

## SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR OF POLISH SENIORS (REPORT FROM OWN RESEARCH)

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### ABSTRACT

The discussion presented in this study focuses on consumer behaviour of people aged 65+ in Poland that may be classified as sustainable consumption. The article primarily seeks to offer some insight into sustainable consumption within the consumer decision-making process among Polish seniors. The basis for the conclusions is provided by direct research conducted in the form of a survey questionnaire on a sample of 2,537 people aged 65+ in 2014–2015 in 10 Polish cities of various populations and sizes.

**Key words:** seniors, sustainable consumption, consumer behaviour

### INTRODUCTION

Mass consumption and consumerism characteristic of contemporary societies are causing not only destructive consequences for human spirituality, physical and mental health and social relations but also for the natural environment. As rightly pointed out by Bauman, consumerism consists in continuously buying, consuming, using, disposing of waste so that everything can begin all over again the following day [Bauman 2005]. The negative consequences of over-consumption, manifested as buying and throwing out products constantly, have given rise to various environmental trends and movements that firmly reject excessive consumerism and call for application of the principles of sustainable development based on respect for the environment combined with responsible use of the achievements of the modern world. Sustainable consumption is a consumer trend within the drive towards maintaining the balance between human natural needs and what makes civilisational progress necessary. According to Borys, it is a major objective of sustainable

development, while being strongly connected with the realisation of quality of life as the overarching goal of the new paradigm of development [Borys 2014]. It should also be highlighted 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. 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]. It is therefore necessary to specifically assess the extent to which sustainable consumption is present in the daily purchasing behaviour of Polish consumers, in particular the elderly. More and more senior consumers are following new consumer trends, including sustainable consumption. This consumer trend implies a new structure, new forms and methods of consumption but also the emergence of new needs and motives for their satisfaction. Today, seniors are more frequently willing to follow these changes. This

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article seeks to provide some insight into sustainable consumption in consumer behaviour of people aged 65+ in Poland, based on the results of the author's own research.

### **The concept and essence of sustainable consumption**

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” [Ministry of the Environment of Norway 1994, 1995]. 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].

According to Moisander and Pesonen, 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 [Moisander and Pesonen 2002].

According to Kielczewski, sustainable consumption is a structure where the shape of individual systems and relationships and dependencies between them enable the achievement of sustainable development objectives. Consequently, consumption of today's generation does not limit the possibilities of consumption for future generations [Kielczewski 2008]. In other words, sustainable consumption means optimum, conscious and responsible use of available natural resources, goods and services at the level of

individuals, households, local communities, business communities, local, regional and national governments and international structures, in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, bearing in mind the good of future generations [Zalega 2014]. It should be emphasised that sustainable consumption is based on the wish to reduce wastage as well as waste and pollution generation (best practices in the field of waste management, water and waste water management, renewable energies and development of eco-friendly products) and to choose goods and services which comply, as far as possible, with certain ethical, social and environmental criteria [Heinzle 2012, McDonagh et al. 2012, Paetz et al. 2012].

In practice, a distinction is made between the so-called weak and strong sustainable consumption [Seyfang 2011]. 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. Nevertheless, 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]. 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 and Spangenberg 2014, Spangenberg 2014]. 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, Lorek and Fuchs 2013].

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, Krantz 2010, Schrader and

Thøgersen 2011, Leßmann and Masson 2015]. 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. However, consumption sustainability requires balancing the following aspects [Kielczewski 2008]:

- 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 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, Dueby et al. 2016] 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.

## CONCEPTUALISATION OF RESEARCH

The empirical material contained in this article comes from direct research conducted in the form of a survey questionnaire on a sample of 2,537 households in 2014–2015 in 10 Polish cities of various populations and sizes. In accordance with the research assumptions, the sample included persons over 65 years of age who took independent purchasing decisions in the market. In order to select the sample, the selective quota sampling procedure was used. The characteristics (quotas) covered by the research were: sex and age.

This research method was chosen in view of the older age of respondents whose openness to new media (Internet, smartphone, i-Pod) often used in direct research is limited.

The survey was conducted among participants of the university of the third age (UTA) at state universities in: Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Poznań, Gdańsk, Katowice, Lublin, Białystok, Toruń and Wrocław, as well as among members of parochial clubs in parishes located in the archdioceses of Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Białystok, Gdańsk, Katowice, Lublin, Poznań, Wrocław and the dioceses of Warsaw-Praga and Toruń.

### 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 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 (sex, age, place of residence, household size) and socio-economic indicators (education, income).

The survey covered 71% of women, with only every third respondent being male. There were definitely more women than men, and people aged 65–74 formed the largest age group in the sample<sup>1</sup>. Place of residence was also an important variable in the research. In line with the research assumptions, the sample comprised respondents who lived in the largest Polish cities.

Respondents were also asked about their level of education. The questionnaire included four categories of education: primary, basic vocational, secondary and higher education. Respondents with secondary education formed the largest group. Nearly 2/5 of those surveyed declared this level. Every fourth respondent was a university graduate, and those with basic vocational education represented a similar percentage. In the sample surveyed, people with primary education were the smallest group (11.4%).

Nearly half of those surveyed were members of households consisting of two persons, while fewer than 2/5 represented three-person households. Every sixth respondent was a member of a single-person household.

The largest group of respondents included people whose monthly income per capita did not exceed PLN 2,000.00. For every third respondent, monthly income per household member ranged from PLN 2,001.00 to 3,000.00. In turn, every fourth person interviewed had monthly disposable income per capita of between PLN 3,001.00 and 4,000.00. The smallest group of respondents included households where the income was above PLN 4,000.00 per capita a month.

#### **Implementation of sustainable consumption in consumer behaviour of the seniors surveyed**

Sustainable consumption is a trend that is becoming stronger in the context of consumer behaviour of people aged 65+. The research examined the attitudes of senior consumers towards sustainable consumption.

**Table 1.** Sustainable consumption as understood by the seniors surveyed

Item	Number of respondents ( <i>N</i> = 2 537)	Share (%)
Sustainable consumption means rational and efficient use of scarce resources at various levels, in particular environmental, yet with a general increase in consumption	314	12.4
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	1 265	49.8
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	958	37.8

Source: Own research.

<sup>1</sup>The Anglo-Saxon literature uses the following division of older people: (i) young old – people aged 60/65–74; (ii) old old – people aged 75–84; and (iii) the oldest old – people aged 85 and more. The age classification in this study is similar to that proposed by the World Health Organization [Moschis 1992]. The author divided seniors into: (i) young old – people aged 65–74; (ii) old old – people aged 75–84; and (iii) the oldest old – people aged 85 and more. According to the United Nations, the conventional old-age threshold is 65. It should be remembered, however, that old age is not just the number of years that a person has lived. We distinguish calendar (chronological) age and biological age. Many factors often cause very large discrepancies between chronological and biological ages.

It essentially checked whether older people understand the concept and idea of sustainable consumption and whether their possible competences translate into practical behaviour. To this end, respondents were asked about their understanding of the term sustainable consumption (Table 1).

In the light of the research results, it can be stated that half of people aged 65+ understand sustainable consumption as its strong form. This answer was more often indicated by women (53.4%), mostly aged 65–74 (53.1%), seniors with higher education (57.3%) and a monthly income of above PLN 3,000.00 per capita (55.8%), most frequently living in Warsaw (52.6%), Poznań (51.7%) and Gdańsk (50.9%) and actively attending UTA courses (54.9%). Almost 2/5 of senior respondents misunderstand sustainable consumption, identifying it with conscious consumption, also known as ethical consumption or responsible consumption in Anglo-Saxon countries. This answer was chiefly chosen by men (40.3%) and old old respondents (43.8%) with a monthly income of less than PLN 3,000.00 per person, who had completed basic vocational education (47.6%), mostly living in Kraków (42.6%), Lublin (41.8%) and Białystok (41.9%) and being parochial community members (39.8%). 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 conducted found that only one in eight respondents construed sustainable consumption as its weak form. This answer was more often chosen by women (14.2%) than men (10.6%), by seniors with basic vocational (13.1%)

and secondary education (12.9%), with a monthly income not exceeding PLN 3,000.00 per capita (14.3%), living in Katowice (13.4%) and Wrocław (13.2%) and being parochial community members (13.1%).

Another issue was whether senior consumers follow the assumptions of sustainable consumption in their consumer behaviour (Table 2).

The survey shows that people aged 65+ implement the idea of fully sustainable consumption to a small extent. Only every eighth surveyed senior fully realises its postulates when making consumer decisions. By contrast, more than half of the elderly responded negatively. Every twelfth senior found it difficult to say whether their consumer behaviour was consistent with the assumptions of sustainable consumption. This share of indecisive senior consumers can be explained by their misunderstanding of sustainable consumption.

The alternative consumer trend of sustainable consumption may form a certain lifestyle, and a specifically oriented way of buying products may (though not necessarily) represent a particular ideology of life for some older people. The proportion of seniors who declared that they acted fully in line with the idea of sustainable consumption was much higher among women (13.8%) than men (10.6%) as well as among university graduates (14.1%) and those earning a monthly per capita income of more than PLN 4,000.00, mostly inhabitants of Warsaw (13.3%), Poznań (12.8%) and Gdańsk (12.1%), and those actively attending UTA courses (15.1%). In contrast, older people who considered their consumption to be unsustainable were seniors with primary education (67.3%), mostly men (57.3%), aged 75–84 (62.3%), with a monthly income not exceeding

**Table 2.** Subjective perceptions of the seniors surveyed on whether they put sustainable consumption into practice

Item	Number of respondents ( <i>N</i> = 2 537)	Share (%)
My consumption is fully sustainable	310	12.2
My consumption is slightly sustainable	647	25.5
I cannot say whether my consumption is sustainable	202	8.0
My consumption is not sustainable	878	54.3

Source: Own research.

PLN 2,000.00 per capita (64.1%), living in Łódź (56.2%) and Katowice (55.8%) and being parochial community members (56.7%).

Senior consumers who follow the principles of sustainable consumption can be referred to as competent, conscious consumers. They usually shop at markets, in small corner shops, and avoid hyper- and supermarkets and shopping centres.

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]. 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 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.

Seniors' environmental behaviour as part of sustainable consumption was measured by means of 20 statements (Table 3).

The survey results indicate that the behaviours forming part of sustainable consumption are exhibited (albeit with varying frequencies) by the majority of older people. The largest group of senior respondents said that they used reusable bags (92.7%), with 64.2% doing so whenever possible. A similar percentage of

**Table 3.** Environmental behaviour of the seniors surveyed as part of sustainable consumption (% of answers)

No	Statement	Whenever possible	From time to time	Never
1	I buy carefully, only as much as needed at the moment	46.6	32.7	20.7
2	Before I buy a product, I gather product information confirmed by other consumers	20.1	39.0	40.9
3	Before I buy a product, I always check its expiry date	61.2	30.2	8.6
4	Before I buy a product, I check if it is biodegradable (recyclable)	10.6	55.2	34.2
5	I use reusable bags	64.2	29.0	6.8
6	I choose products in green, minimised packaging	10.2	41.9	47.9
7	I avoid purchasing disposable items (plates, cups, cutlery, plastic bags)	37.2	19.5	43.3
8	I regularly sort waste	59.2	32.4	8.4
9	I use water sparingly	58.9	33.8	7.3
8	I throw out used batteries into special containers	32.3	44.8	22.9
11	I replace light bulbs with energy-saving ones	57.8	28.3	13.9
12	I limit gas consumption	57.6	33.2	9.2
13	I buy energy-efficient equipment	34.7	48.6	16.7
14	I use electricity sparingly	63.8	28.6	7.6
15	I throw out expired drugs into special containers	19.3	24.4	56.3
16	I collect waste separately	25.3	25.4	49.3
17	I return glass bottles to collection points	24.9	20.9	54.2
18	I buy drinks in recyclable packaging	23.6	20.1	56.3
19	I pay attention to eco-labels	15.3	34.5	50.2
20	I reduce car use for public transport or bicycle	20.6	32.9	46.5

Source: Own research.

those aged 65+ admitted that they used water (92.7%), electricity (92.4%) and gas (90.8%) sparingly. In the three cases, those who did so whenever possible were the dominant group (58.9, 63.8 and 57.3%, respectively). Nearly 92% of seniors sorted waste, of which 59.2% admitted doing so always. The responses show that those surveyed most often segregate plastic packages, metal and paper. In line with the requirements of sustainable consumption, these actions are 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). The survey results confirm that money saving is, indeed, the key motive for seniors' environmental behaviours, but the resultant environmental protection is an additional, secondary advantage.

The findings indicate changes in seniors' attitudes. Before making any decision, in particular before buying products, senior 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. Over 79% 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, almost 2/3 of them 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 not in line with expectations. Less than half of people aged 65+ say that they are more likely to buy an eco-friendly product that has eco-labelling. Nonetheless, research into Fair Trade [Radziukiewicz 2015] clearly confirms that this outcome 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.

The described consumer behaviours of people aged 65+ result in tangible economic benefits not only for respondents but also for their households. In addition, these environmental behaviours as part of sustainable consumption largely overlap with the research on environmental awareness and behaviour of Polish residents that is systematically carried out by TNS Polska [2014].

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 people aged 65+, certain cognitive reactions and beliefs about environmental behaviours can be noted. Based on their research, some authors [Krantz 2010, Schrader and Thøgersen 2011, Leßmann and 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.

For people aged 65+, 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 seniors in financial difficulty with a monthly income of less than PLN 2,000.00 per capita (68.6%), mostly women (53.2%), aged 75–84 (54.6%), with basic vocational education (54.7%) and living in Lublin (53.1%) and Toruń (52.4%). Another major barrier that was pointed out by every third surveyed senior was poor information on how to act in line with sustainable consumption. Following the economic barrier, it was the most important obstacle for the old old (33.1%) and the oldest old (32.6), chiefly men (33.9%) with secondary education (33.6%), earning a monthly income of PLN 2,000.00 per capita (34.1%), living in Białystok (32.9%) and Toruń (32.78%) and being active members of parochial communities (33.9%). The least significant obstacles were those connected with the effort and time needed to stick to sustainable consumption assumptions.

## CONCLUSION

When deciding on the purchase of selected products or services and when performing specific activities in their daily lives, people aged 65+ in Poland each time

follow a more or less sustainable consumption pattern. Seniors whose purchasing behaviours largely conform to sustainable consumption buy only necessary things, paying attention to the quality of goods that have extended lifetime through recycling or re-use, thereby reducing wastage. Furthermore, these behaviours contribute to the conscious and deliberate reduction of consumption of products that require rare natural resources to be used and generate much waste.

The majority of seniors reported the discussed environmental behaviours that are consistent with the sustainable consumption idea, albeit to varying degrees and with varying frequencies. These are most often household-related activities including waste sorting, economical consumption of water, electricity and gas, and the use of reusable bags.

The increased scope of seniors' behaviours and actions for environmental protection should be assessed positively. At the same time, it is worth noting that these behaviours often result from economic rather than environmental motives.

The survey shows that the proportion of seniors 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 and those earning a monthly per capita income of more than PLN 3,000.00, mostly inhabitants of Warsaw, Poznań and Gdańsk, and those actively attending UTA courses.

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## **ZRÓWNOWAŻONA KONSUMPCJA W ZACHOWANIACH POLSKICH KONSUMENTÓW SENIORÓW (RAPORT Z BADAŃ WŁASNYCH)**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Prezentowane w opracowaniu rozważania koncentrują się na zachowaniach konsumenckich osób w wieku 65+ żyjących w Polsce, które wpisują się w ideę zrównoważonej konsumpcji. Głównym celem artykułu jest próba uchwycenia zrównoważonej konsumpcji w procesie podejmowania decyzji konsumpcyjnych przez polskich seniorów. Podstawę wnioskowania stanowią informacje pochodzące z badań bezpośrednich przeprowadzonych w formie wywiadu kwestionariuszowego na próbie 2,537 osób w wieku 65+ w latach 2014–2015 w 10 miastach Polski o zróżnicowanej liczbie ludności oraz różnej wielkości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** osoby starsze, zrównoważona konsumpcja, zachowania konsumenckie

