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## THE RESPONSIBLE CONSUMER AS AN ANSWER TO NEW SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

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**ABSTRACT:** In contrast to the escalating materialism and consumerism, more and more trends are emerging, aiming to reduce the negative effects of consumption on the environment and society. Responsible consumption is not only one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, but also an important way of implementing the remainder. The purpose of this article is to encapsulate the concept of a responsible consumer in the context of consumer behaviour noticeable nowadays, in view of the current topic, primarily based on a web and desk research analysis.

**KEY WORDS:** responsible consumption, sustainable consumption, responsible consumer, consumer attitudes and behavior, UN Sustainable Development Goals

## Introduction

Globalization processes, reinforced by economic, socio-cultural and political changes, occurring in contemporary societies, have exerted a strong influence on the changes in the system of values, consumer lifestyles and behavioural patterns. For, on the one hand, products on offer available on world markets, which become increasingly commonplace, lead to similarity in consumption patterns on a global scale, and on the other hand, new possibilities are emerging which cater for consumers' needs. At the same time however, globalization has contributed to the intensification of worldwide threats (including deterioration of the environment, hunger and poverty, social dysfunction) and has also strengthened the role and importance of business in our world today (which, it is frequently claimed, is constantly creating new fashions and shortening the life cycle of products to make room for new generations).

A consumer who wants to be a market participant on a par with business in this new reality must have specific competence (knowledge, skills and attitudes) (Dąbrowska et al, 2015, p. 53), which enable him to make conscious choices for which he takes responsibility. It is because of this active approach, that the responsible consumer is able to play his part in overcoming global problems, rejecting an increasingly widespread culture where everything is "instant" and a "throw-away".

This article addresses the issue of defining the concept of a responsible consumer<sup>1</sup> in the context of challenges with which UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) confront the world, against the background of contemporary observations of behaviour, initiative and consumer movements, using desk and web research analysis.

## Defining the responsible consumer

The concept of a responsible consumer (also referred to as ethical, conscious, competent and level-headed) should be deduced from the considerably more common term of sustainable consumption. However, sustainable consumption continues to be most frequently defined in terms of eco-con-

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<sup>1</sup> Above all in relation to decisions taken by him in the process of acquiring goods and services. This process includes preparation for purchase (defining needs, decision making, expectations of a product, then gathering information about it – e.g. its origin, how and from what it is manufactured), deciding on product choice, its purchase and use.



Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals

Source: (Learn More About the SDG's, 2016).

sumption (eco-centric perspective), in other words, respect for the natural environment, disregarding the social context of this issue (just as initially the concept of sustainable development itself was interpreted as eco-development). This is borne out both by the binding definitions – e.g. UNEP (2015, p. 9), EU (*Sustainable Development*, 2016), and also the most recent SDG's together with targets (UN, 2015) and the indicators ascribed (UN, 2016) to them (responsible consumption and production are 12. SDG – figure 1).

Applying sustainable development in its wider sense as a starting point, on the assumption that it is such socio-economic development which is compatible with the requirements of natural environment protection, and enables the present generation's needs to be satisfied, whilst not placing restrictions on the potential of future generations, one ought to assume that the analogically extended, holistic and long-term approach should apply to sustainable consumption – e.g. this is the interpretation of the OECD (2008). This stance is taken by F. Bylok, who assumes that sustainable consumption should be based on three principles: economic rationality (economic optimization in the choice of goods), ecological rationality (choice of goods which are the least harmful to the environment) and social rationality (choice of goods which solve social problems or at the very least do not escalate them) (Neale, 2015, p. 153). The sustainable consumption concept is therefore an interpretation of the sustainable development concept, when applied to consumption (Dąbrowska et al., 2015, p. 93). Thus, a responsible consumer is

one who takes into account this paradigm in making consumer decisions (Wilk, 2015, p. 185).

The responsible consumer knows that material goods are not the most important indicator of the quality of life and defies materialism and consumerism (that is, excessive accumulation of material goods without any perception of the ecological, social and individual consequences of such actions), and represents the counter stance of anti-consumerism (Dąbrowska et al, 2015, p. 41–42). The responsible consumer understands that his choices bring about not only individual short-term consequences (satisfaction derived from consumption), but also long term individual and social results (Rachocka, 2007, p. 4). He therefore, buys consciously, taking into account the consequences of his consumer choices, both on the environmental and on the social level (their effect on the surroundings, and also on the market itself).<sup>2</sup> Making a conscious choice, accepting moral responsibility for the consequences, therefore, requires the appropriate knowledge, skills and also individual engagement, which will later evolve into responsible and active attitudes, the very opposite of passive (automatic) and mindless repetition of consumer patterns from other countries (susceptibility to advertisements and fashion or to the “McDonald’s consumption syndrome”). Typical attitudes of a responsible consumer should be: no wastage, not seeking to satisfy artificial needs, green, ethical and political consumerism<sup>3</sup>, whilst also being an innovative consumer – engaging in initiatives in the collaborative economy, including the sharing economy (Bachnik, 2016, p. 35–44).

### Attitude of a responsible consumer in the context of SDG’s

Responsible consumption is one of the 17 SDG’s which has an important bearing on the rest. The responsible consumer, by its attitude, which is reflected in various types of behaviour, initiatives and membership of consumer movements, may contribute to the implementation of SDG’s – the

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth also pointing out that the choices of a responsible consumer are not limited to food products, but extend to all categories of goods. Moreover, being a responsible consumer usually entails an appropriate (higher) material status, not because the ecological products or those which are socially engaged are more expensive than standard ones (this is not always the case), but because the additional ecological and ethical value, which they offer, satisfies needs of a higher order.

<sup>3</sup> The term consumerism appears in separate two meanings – negative, as a synonym for over-consumption and consumerism and as *morally characterized as alternative consumption* (Neale, 2015, p. 146). One can distinguish green consumerism (pro-ecological consumption models), ethical (pro-social models) and also political consumerism. The latter is a form of political activity of consumer citizens, and this manner of citizenship takes place through consumption (Rachocka, 2006, p. 12).

awareness of the consequence of a conscious choice also includes awareness of the significance of even the most trivial decision in fashioning the surrounding reality (table 1).

**Table 1.** Consumer attitudes and consequential behaviour, supported by initiatives and consumer movements as a response to SDG's

Consumer's attitude	Consumer's behaviour <sup>a)</sup>	Initiative, consumers movement	Reply to SDG's
NO WASTAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>limiting own material needs and consumption of certain goods and services</li> <li>planning purchases and foregoing incidental purchases, or spare stocks</li> <li>carefully thought out purchases (only products which are necessary)</li> <li>using reusable products (e.g. fabric bags instead of plastic throw-away disposable ones)</li> <li>re-using objects for a different purpose (e.g. jars for home-made preserves)</li> <li>reusing used products and then passing them on to other consumers</li> <li>passing on unwanted items to others</li> <li>shared use of products</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sharing (Food Banks, places where you bring spare food to create a "common pool"<sup>b)</sup>, internet platforms gathering together interested persons e.g. www.shareyourmeal.net/ and Foodsharing.pl or campaigns e.g. Share Your Meal with a Homeless Person campaign<sup>c)</sup>)</li> <li>freeganizm<sup>d)</sup></li> <li>pay-per-use (e.g. public laundrettes, municipal bicycles e.g. veturilo)</li> <li>sharing (including ride sharing e.g. BlaBlaCar or car sharing e.g. Beecar.pl or WolneAuto.pl)</li> <li>second-hand goods sale (e.g. sale groups on Facebook (Popiołek, 2016))</li> <li>free exchange – e.g. clothes swaps (Swap ciuchowy czyli darmowa wymiana ubrań, 2016)</li> </ul>	2 11
NOT SEEKING TO SATISFY ARTIFICIAL NEEDS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>foregoing some needs (not only goods)</li> <li>foregoing purchase of gadgets</li> <li>resisting fashion and adverts</li> <li>not replacing goods still in good working order with new generations</li> <li>taking care to ensure economical use (and not the moral dimension) of products</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>minimalist trends – slow living, less is more or consume less, live more</li> </ul>	10 11
GREEN CONSUMERISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>limitation of consumer goods and services produced from rare and not renewable natural resources</li> <li>consumption of products manufactured from natural raw materials or obtained in a manner involving minimal disruption of the environment</li> <li>selecting products which, after they are used up, do not leave post-consumption waste and can be recycled</li> <li>purchase products bearing an ecological symbol</li> <li>foregoing goods which were made in a process involving cruelty to animals (e.g. originating from inhumane rearing methods)</li> <li>purchase of products resulting from ecological farming</li> <li>purchase of products involving minimal processing, without additives or preservatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>prosumerism (producing or co-production of goods and services)</li> <li>uniting to function as food cooperatives<sup>e)</sup> (e.g. warszawska kooperatywa spożywcza Dobrze) or community supported farming<sup>f)</sup> (e.g. RWS Dobrzyń nad Wisłą)</li> <li>servitization (purchasing services instead of products)</li> <li>carrotmobs<sup>g)</sup></li> <li>eco certification – e.g. Demeter (Historia Demeter Polska, 2016)</li> </ul>	3 6 7 13 14 15

Consumer's attitude	Consumer's behaviour <sup>a)</sup>	Initiative, consumers movement	Reply to SDG's
GREEN CONSUMERISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• purchase of seasonal products and which are available in a given geographical zone</li> <li>• purchase of regional and local products</li> <li>• purchase of products without packaging or unnecessary packaging, with biodegradable or re-usable packaging</li> <li>• re-use of some products for new purposes</li> </ul>		
ETHICAL CONSUMERISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• foregoing products originating from slave labour or low paid work (somewhat inexpensive) and also work produced by prisoners</li> <li>• foregoing products manufactured by children</li> <li>• purchasing traditional products</li> <li>• purchasing products resulting from community involvement</li> <li>• products from social economy</li> <li>• choosing excluded producers, e.g. co-operatives of handicapped, unemployed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fair Trade movement</li> <li>• support for Slow Food movement<sup>h)</sup> and purchase products it recommends (Produkty, 2016)</li> <li>• purchasing products from Cause Related Marketing (e.g. products bearing the logo "Podaruj Dzieciom Słońce" or "Podziel Się Posiłkiem")</li> <li>• purchasing products with a "Pro Community Purchase" certificate (Zakup prospołeczny, 2016)</li> </ul>	<p>1</p> <p>3</p> <p>4</p> <p>5</p> <p>8</p> <p>9</p> <p>10</p> <p>11</p>
POLITICAL CONSUMERISM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• choosing goods produced by family firms and local products</li> <li>• choosing small producers or local sellers (using local raw materials)<sup>i)</sup></li> <li>• foregoing products from countries with an oppressive political system (e.g. totalitarian regime, system contravening international laws, human rights or restricting citizens' freedom of choice)</li> <li>• foregoing products of enterprises in which negative practices operate from the social viewpoint (e.g. breaking employees' rights, degrading the natural environment)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• choosing products marked "Dobre, bo polskie", "Teraz Polska" (positive political consumerism – sensible purchases)</li> <li>• consumer boycotts (negative political consumerism) e.g. KitKat Killer campaign or LPP boycott</li> </ul>	<p>7</p> <p>10</p> <p>16</p> <p>17</p>

a) The behaviour of the responsible consumer indicated may apply to more than one attitude. It was ascribed to that attitude for which they have the greatest meaning.

b) [www.facebook.com/jadlodzielnia.torun/](http://www.facebook.com/jadlodzielnia.torun/)

c) [www.facebook.com/events/148886318813194/152613955107097/](http://www.facebook.com/events/148886318813194/152613955107097/)

d) Freeganizm is both of a search for food which is already in the garbage, and also asking for surplus and unwanted goods before they are thrown away by restaurants, sellers at outdoor markets or supermarkets (Pena, 2016).

e) Food cooperatives are informal food co-operative shops, grouping together interested consumers from towns, wanting to buy healthy food at fair prices, from farmers using ecological cultivation. Cooperatives function based periodically placed bulk orders, often also a collectively managed shop.

f) A model of cooperation between consumers and farmers: at the beginning of the season consumers make an advance payment for the farmer to deliver regularly throughout the season a variety of vegetables, and have an influence on the cultivation methods he uses.

g) Carrotmob, or literally "mob with a carrot" (also referred to as *buycott*), is an act aimed to reward those firms which treat consumers' expectations seriously. It is based on support for local service points in financing changes which allow them to become more amenable to people and the environment (Rok, 2011).

h) Slow Food International is an international organization, founded as opposition to the widely spreading fast foods, supporting small-scale producers of original food, traditional, healthy, produced by a unique method not encountered anywhere else in the world (*About us*, 2016).

i) Consumer ethnocentrism, also referred to as consumer patriotism, i.e. convincing consumers of the moral duty to buy products locally, ascribing them to the globalization process, meaning the tendency to concentrate it on locality (Wanat, Stefańska, 2014, p. 815).

Global research by Nielsen (2015) shows that increasingly more consumers value enterprises which are pro-active for sustainable development, as in choosing purchases, they take into account whether the product is made from fresh, natural and/or organic ingredients (57% indications) and its packaging is environmentally friendly (41%), whether it comes from a company known for being environmentally friendly (45%), from a company known for its commitment to social value (43%), and from a company known for its commitment to community (41%). 66% of consumers would be willing to pay more (in 2013 this percentage was 50%) for such sustainable products – the criteria mentioned have even more significance for this group (Nielsen, 2015, p. 5, 8, 10, 17).

Research conducted amongst consumers in Poland in general proves that although they are aware of sustainable consumption, this is not always reflected in their behaviour – there is a considerable gap between what they declare and what happens in practice. However, a positive trend is clearly visible in this area. According to a survey by Deloitte (2015) 62% of Poles, in making their Christmas purchases before Christmas Eve, took into account social issues (taking note of the country of origin of products and whether they were manufactured in accordance with Fair Trade principles) – compared with the previous year, this percentage rose by 5 p.p. (Błaszczak, 2016, p. 19). II edition research the CSR Barometer (2016) in turn showed that socially responsible activity of CSR firms evoke a positive attitude towards the firm (72% respondents, an increase of 10 p.p. as compared with 2013). Amongst the Fulfilled Realists (this is the largest group, constituting 21% of those researched, after the Eco-Pragmatists), 71% declared that they were prepared to change brand for one which counters social problems or is pro-active in the area of environmental protection (CSR Consulting, 2016).

Consumers attitude is instrumental in a change of approach amongst firms. In FOB (2015) research 27% of CSR managers admitted that the need to adapt to consumers requirements is one of the factors which influenced the popularization of the idea of corporate social responsibility in Poland to the greatest degree within the last 15 years (FOB, 2015, p. 14).

## Conclusions

Excessive consumption creates many negative consequences, both environmental, and psychological. Therefore, more and more consumers are beginning to take into account in their decisions on purchases, other criteria besides economic. Responsible consumers are aware of the significance of the daily choices they make, and consumer initiatives which they undertake

become tools for social changes. In taking responsible market decisions and choosing sustainable consumption models, responsible consumers are not only helping to improve their own quality of life, but also that of society as a whole. In this sense they are creating the surrounding reality (Rachocka, 2007, p. 5).

By weighing up the consequences of their choices and perceiving their influence on others, it would seem, responsible consumers are beginning to combine two opposing roles – that of consumer (focusing on the individual needs and own benefits) and citizen (taking heed of the needs of the community) (Rachocka, 2007, p. 5–6). As citizen consumers they also support the circular economy (not wasting resources), valuing such things as exchange, sharing or other practices which build inter-personal relations, and thereby – social capital (a key factor in socio-economic development).

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