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## Culturally driven notion of sustainable lifestyle: the case of Polish consumers

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**Abstract:** This exploratory study is an attempt to appraise the knowledge about sustainable consumption in Poland. It seeks to understand the consumption as an activity of an individual driven by ecological and social values in the context of culture. The data for this study was collected from a purposive sample of one focus interview with 20 interviewees and it was obtained in 2008 and 2011. The term *lifestyle* used in this study can be defined as culturally determined practices and attitudes towards material objects, reflected in habits of spending free time and in the modes of consumption. In this article, the author will represent lifestyles of Polish consumers, taking into account a great variety of daily practices and habits which dominate in the group of eco-oriented individuals.

**Keywords:** lifestyle; sustainable lifestyle; consumption; Poland.

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### 1 Introduction

Modern day lifestyles are influenced by factors, phenomena and frames which are imposed by the late-modern society. Social changes which have gradually progressed alongside with industrialisation, urban development and division of labour were of great importance for the individual. The increasing degradation of the role which traditional institutions, such as family, religion, and state play in shaping individuals and their identity is directly linked with the organisation of a daily life and with the praxis of the contemporary lifestyle. The character of this category is determined by the character of modern culture, which is composed of both aesthetic and cognitive processes.

There are many approaches regarding the lifestyle theory. The classical sociological theories of Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu or the Polish sociologist Andrzej Siciński place the category of lifestyle within the frames of class stratification. For Weber, the relation of 'special systems of behaviour' was strongly bonded with the economic capital. Similar

understanding of a lifestyle was represented by Pierre Bourdieu, according to whom a lifestyle was connected with the position of an individual within the class structure and with the *habitus* and the taste resulting from it, upon which the structuralisation of social practices is based.

Different positions within the class structure generate different experience within the hierarchical class system and at the same time, a similar experience within groups that belong to the same class. According to Bourdieu, the class shares 'common attributes' and attitudes, which shape norms, values and symbols, common for all and shared by all members of the class; these, in turn, together constitute the culture of a given social class (Bourdieu, 2005; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

In other words, according to this classical theory, the culture of a particular class and its lifestyle are determined by its economic and cultural capital. Such approach towards lifestyle is known in literature as homogenic. It often meets with a lot of criticism from the researchers who see culture as dominant and vital in shaping identity and, as a result, in the creation of a certain lifestyle. The dominating approach is neo-Weberian discourse, in which lifestyle is assumed to be determined by both culture and non-class-based elements of social structure, such as age, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc..

Pakulski and Waters (1996) argue that nowadays, cultural processes are based on identity and consumption style. However, some recent research has proved that there are some issues with regards to culture and reflexivity as the only factors in lifestyle analysis. The studies have shown that, regardless of the multiplicity of product choices, the class definition of lifestyle is still in strong position (e.g., Warde, 1997; Tomlinson, 1998).

On the other hand, there are a few symptoms of inadequacy of the traditional class approach. The quantitative growth of the middle class, which can be observed in the late-modern society, does not determine the lifestyles of various social classes in the same way as it used to in the pre-modern societies; this is due to, e.g., similar living standards of different classes (access to similar goods, healthcare, education, employment, leisure, etc.). In post-modern times, defining lifestyle in terms of class structure seems to become irrelevant.

Another point in favour of abandoning the class distinction of a lifestyle is the individualisation argument. Currently, the differences between the styles of consumption result from the possibility of self-fulfilment. The social stratification seems to be progressing in a different direction than it used to. The class in which one was born does not determine consumption patterns anymore; on the contrary, it is consumption that determines the social status.

Nowadays we deal with, as Warde (1997, p.8) puts it, the emphasis on the shift from "habitus to freedom". Lifestyles are fashion-oriented and result from an individual's work and his selection and approval of certain practices as significant and worthy of internalisation and, at the same time, his rejection of others (Bauman, 1998, 2002).

Another opponent to the assumption that style of consumption is determined by the class is also Beck (1992), who notices the determinants of a lifestyle in an institutionalisation of individualisation. The main criterion of social distinction that he mentions is unemployment affecting an ever-growing group of people, whose lack of means of support makes their participation in consumption industry impossible.

One more scholar speaking in favour of cultural implications of a lifestyle is Slater (1997, p.87), who claims that "lifestyle tends to indicate a purely cultural pattern: it is made of signs, representations, media and it is mutable and unstable as they are.

Secondly, one can in theory switch from one lifestyle to another in a move from one shop-window, TV channel, supermarket shelf and so on to another”.

## **2 Sustainable lifestyle definition**

Lifestyles are often defined as a set of daily practices connected with values and attitudes. This category is an attempt of “holistic conceptualization (...) where a sphere of life consists of everyday human behaviors” [Siciński, (1976), p.26], it is a “mode of living” [Cheney, (1996), p.11]. Cheney (1996, p.5) defines lifestyles as “sets of practices and attitudes that make sense in particular contexts”. The defined historical time, which is inseparably connected with culture, can serve as such context.

Our contemporary culture is permeated with consumptionism, yet the first, emerging symptoms of sustainable consumption slowly come into view. Featherstone (1991, p.84) writes about an individual: “the modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, interior decoration, car and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste”.

Constructing such lifestyles is based on balancing moral elements and accepted values. Pro-socially and pro-ecologically-oriented consumption is a far more demanding task than traditional consumption, based on purchasing whatever is available at the shop. Sustainability takes into account the common good, which is understood as global justice. The praxis of such consumption is based on constant concern about the results of consumption, which should be understood not only as an act of purchasing, but also as a way of coping with the product, the materials and the resources.

Evans and Jackson (2007, p.13) conclude that the category of lifestyle is based on “marking of style, difference, personhood and status (...) being turned to and joined with ethical agendas and (...) conducive to sustainability”. In reality, it means that people incorporate certain values and aims in their daily consumption practices, and change the patterns of their daily consumption into more sustainable ones.

Internalisation of ecological values turns consumers into more demanding and conscious market players; they are also less susceptible to mainstream consumption agendas, even though such attitude to shopping can make it a burdensome activity. Still, there are many factors to support the claim that, in many cases, pro-ecological and pro-social attitudes to consumption stem only from the ‘green’ fashion. In such cases, their actual ‘green’ effect is merely a positive side-effect of purchasing goods which are labelled and advertised as responsible and sustainable.

As the authors quoted above also argue, the increase in the demand for ecological food cannot be treated as a proof of a mass move towards conscious, ecological consumption.

Ecological goods, or articles marked with ‘bio-’, ‘eco-’ or other green phrases may serve as nothing more than just a ‘lifestyle accessory’, and environmental benefits are not necessarily intended by the consumer. “Ethical agendas are tended to as a by-product of lifestyle aesthetics” [Evans and Jackson, (2007), p.14]. Sustainable lifestyle should result from a motivation not to do any harm to oneself, to others or to the natural environment. It is easy to have a fake sustainable lifestyle, make it shallow, and promote it in a nice green package.

My research subjects have not displayed such attitudes. The transition towards sustainable style of consumption is closely connected with the redefinition of values and giving priority to ecological values over hedonistic ones; despite the fact that such mode of consumption involves resignation from many things, the subjective sense of quality of life among my research subjects has increased.

### 3 Sustainability discourse

Sustainable consumption appeared in a particular period of time. It seems that socially and ecologically-oriented consumption is the result of a few determinants. The research carried out by Inglehardt (1989) shows that the higher the sense of safety and the level of satisfying basic vital needs, the more likely it becomes that a man will turn to post-materialistic values, such as human rights, protection of the natural environment, health, or women rights.

Another, yet chronologically earlier source of sustainable consumption is environmental discourse. Doctrines, ideas and philosophies in which care about other living creatures came to the fore appeared quite early in the history of human thought, but it was not until the turn of the 20th century that the care about natural environment took on an institutionalised character, e.g., through granting to green areas the status of national parks or nature reserves.

Philosophies which to some degree paid attention to the ecosphere belong to the ancient religions of the Far East Buddhism and Hinduism, which are based on the rule of *ahimsa*<sup>1</sup>. In all likelihood, Plato, St. Paul and the first Christians were vegetarians. Also the Stoics called for a life in accordance with nature. In the laws ruling nature, they saw harmony, wisdom and order. Such life allowed a human being to participate in divine *logos*.

During the second half of the 18th century, Jean Jacques Rousseau demanded that humanity should return to its primitive state of nature since the progress of civilisation is responsible for the demise of humanity. At the same time, John Locke laid the ground for liberalism by granting to every human being an inalienable property right which objectifies nature and turns it into a tool serving people to achieve their goals and to expand their living space.

We can find the first symptoms of a global trend towards sustainable practices in the 19th century, in the popularity of the literature focusing on a relationship between the human and the environment. In this period, numerous volumes were published which belonged to ecological mainstream with well-articulated postulates of the environment protection, such as works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. In the 20th century, nature acquired a new meaning, that is an aesthetic one and, at the same time, the notion of nature entered the political discourse.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the proponent of the return to nature on ethical grounds, Schweitzer (1976, p.87), wrote about himself in *Ethics of Worshipping Life*: "I am the life which wants to live amongst life which desires to live", and laid the foundation of environmental mainstream in ethics. In 1949, *A Sound County Almanac* was published by Aldo Leopold (1949). The book discusses the problems of the relationship between people, land, animals and plants. Its author sees a human being as one of many users of the environment, who, like all other creatures, is a part of the ecosystem and is completely dependent on it.

In 1960s, social consciousness was awakened by the alarming results of UN reports on the progressing degradation of the environment. To the most striking ones belonged: U Thant's Report *The Problems of Human Environment* and numerous reports of the Club of Rome (established in 1968), such as *The Limits to Growth*, *Mankind at the Turning Point*, *Road Maps to the Future*, *The First Global Revolution*, *Crossing the Limits*, *The Report on Condition of the World*, and *At the Turn of a New Millennium*. Each of them raises the question of the exploitation of Earth resources at such speed that makes it impossible for them to renew in a natural way. If such economic exploitation is to continue, it can become a threat to the very existence of mankind. Such over-exploitation of natural resources has to be replaced by an alternative way of economic management so that economic activities could be harmonised with regenerative capacities of the ecosphere.

1970s gave rise to numerous pro-ecologically-oriented social movements. Arne Naess created the mainstream of deep-ecology, which can be regarded as the next stage of raising ecological awareness of societies through promoting equality of species (against speciesism) and incorporating its ideals into the political discourse.

Since 1975 the idea of eco-development was developed, supported by UN Environmental Protection Program; since 1987 the idea has been known as 'sustainable development'. Subsequent Earth Summits – in Kyoto in 1997 or in Johannesburg in 2002 – spread the idea of sustainable development in the media and in the public discourse.

Years 2005–2014 have been pronounced the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development; the main outcome of this undertaking should be education of societies, promoting the idea of economic, social and ecological interrelations. This concept is gradually becoming a wide-ranging, global project.

One of the activities in the interest of sustainable development in a society which is permeated with consumptionism must be the promotion of pro-socially and pro-ecologically-oriented sustainable consumption. Thanks to certain philosophies growing in popularity, and owing to the fact that certain issues regarding political activities aimed at ecological development entered the media discourse, the idea of sustainable development emerged in the social space, which undoubtedly has contributed to the reflection of citizens concerning their own actions and the consequences of shopping. Currently, consumers more and more often demand information about where the product has been made, under what conditions, and what the list of ingredients is. The departure from thoughtless and spontaneous consumption requires redefinition of needs and values, as well as far-reaching changes in everyday life practices.

In Poland, the turning point, when the shift towards reorientation of activities into more environment-friendly ones was started, was the collapse of communism in 1989. Until then, nature was being overstrained and treated as a tool in human hands. Right after the change of the political regime, not much was changed in this sense. I think that the strongest effect on the social ecological awareness was brought by the participation of Poland in the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and signing The Kyoto Protocol, and by the Polish accession to the European Union; the latter was connected with fulfilling one of the accession requirements, i.e., the implementation of the EU program Nature 2000 in year 2004. Ever since then, ecological issues have been present in the media discourse.

Despite reorientation of the world economy and politics towards the problems of sustainable development, so far no political party at any stage of its existence has based its own political program or political platform on the issues of sustainable development. It means that both ecology and sustainable development do not pose a substantial problem for Polish people, and those citizens for whom they are important still form the minority. The only political party for which inter-generational justice and solidarity really matter is the Green Party, which so far has not enjoyed electoral success. There are a few very active non-governmental organisations aiming at raising sustainable development awareness in relation to consumption, such as Polish Green Network, eFTe, Polish Humanitarian Action with the campaign for Responsible Fashion, and the Coalition for Fair Trade.

The awareness of one's own influence on the local environment seems to be quite high in Poland. In a survey carried out in 2008 (InE), 65% of the respondents stated that they were anxious about the condition of the environment. It may suggest that for 2/3 of the Polish society, ecological features of a product should be an important factor in the purchase decision-making process.

However, such awareness does not go hand in hand with the praxis, especially when the instinct of saving money is at play, i.e., when ecological products are more expensive than the non-ecological ones. In the years 2000 and 2008, nearly half of Polish people expressed an opinion that individual actions have influence on the environment (CBOS, 2000, 2008). Nonetheless, actual activities which are undertaken by Poles suggest that the main motivation behind pro-environmental behaviours is the condition of the domestic budget. The majority of consumers' practices aimed at lowering the carbon footprint are based on savings. Most commonly declared activities include saving water, gas and electricity. We have energy-saving electronic devices or mercury-free light-bulbs, and we limit the usage of plastic shopping bags. The number of people trying not to use plastic shopping bags in 2009 amounted to 60%, however, it could have been caused by a compulsory fee for such bags that was introduced one year earlier.

5% to 10% of the population is willing to pay extra for certified ecological products. When choosing a product, Polish people take into consideration mainly the price, the quality and the trademark. Only 11% of them pays attention to whether the product has been made with respect for the biosphere, and 9% takes into account ecological packaging (InE, 2008).

In 2000, 55% of Poles declared that they prefer products with the label which suggests lack of negative influence on the environment. Almost 45% stressed the importance of such certificate, whereas 14% declared that it is a priority for them when they do the shopping (CBOS, 2000). In the same year, 56% admitted that they avoid buying products harmful for the environment; in the year 2008, this percentage dropped to 36% (CBOS, 2008), and 55% of the respondents declared that they were able to recognise such environmentally harmful products (CBOS, 2000).

As the author of the Polish report points out, "the capacity to recognize labels informing about the lack of harmful influence on environment systematically improves. In the year 1993, the knowledge of this type of symbols was declared among 35% of the people surveyed, in 1997 – 44%, and in 2000 – 45%" (CBOS, 2000).

In the case of ecological farming, which is also connected with the well-being of natural environment, things do not look so optimistic. According to the data of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, an average Polish citizen spends on

average 2 Euro on organic food, whereas a German citizen spends 50 Euro on such products.

The above brief review of activities which can be described as environment-friendly allows us to draw some conclusions. First of all, Polish citizens are more interested in financial savings than in pro-environmental actions per se which should stem from the internalisation of ecological values. What is more, if such actions are undertaken, it is due to their simplicity and accessibility.

When more than just the superficial knowledge is involved, and in the case of a longer decision-making process, Polish citizens tend to depart from sustainable consumption. An average Polish citizen is a person who is interested in the problems of the ecosphere rather on the verbal level. The declared preference for socially and ecologically responsible products does not correspond with consumers' actual choices, since the Polish citizen does not want to pay extra for ecological qualities of a product. Poles look at the label in the search for information about harmfulness of packaging, but in fact any information provided by the producer will be accepted as sufficient and satisfying. Inscriptions such as 'ecological product', '100% natural', or 'organic food' successfully convince the buyers about their authenticity, despite the fact that they are nothing more but a mere decoration, and very often have nothing to do with the truth.

The phenomenon of green washing, aimed at people interested in green consumption but not determined enough to look for detailed information about products and producers, makes defining sustainable consumption and a sustainable lifestyle even harder. Incorporating 'sustainable development' values into everyday life practice seems to be something more than just a purchase of a product in a green packaging or with an inscription 'Fair Trade'.

A group of green and ethical consumers that is the subject of this research project is just a tiny group of the Polish society who have above-average knowledge regarding interdependent elements of the sequence 'production-consumption-utilisation', are aware of their influence on the natural environment and on the situation of local people employed at various stages of production, and wish to minimise their ecological footprint.

#### **4 Research methodology**

In 2008 and 2011, I carried out qualitative research on a group of people who declared interest in sustainable consumption and who were trying to incorporate elements of such consumption into their everyday life. The method of suitable sampling was used in order to exclude such persons who were only superficially interested in sustainable consumption, for whom main reasons for such practice were financial motives, fashion, conspicuous consumption, marking status, etc.

The main purpose of this project was identification of conscious consumption in Poland in a group of people with pro-ecological and pro-social attitudes. The research questions were aimed at providing information on the process of initiation and on daily life consumption matters (what is purchased, what does the decision making process look like). In 2008 and 2011, 18 in-depth individual interviews were carried out and one focus group interview with ten persons.

## **5 Initiation experience**

Defining a lifestyle in cultural categories requires an analysis of the process of initiation. Certain values, norms and knowledge may be internalised in the process of primary socialisation, whereas others are acquired through participation in the social life. The data I gathered suggest that there exist two paths leading to the initiation of practicing sustainable consumption. Its elements could have been practiced at home, or could have acquired value in the adult life of the respondent.

The first path could be explained by the period of communism. My respondents were born and passed their childhood (or youth) under the communist regime. Access to merchandise was very limited, so managing material goods had to be based on prolonging the life cycle of a given product. Even now in Poland there exist repair points for all sorts of household appliances, electronic equipment, clothes, etc. The shortage of cars forced people to use public transport. The limited access to consumer goods resulted in a small amount of waste; people extensively relied on returnable glass bottles, which disappeared altogether with the transition to capitalism. After the year 1989, the shopping habits of Poles, which in times of communism were limited due to structural and political reasons, entered the stage of thoughtless and excessive consumption.

Although various reasons lie behind the modern-day interest in social and ecological problems, they can be classified into two categories. The first category includes reasons independent from the individual, and very often accidental. The other category groups more subjective factors, resulting from the care about oneself.

One of the interviewed persons describes the first contact with pro-environmental ideas, referring to a conversation with an accidentally met stranger:

“Some time ago I met a man. I wanted to give him a sandwich and he asked what was inside it, and refused it [it contained cold cuts – AN]. I started to ask him questions, a discussion started and then I realized that I had never thought about it in the way he did (...) [after a while – A.N.] we watched a movie [about food production – A.N.]. I knew in some sense that in terms of animals exploitation, milk production is nothing good. It was hard for me to give up on the taste of cheese. The taste and comfort were the most important to me. (...) I can honestly say that the movie was really moving. And then, it became more important to me than the taste of cheese from which I didn’t want to resign and which I really miss even up till now. It became the most important to me not to contribute to industrial farming, to such way of raising animals.”

The next quote shows that sustainable consumption is another stage after the change of diet, mainly caused by poor health. It also happens that the shift towards conscious consumption is caused by a chain reaction:

“I think that it took me some time to have grown to it, because on one hand, when it comes to food I was trying to buy organic food, taking care about my own health. On the other hand, (...) for several years, I’ve been dealing with such form of charity help for kids from African countries. Fair trade is such a natural consequence, because if I help the kid so that he wouldn’t starve and could learn (...) I think that (...) fair trade is such an idea; a fishing rod instead of fish. It has caused an interaction in the form of a consumer’s approach.”

Employment serves as another stimulus. It is the working environment, taking up a job in a non-governmental organisation or a magazine that triggers focusing attention on the problems of sustainable development. Having access to international sources, or publishing articles and reports provokes searching for information, widening one’s



knowledge and reflecting on the current state of the world in the context of one's own consumption practices. "I have heard about these issues before, but didn't pay attention to them, not until I started to work for a magazine related to corporate responsibility".

Work environment serves as an important source of detailed information regarding the producers, quality of production, facts connected with employment, quality of work, information such as what can be consumed and what should not be consumed, the ingredients and the origin of products. Thanks to work, "I have better access to the information, for example about where such things can be found and this is why I can be sure that these things have been fairly produced", explains one of the interviewed women.

The category of subjective and self-oriented reasons is connected mainly with the care about one's own health. "I had serious health issues. I had to change the diet drastically and become vegetarian. It was only a matter of time for the shift to happen. The shift from taking care of myself to taking care of animals by refusing to eat them, and finally to seeing all my daily actions as related to the environment. It started to make sense in the context of my life. I did not want to harm others anymore". Very often healthy eating and purchasing ecological products which are grown without the use of pesticides is being rationalised in a wider context. Benefits are seen not only in the context of improving one's own quality of life but also in terms of caring for the environment.

One respondent, asked about the reason for such consumption practice, answered: "Because of the respect for the world, (...) ecology and nature, for the workers. (...) and for myself, I simply don't want to eat rubbish". Eating local food is usually connected with the conviction that we are choosing the products of better quality, with a lower ecological footprint; it is also linked with the economic situation and treated as a form of supporting small Polish producers. Consumption takes on a political dimension. The interviewed people declare constant preference for local and seasonal food over the allegedly nicer and cheaper imported products. Local products can be easily found at marketplaces and farmers' markets. They can also be purchased in traditional shops, but in such cases the country of origin is not always marked, for example in the case of vegetables.

A person living in a town that has its own food processing plant says, "I only buy products of this company. All my town is employed there. If I stop, my neighbors could lose their jobs. Besides, these are very tasty products, quite natural and at a reasonable price". In the case of such decision, not only the ecological footprint is important (which is reduced thanks to the shortening of the transportation distance), but also the awareness that shopping can support local economy and, most frequently, small producers and suppliers.

## **6 Natural resources**

One of the most frequent manifestations of sustainable consumption is the care for natural resources, such as gas, water, and crude oil, and the management of electricity consumption. Undertaking activities in this area varies with regard to the priority which is given to one of the natural resources and the ease of performing additional activities, which usually involve further work.

Most commonly, such practices are applied as cooking with the usage of a lid, reducing consumption of water during boiling, using the same water a few times to perform various activities, “all the dishes which can be used once more, for example a mug, to which I have poured water, I will use once more. I don’t wash it but I use it once more to do something in the kitchen. If for example I’m cooking (...) I use two pots, one mug and one spoon for it and later I load all this into a dishwasher (...)”.

Another person adds, “it happens that when I wash my hair I rinse it over a bowl. Later I use this water to flush the toilet. But I don’t do it too often”. Other practices involve choosing a shower instead of taking a bath, turning the tap off during brushing teeth, switching off all sorts of equipment instead of using a stand-by mode, etc.

There is a group of people who decide to commute to and from work or school using public transport or a bicycle. “I go to work with a colleague, male or female, who has a car and gives a lift to a few persons; usually we have a full car. We share a car so it’s cheaper, more economical and ecological for everyone”, as one of the interviewed women describes the organisation of commuting to work.

With regard to sustainable management of non-renewable resources. Two ways of rationalisation were observed as well as two kinds of practices. One of them assumes the diminution of ecological footprint through reduction of thoughtless behaviours within the household. The other one does not concentrate on giving too much attention to every performed activity but focuses on sustainable management within the institutional and nation-wide frames.

The first group includes such activities as the above mentioned reduction of usage and a tendency to reuse. Both orientations are characterised by understanding the influence of individual actions on the condition of natural environment and by willingness to achieve a certain pro-environmental alternative, but the first group emphasises reorientation of daily practices and the sense of responsibility for one’s actions.

The other orientation is based on a more holistic approach and on accumulated results of frugal management of resources on a nation-wide scale. According to people who subscribe to such view, it is better to invest in an energy saving dishwasher or washing machine and to use them only when they are fully loaded than to focus too much attention on each and every small activity (such as saving water through reusing it). Practices based on focusing a lot of attention on every small activity lead to specialisation, which consumes a lot of time and energy.

One of the interviewed persons expresses his opinion about the people focused on detail-oriented sustainable practices, saying

“I wonder if perhaps other spheres of life escape the attention of this lady if she is so preoccupied trying not to waste even one drop of water. I understand the reason why she is doing it, because there is a global problem with drinking water. But the main problem regards the distribution of water, not the way we use it. The fact that we have saved 2 litres of water per day will have no influence on the situation of people living in Africa, who suffer from the shortage of water. (...) it’s worth thinking about such practices and consider whether or not it makes sense to go into so much detail, and about the necessity to remember about them (...)”

These two approaches are characterised by two different ways of understanding the quality of life. Some people find joy and fulfilment, being able to gain tangible control over their own consumption and its negative results in the form of produced waste. The

other group of people rather tends to focus on large-scale, higher-effectiveness activities, such as installing double acting float valves or water saving taps. Such activities aim at saving time, having more serious global impact and maintaining high quality of life, understood as using the latest technological developments in order to generate more leisure time that can be devoted to fulfilling other necessities of life (such as spending time with the family or going on a trip outside the city).

## **7 Reduce, reuse, recycle**

3R rule is already a familiar slogan of organisations and movements promoting awareness of sustainable consumption. This rule is being practiced by my research subjects with lots of devotion and understanding. The group of respondents in question take numerous steps in order to limit consumption, reuse materials and recycle them. The most frequent claims are the following: “Generally, I am quite moderate when it comes to shopping.” (tad) or “I generally buy very little”.

Apart from the reduction of consumption as such, the interviewed people gave examples of more specialised activities, such as printing on both sides or preparing handmade paper craft objects. One person says: “I collect scraps, wrapping paper, other packaging and cardboard. Later I make special occasion cards from them. It’s a nice and interesting way of giving new life to objects”.

The reduction of the amount of shopping is connected with buying second-hand goods. Purchasing clothes at second-hand shops is valued positively. My interlocutors feel satisfaction when they manage to find, at a good price, a product which meets their aesthetic requirements. Shopping at second-hand shops is perceived as an example of good practice of sustainable consumption. The values that result from it are directly connected with the values encompassed by the idea of sustainable development.

The following quote can serve as a good summary of such approach:

“(…) I feel better when I know that if I need something, I can buy a second-hand good, I know that I do not contribute to production of a new thing, I can use something that someone else doesn’t need, but that is still in a good condition and can be used for a few more years; it can be fixed and is still good to be used, instead of being thrown away. (...) I feel much better when I have less. I even donate my beloved books to a library right after reading them.” (Aga).

Another interviewed woman distances herself from excessive consumption by making her own clothes. “I know how to sew, I have access to organic cotton, so whenever I can, I sew my own clothes, of my own design” (focus).

It happens that unnecessary electronic devices are being taken to or left at a repair point. Another practice is taking unnecessary electronic devices to the repair points where they will be taken apart so that spare parts could be reused.

As far as methods of shopping for food or home cleaning products are concerned, it is clear that the respondents try to limit waste before shopping. The product is selected with detailed precision. The respondents not only look for preservatives in food ingredients, but they are also very well informed about their scientific counterparts.

What also seems apparent is that Polish sustainable consumers will try to avoid a product ‘together with a trash-package’. “I will not buy facial cream if it is packaged in a carton box, or wrapped in a foil with a ribbon on top(...)”, one person says. The

knowledge that the easiest material to recycle is white glass caused that the most choices were based on that detail, and on the local (or nearby) origin of product.

Recycling of waste, goods and equipment is so deeply rooted in the consciousness and practices of the interviewed people that it was not described in the interviews as a problem. It was so obvious for my research subjects that the issue needed no additional explanation. Recycling was understood as an undisputed obligation.

## **8 Conclusions**

The interviewed group can be labelled as 'citizen consumers'. Their daily shopping is not only determined by the need to satisfy basic vital needs, but is constantly accompanied by the awareness of a connection between shopping and well-being of the natural environment, and of the association between an individual purchase decision and the national or even global economy – and their own health. The care about the ecosphere is directly linked with the care about the quality of the consumed products and the limitation of excessive consumption.

The consumers demonstrated wide and specialist knowledge of global interdependencies in the context of consumption. Understanding the role and the importance of individual decisions in ensuring the well-being of the atmosphere, and seeing the role of fair trade products, they had undertaken a wide range of activities aimed at limiting their individual contribution to the pollution of the natural environment, and at reducing the hardship of the people employed in the countries of the Global South, who produce goods for the western markets.

Their lifestyle appears to be a complex of practices supported by ecological awareness and strong identification with ecological and humanitarian values. The praxis of such mode of consumption (which is more demanding, since in many instances it requires a revolutionary change in the way of shopping and using goods) often involves certain limitations of everyday life activities. Yet, the subjective sense of quality of life still remains at a high level, despite the difficulties that responsible buyers may encounter in the Polish reality.

The research concentrated mostly on the routinised consumption, practices, justifications and hedonism, but a few class-related conclusions can also be made. The habitus did not always play a role in such practices. There was a group who declared to have learned their practices at home, but other groups were introduced to the idea of sustainable consumption later on in life, by peers or co-workers. The level of education cannot be a distinctive feature, either, since the interviewees varied from higher education (PhD and MA) to high school and vocational schools graduates. The professions performed by the respondents also varied, from highly professional, white collar to semi-skilled.

However, women interviewees were higher in number than men, and tended to declare that the shopping decisions were not usually only their decisions. Neither did economic capital play a significant role in sustainable awareness. Sustainable consumption was seen not only as a shopping activity but also as a proper use of resources. In that case, sustainable use of natural resources was seen as a good way of supporting the family budget. It is important to state that it was not savings that were the primary reason for this practice. It was the idea, which also has a pleasant side effect of

lower bills to pay. Regarding the collected information, the notion of Polish sustainable lifestyle seems to be driven by cultural aspects, rather than by the class-related factors.

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## Notes

- 1 Ahinsa is a rule of not harming any living being.