation analyses were carried out between questionnaire items.

The qualitative part consisted of IDI (Individual in Depth Interview) interviews. Such interviews resemble a natural conversation and are much less structured compared to questionnaire interviews. Twelve interviews were conducted, lasting between 37 and 82 minutes. Transcriptions were made and a coding process was carried out based on themes and codes. Analyses were conducted in QDA Miner Lite software. Thematic analysis was used to extract and interpret the main themes that recur in the respondents' statements. For both research techniques, data were collected in May–June 2023, the voluntary response sampling were used

A total of 302 students, mostly women, took part in the survey, reflecting the actual gender structure in the fields of study: administration, economics, criminology, law, and law in business. The largest group of respondents is from cities of 150,000 to 500,000 residents, presumably mainly from Bydgoszcz. A slightly smaller group of students comes from the countryside, the rest mostly from smaller and medium-sized towns. The sample structure for the quantitative and qualitative survey is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of the survey sample (n=302)

Characteristics	Items	Percentage
Gender	Female	69,7%
	Male	30,3%
Major	Bachelor's administration	18,5%
	Master's Administration	2,3%
	Bachelor's economics	23,5%
	Master's economics	3,3%
	Criminology	30,1%
	Law	10,9%
	Law in business	11,3%
Year of study	First year of bachelor's degree	55%
	Second year of bachelor's degree	24,5%
	Third year of bachelor's degree	14,9%
	First year of master's studies	3,3%
	Second year of master's studies	2,3%
Permanent place of residence	Village	30,8%
	Town up to 50 thousand	20,2%
	Town from 50 thousand to 150 thousand	11,6%
	City from 150 thousand to 500 thousand	35,1%
	City above 500 thousand inhabitants	2,3%

Source: own research.

Table 2. Sociodemographic profile of the IDI sample

Characteristics	Items	Quantity
Gender	Female	5
	Male	7
Major	Bachelor's administration	3
	Master's Administration	3
	Bachelor's economics	3
	Master's economics	2
	Law in business	1

Source: own research.

4. RESULTS

During the in-depth interviews, students explained how they define responsible consumption. The thematic analysis conducted identified three recurring themes in the respondents' statements:

- Non-waste (codes: I buy as much as I use up; choosing products that will last longer; buying used things). In most of the students' statements, responsible consumption is equated with such a way of buying and using goods that eliminates waste. The reluctance to throw products in the garbage is evident here. Situations in which someone bought too much food and threw some of it away are cited as negative examples. Such situations are judged not only as a waste of money but also as a burden on the environment.
- Choosing products that do not harm the environment or people (codes: concern for workers' rights; with the environment in mind; with future generations in mind; not

tested on animals; buying from honest producers). The theme includes typical associations with the phrase "responsible consumption." Students define responsible purchasing decisions as those that minimize negative impacts on the environment, animals, and production workers. They are aware that with their consumer choices, they can to some extent promote socially responsible producers.

- Self-discipline (codes: keeping an eye on the budget; not succumbing to temptation; meeting all basic needs; seeking product information). Responsible consumption is associated with effort to be made, self-discipline, and habit formation. The effort is required to follow the market, seek product information, be aware of one's needs, refrain from cravings, and keep spending under control.

The second research question focused on the responsible consumption behavior exhibited by students. Both qualitative and quantitative parts provided answers. A factor analysis was conducted on the questions in the survey questionnaire. The questions dealt with various aspects of consumer behavior, from which three indices – key factors of consumer behavior – emerged, each with a range of 0–32:

- Index of frugality, mean 24.18, dev. std. 5,73
- Index of responsible purchasing decisions, mean 16.78, dev. std. 6,78
- Index of social influence and fashion influence, mean 14.48, dev. std. 5,37².

The responsible purchasing decisions index was found to be less significant than the frugality index and more significant than the index of social influence and fashion influence.

The components of the responsible purchasing decisions index are presented in Table 3. It contains product selection criteria that address the impact of the production process on the environment, animals, workers, and the consumer himself. Each component of the index takes a value from 0 to 4. Students present a diverse attitude towards

Table 3. Components of the index of responsible purchasing decisions

Index component: the importance of a given criterion during purchasing decisions	Mean (variable value range 0–4)	Standard deviation
Product composition	2,57	1,1
Guarantee	2,36	1,13
Knowledge of whether animals were not harmed in the production process	2,32	1,43
Knowledge of whether the product was made with respect for human and worker rights	2,19	1,29
Quality certificate	2,1	1,13
Knowledge about whether the production is safe for the environment	1,97	1,25
The possibility of recycling the product	1,91	1,25
Country of origin	1,36	1,14

Source: own research.

² The indexes were verified for reliability and discriminatory power of the individual components. In the case of the Responsible Purchasing Decisions Index, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient values for the correlation between individual index items and the index value were located in the range of 0.47 - 0.84. The reliability of the index was tested using the Cronbach's Alpha index, which was 0.85 (statistically significant, $p < 0.05$).

responsible purchasing decisions, with a slight predominance of responsible decisions. Of the criteria analyzed, the most important to them are the composition of the product, the guarantee, the knowledge of whether animals were not harmed during production, and whether the product was made with respect for human and worker rights.

Product composition was mentioned during in-depth interviews in the context of product quality and durability, and also with reference to food products and their impact on health. Some respondents declared a habit of reading labels. Quality certification and warranty came up in the context of choosing products that will last longer. Recycling was mentioned in regard to plastic packaging. During the interviews, many students expressed concern for animal welfare, most often laboratory and fur animals and those destined for slaughter. Country of origin appeared to be considered most often in the minds of consumers in the context of China and concerns about labor rights violations.

In the survey, students were also asked whether knowledge if a product was vegan or vegetarian influenced their purchasing decisions. Based on factor analysis, this criterion was not included in the index in question. The largest group of respondents (45%) considered it completely irrelevant. Clarification of such a position is provided by in-depth interviews, which indicate a dominant desire to eat meat while caring about animal welfare.

I'm very pro-environment and I'm very, very interested in the animal issue, but everything kind of has its own, everything has to be balanced. (...) If it were to be tested on animals or directly like, for example, skins from some mink and those mink were to be kept in some horrible conditions in cages or something like that, then that affects me and I'm definitely against that. But when it comes to food things, for example, I don't know, I mean like this vegan and vegetarian trend I respect it a lot and I'm kind of full of admiration, but no, I wouldn't choose to be a vegetarian. I like meat and I know I intend to eat it. (IDI 3)

The index of responsible purchasing decisions is correlated with specific beliefs. These relate to the protection of animal welfare, control of the environmental impact of businesses, and the relationship of consumer choices to the quality of life of future generations. The correlation coefficient values are presented in Table 4. All correlations are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Views correlated with the index of responsible purchasing decisions

	Correlation with the index of responsible purchasing decisions (Spearman's r, $p < 0.05$)
My current behavior as a consumer has an impact on what life will be like for future generations	0,34
Animal welfare should be better protected by law	0,35
The environmental impact of companies should be more controlled	0,38

Source: own research.

Responsible consumption is also evident in the way people use the products they own. During IDI interviews, students declared that they take care of their belongings. Similarly, in the survey, 57.6% of respondents agreed with the statement "I try to repair things instead

of buying new ones”³. They tend to sell or donate unneeded items rather than throw them away. 72.5% denied that "Items that I no longer need, I usually throw away, even if they are not damaged." There is an apparent tendency to use products for a long time and a reluctance to throw them away. As many as 84.8% of respondents admit that "I use products until they wear out, despite the arrival of a newer model on the market." Similar statements appeared during IDI interviews.

This approach is seen as both economically rational and ethical and ecological because it does not contribute to the generation of waste and environmental pollution. Similarly, attitudes toward responsible consumption are also revealed about second-hand purchases. 75.5% of respondents believe that buying used items is environmentally friendly, and 64.6% consider "second-hand" purchases.

I like [shopping in a second-hand store] because one, you can find it cheap, and two, as if everyone bought or exchanged these clothes there, well, there would be less trash and all that stuff in this world (...). Well, and quality-wise, these are nice things, too. (IDI 07)

The research also revealed an area of irresponsible consumer decisions. Respondents were asked to refer to the statement: "It happens to me to buy a product that I doubt was produced ethically (e.g., using child labor) because I like it and it's cheap". The largest group (27.4%) chose the "hard to say" option. The rest split almost equally: agreeing and disagreeing. This dilemma was also the subject of qualitative interviews. In this context, students usually mentioned online purchases of products from China. Two groups of consumers making ethically questionable purchases emerged. The first were those who were aware that cheap and attractive products were paid for not only by the suffering of production workers but often also by environmental damage. This caused remorse in some of them. Others explained that they do not think about responsible consumption. The second group had doubts about whether the information about the harmfulness of the production process that reached them was true.

In-depth interviews provided insight into concerns about responsible consumption and green products. There was a suspicion that eco-products serve the profits of manufacturers rather than the environment. Students perceive the lack of repairability of many electronic products and the practice of aging products as forcing consumers to keep buying new products, which means throwing away old ones and increasing the amount of garbage. They point out that these products are often energy-saving devices that are advertised as being environmentally friendly. Respondents note that often calling a product green is a justification for a significant price increase. This creates mistrust among consumers and a sense of being cheated. Electric cars were also frequently mentioned in students' statements as an example of products that should be green but are not. Other doubts about responsible consumption can be boiled down to the question: Will pro-environmental solutions be effective if only some countries introduce them?

So when I order such things from Aliexpress I probably somehow don't think about it, because I rather think that whether Amazon or Apple or even Coca Cola also contributes a lot to, let's say, environmental destruction. (IDI 1)

³ Sum of "rather yes" and "definitely yes" responses from a five-point Likert scale.

Let's say I buy apples, yes I will pay PLN 3 for them. And there are some EKO apples, somewhere super packed, there without chemical sprays. And they cost 8 zlotys. Now am I practically always when buying apples, which, well, besides the fact that I will somehow mentally feel better about it, that I am helping the environment, when in China the chimneys of everyone's factories are running without filters, that I will feel a little better about myself, should I lose money on this, yes? It can be done to a certain extent. Yes, that is, if let's assume, this price difference is relatively negligible for someone there, one can pay attention to it, but well, one can't go into exaggeration. (IDI 10)

And some talk about that we produced it in ecological sustainability, so pay for it 10 times more than normally, because we are such an Eco company here. Well I don't buy something like that [...] and such marketing talk doesn't reach me. (IDI 04)

5. CONCLUSIONS

Responsible consumption is an important, though not critical factor in the purchasing decisions of the consumers surveyed. Of greatest importance is frugality. The way students define responsible consumption is related to frugal management: not wasting, buying only needed products, seeking product information, and self-discipline. It's also a concern for the environment and moral issues: concern about whether the production process respected workers' rights and did not involve animal suffering. Responsible consumer behavior demonstrated by students includes analyzing the composition of products, paying attention to whether the product has a guarantee, or a quality certificate, and what impact the production process had on workers, the environment, and animals. These elements form an index of responsible purchasing decisions, which is correlated with beliefs regarding the impact of consumer decisions on future generations, beliefs about the need to control the environmental impact of companies, and the need to safeguard animal welfare legally. Responsible consumption is also evident in the way people use the products they own. Students take care of their belongings, repair them, and donate or sell unnecessary items. They are reluctant to throw things away. They are mostly positive about second-hand purchases.

There is an area of purchasing decisions where responsible consumption and frugal management are mutually supportive. For example, respondents prefer durable products that they will use for a longer period. This approach is seen as both economically rational and ethical and ecological because it does not contribute to generating waste and pollution. That is an effect of the economic and ecological combination described by Peattie (2010). However, it is important to remember that it is economic rationality that has the greatest impact on the consumers surveyed. Thus, they present responsible consumption behavior as long as it is profitable. When responsibility involves greater expenses they encounter resistance. As a result, attitudes toward responsible consumption vary. Some young consumers have doubts about the trend. Electric cars are often cited as an example in this context. In addition, students perceive many manufacturers as dishonest and feel cheated by them. At issue are the alleged practices of aging electronic products and constructing them so that individual parts cannot be repaired or replaced. The results of the research suggest that there is a group of consumers willing to pay more for a product that will allow repairs and replacement of parts, and as a result, will last longer.

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