

Ethical Consumption and Its Development in Contemporary Society

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In the paper, the subject matter of deliberations is the ethical approach to consumption. The author discusses the issue of ethical consumption, which is perceived as a subject and means of moral action. Three approaches to defining ethical consumption are described. In the first one, ethical consumption is seen in relation to consumer goods with an ethical value. In the second one, consumer practices are analysed from the perspective of ethics. The final one illustrates the ties between political activity and being a responsible consumer. The following question is posed: Is the concept of ethical consumption merely an idea propagated by scientists or a real perspective for change in terms of consumption? In order to answer that question, the results of empirical research on the scope and degree of prevalence of ethical consumption in various communities are analysed. This review reveals that significant potential exists for the attitudes characteristic of ethical consumption among consumers, with simultaneous existence of differences between particular communities.

Keywords: consumption, ethical consumption, socially responsible consumption, consumer.

Konsumpcja etyczna i jej rozwój we współczesnym społeczeństwie

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W artykule przedmiotem rozważań uczyniono podejście etyczne do konsumpcji. Autor podejmuje refleksję nad konsumpcją etyczną, którą ujmuje jako przedmiot i środek moralnego działania. Opisuje trzy podejścia w definiowaniu konsumpcji etycznej. W pierwszym ujmuje konsumpcję etyczną w relacji do dóbr konsumpcyjnych posiadających zasób etyczny. W drugim analizuje się praktyki konsumenckie z perspektywy etyki. W trzecim uwypukla powiązania między aktywnością polityczną a byciem odpowiedzialnym konsumentem. Stawia pytanie: czy konsumpcja etyczna to jedynie idea propagowana przez naukowców czy też realna perspektywa zmian w konsumpcji? W celu odpowiedzi na to pytanie analizuje wyniki badań empirycznych zakresu i stopnia występowania konsumpcji etycznej w różnych społeczeństwach. Z ich przeglądu wynika, że występuje znaczny potencjał postaw charakterystycznych dla etycznej konsumpcji wśród konsumentów, przy czym występują różnice między poszczególnymi społeczeństwami.

Słowa kluczowe: konsumpcja, konsumpcja etyczna, społecznie odpowiedzialna konsumpcja, konsument.

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1. Introduction

Discussions about sustainable development cover consumption patterns that are alternative to consumerism and aim to reduce the risks to the natural and social environment. One of them is ethical consumption. The literature concerning ethical issues in consumption distinguishes the ethics of consumption and ethical consumption (Newholm, Barnett, & Cafaro, 2005). The former is critical of consumerism from the perspective of ethics. The entire economic system is subjected to moral judgement, from production through distribution to consumption. At the same time, the focus of analysis is on consumption as an object of moral evaluation. In the ethics of consumption, important areas of discussion include environmental protection, anti-consumption movements, and politicisation of consumption. Ethical consumption, on the other hand, sees consumption as a subject and means of moral action. The point of this approach is well reflected by the concept developed by M. A. Starr (2009), who argues that people purchase and consume products not only for personal reasons but also because of what is right and good in a moral sense. Consumers use their purchasing power not solely to enhance their personal well-being but also to promote a moral or political attitude to consumption stimulated by the consumption culture, defying concepts of the consumer as a “private economic hedonist” (Varul, 2009). These two approaches, although disjunct at many points, complement each other, which allows a broader look at the place and role of the ethical dimension of consumption in today’s societies. The article focuses on the analysis of ethical consumption. The author seeks to answer the research question: Is ethical consumption a significant orientation in consumption or a temporary fashion of some consumer groups? In order to answer this question, the relevant literature is critically analysed with the use of a deductive approach and the method of diagnostic survey with inductive reasoning.

2. Ethical Consumption

Discussions about the directions of changes in consumption cover the development of consumption oriented towards ethical values. While making purchase decisions, consumers take into account ethical values such as social responsibility, respect for human rights, animal welfare, care for the natural environment, etc. These behaviours can be referred to as ethical consumption. Thus, what is consumption oriented towards ethical values? The literature contains three definitional approaches to this concept. First, ethical consumption is perceived in relation to specific ethical consumer goods. In this meaning, ethical issues are analysed in the context of sustainable environmental development, consumer responsibility for the environment, animal welfare, fair trade, and respect for human rights in the production

of goods. Secondly, the definitions of ethical consumption put emphasis on it being viewed as a means of action in various consumer practices, for example shopping, consumption, wastage and destruction of goods, and post-consumption waste. Thirdly, ethical consumption is construed as the area of implementation of policy goals in everyday consumption. It is associated with the diversity of social organisations acting for consumers, including: ethical trade organisations, organisations campaigning for fair trade, cooperative movements, campaigns boycotting companies or products produced in an unethical manner.

The first approach stresses responsibility as an ethical value of consumption. It is understood as consumer choices based on knowledge about their social, environmental and political consequences (Zalega, 2013). As in the case of producers, where the concept of socially responsible business is being developed, the idea of a socially responsible consumer has also emerged in the area of consumption. F. E. Webster (1975, p. 188) was one of the pioneers to define such a consumer, highlighting the importance of awareness of social problems arising from consumption. According to him, socially conscious consumers are those who take into account social consequences of their individual consumption or strive to use their purchasing power to trigger a positive social change. L. A. Mohr, D. J. Webb and K. E. Harris (2001) elaborated the concept of a socially responsible consumer, pointing to how important it is to be aware of the effects of consumption of goods when making decisions about the purchase of a given product. When acquiring, consuming or using a product, the consumer aims to minimise or eliminate any harmful effects and maximise a long-term favourable influence of purchased consumer goods on the natural and social environment. Y. Gabriel and T. Lang (1995, pp. 175–176), while defining a socially responsible consumer, also put emphasis on awareness, yet in a broader sense. In their view, responsible consumers think ahead and limit their desires as they are aware that actions must be morally justified and that they sometimes have to sacrifice their personal interest for the benefit of the society. Therefore, it can be assumed that socially responsible consumers are those whose actions on the consumer market are morally justified and who are ready to give up their consumption needs where their satisfaction is harmful to the natural and social environment.

Consumers implement the idea of socially responsible consumption primarily in relations with other consumers. These relations can take either an organised or non-organised form. In the first case, consumer cooperatives emerge that are focused on the consumption of specific goods and bring people together. For consumers, cooperation is a means of exerting a real impact on the supply chain; they can control the origin and quality of the products they buy because they are co-owners of a cooperative. Consumer cooperatives are sometimes informal food cooperatives where food production, distribution and consumption is informal, hence these groups do not

pay value added tax, do not have operating authorisations, do not comply with the established sanitary standards and do not possess official certificates (Dentoni & Lorenzo, 2014). Another form of consumer cooperation is collaborative consumption. According to research by Wardak and Zalega (2013, p. 23), Poles most often declare their willingness to share their products, for instance to lend various items to their neighbours (e.g. gardening tools) and rent their flats or rooms on a peer-to-peer basis. There is also the potential for redistribution of used products with the value in use, for example exchange of clothes, books, films or other items.

Another area of socially responsible consumption is the acquisition of products with an ethical element. When making purchase decisions, socially responsible consumers consider the ethical attributes of products, namely how harmful raw and other materials used to manufacture a product are, how a product was manufactured. The assessment of whether a product is ethical is significantly influenced by the amount of energy used to produce it, the volume of recycled materials, a low level of contamination and pollution, and the use of biodegradable raw materials. Such consumers also take into account the ethical conduct of the producer towards stakeholders: employees, suppliers, customers, and the social environment.

The natural environment is a vital area of socially responsible consumption. It is assumed that consumers exploiting the natural environment are responsible for it. Therefore, they should anticipate the consequences of their actions on the consumer market. Another sphere of socially responsible consumption is the local community, where one of actions is the acquisition of local products related to the local culture, the so-called consumer localism. In this case, an important motive is consumer ethnocentrism, which reflects the belief that it is the consumer's moral obligation to buy local products (Wątroba, 2006, p. 83).

Under the second approach to defining ethical consumption, consumer practices are examined from the perspective of ethics. According to A. Crane and D. Matten (2007), ethical consumption essentially involves a conscious and deliberate decision to choose consumer goods because of moral beliefs and ethical values. Ethical behaviours include conduct whereby the consumer is guided by ethical values at each stage of the consumption process. At the acquisition stage, information about the ethical content of products matters. The ethical element of the product means that it is "fairly" produced and biologically neutral to the natural environment (Byłok, 2013). D. Doane (2000) believes that an ethical product is one produced in an ethical manner (in accordance with human rights, decent working conditions, environmental protection, etc.), which has a significant bearing on individual consumer decisions. Thus, a consumer good is not solely a physical reflection of the idea of economic benefits but contains an ethical element. Producers do not only manufacture goods in a physical way but also generate their symbolic meanings containing ethical elements. For example, the Mercedes

car maker advertises its product as safe, one where a father can leave his sleeping child and be certain that the child is out of danger or a chocolate producer communicates that its product contains much milk and cocoa, so it good for children's health (Priddat, 2006, p. 12). The ethical dimension of a consumer good can affect consumer choices. This is the case when consumers take into account the moral side of consumer goods when choosing the means of fulfilling their needs. As indicated by the research carried out by E. H. Creyer and W. T. Ross (1997), consumers expect companies to behave ethically towards their stakeholders and are willing to pay higher prices for ethically made products. When ethical consumers learn about unethical behaviours of producers, they refrain from buying their products.

At the consumption stage, consumers follow consumption patterns associated with ethical values. This applies mainly to so-called organic food without artificial additives, preservatives, etc. Among the attributes of organic food, what matters is its safety, notably health and environmental safety (Śmiechowska, 2011).

At the last stage, namely post-consumption waste generation, concern for the natural environment, for example waste segregation and treatment, is important (Cichy & Sobczyk, 2014).

The third approach defines ethical consumption by combining political activity with being a responsible consumer. Actions in the sphere of politicised consumption are sometimes paradoxical – they are “individualised collective actions” (Micheletti, 2003, p. 24) that have evolved into political consumerism. It is a social movement driven by the interests of consumers and intended to provide them with better information, protection, rights and guarantees. Consumerism seeks to strengthen the rights and position of buyers in relations with sellers (Antonides & van Raaij, 2003, p. 107). This concerns participation in consumer organisations, consumer movements or consumer boycotts. Consumer organisations usually undertake actions concerning the protection of consumer rights, product safety, producers' responsibility for their products, consumer credits and unfair contracts. In addition to institutional activities, these organisations continually educate consumers, which is an information and advisory activity regarding the rationalisation of consumer needs and processes related to the use of possessed consumer goods (Kieźel, 1999, p. 229).

Consumer movements have different goals, with their common denominator being the promotion of moderate consumption. They can be divided into three types: green consumerism, ethical consumerism, and anti-consumption movements. Green consumerism claims that consumers can counteract environmental degradation in various ways, from buying environmentally friendly products to reducing consumption in general. This movement points to the negative effects of overly developed individualism and thinking in terms of one's own interest.

The second type of consumer movements, ethical consumerism, makes people aware of the global consequences of excessive consumption, pays attention to the conditions in which products are made and to product composition, and promotes companies that respect human and employee rights (Lewicka-Strzałecka, 2003, p. 136). It assumes that consumers buying a product of a specific manufacturer express their support for the conditions in which the product is manufactured, distributed, used and disposed of. Consumer choices are treated as political choices because they are equivalent to deciding who will remain on the market. By endorsing a specific company, namely by purchasing its products, consumers ensure its market presence. It is suggested that consumers should choose only those companies that apply the principles of corporate social responsibility in practice. As a result, consumer associations try to inform consumers about companies that take ethical considerations into account. For example, consumer organisations such as the New Consumer and the Ethical Consumer Research Association assess companies according to different criteria: working conditions, attitude to women and minorities, impact on the natural environment, charitable activities, animal experimentation, arms contracts, activities for the local community, etc. (Lewicka-Strzałecka, 2003, pp. 132–138).

Anti-consumption movements are based on the shift from consumption forms characteristic of the Western lifestyle to environmentally friendly forms (Black & Cherrier, 2010). They may involve voluntary simplicity in consumption (Voluntary Simplicity Movement) promoting reduced material consumption and a change of the existing lifestyle in favour of a lifestyle relying on simplicity, namely limited acquisition of many unnecessary consumer goods (Ballantine & Creery, 2009). In general, the movement is committed to the acquisition of goods in smaller amounts and alternative consumption options, for example the use of second-hand goods, and places emphasis on the usefulness rather than quantity of purchased goods, the exchange of goods and services between consumers resulting in new channels of their mutual communication, and the development of consumer communities.

One of the forms of ethical consumers' activity is participation in collective political actions usually undertaken to influence unethical companies through consumer boycotts. They involve a refusal to buy unethical products or products of companies recognised as unethical. Consumer boycotts can have multiple causes. One of them is environmental protection. An example of a boycott of products due to their environmental harmfulness was the Greenpeace campaign to force Nestlé to stop using palm oil that came from palm plantations in areas made arable through logging rainforests where orangutans lived. That organisation discouraged consumers from buying KitKat bars, using the slogan "*Have a break? Give orangutans a break*".¹ As a result of that boycott, some consumers worldwide decided not to buy the bars, leading to losses to the producer and putting an end to the use of palm oil from that region by Nestlé. Another reason for boycotts is

unethical behaviour of some global corporations towards their employees. An example is the campaign against Coca-Cola entitled “*Campaign to stop Killer Coke, Murder... It’s the Real Thing*”, which accused the company of abuses against workers and even kidnap, tortures and murders of trade union activists in the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Indonesia.²

What determines the approach to ethical consumption is moral relativism leading to short-lived and unpredictable moral judgements and behaviours of individuals (Mariański, 2008, p. 219). Consumers seem to be ethically selective instead of behaving ethically in the entire area of consumption. Consumers adopt different attitudes towards various unethical products and behaviours. In the case of products associated with fashion and social position (e.g. clothing, footwear and cosmetics), the brand image takes precedence over ethical criteria. Consumers do not boycott unethical producers of well-known brands who outsource production to developing countries, for instance Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, where employees are exploited and work in conditions that are dangerous to their health. On the other hand, they use various forms of boycott in the case of food products made unethically (e.g. the use of GMOs, unethical killing of animals, unethical handling of animals, the use of antibiotics).

3. Ethical Consumption in the Light of Research

The concept of ethical consumption provokes a discussion among researchers, where its critics and supporters can be distinguished. Critics point to its limitations, emphasising its small range. For example, A. Lewicka-Strzałecka believes that “*an ethical consumer is a theoretical construct that rarely finds its representations in reality*” (2015, p. 5). T. M. Devinney, A. P. Eckhardt and M. Giana (2006) are also sceptical about it, writing that the latest evidence suggests that consumers do not attach much weight to ethical issues when making purchase decisions.

In turn, supporters of the concept of ethical consumption stress its potential related to the pursuit of changes in current consumption through moderate acquisition of new goods and the search and consumption of products that are friendly to the social and natural environment.

In attempting to decide who is right, it is advisable to analyse the results of empirical research on people’s behaviours and attitudes towards ethical consumption. Numerous studies indicate that consumers, while making decisions, pay increasing attention to the ethical components of products and their manufacturing processes. For instance, a report on the prevalence of ethical consumption in the UK prepared by Triodos Bank (2017) shows that overall sales of ethical goods and services reached 81.3 billion pounds in 2017. The analysis of purchasing behaviour conditioned by ethical values provides interesting knowledge. One of the ethical values is concern for animal welfare reflected as the avoidance of animal products.

The value of vegetarian products sold in 2017 was 630 million pounds. Ethical trade is another important ethical value. The sales of products with a Fair Trade label amounted to 1,608 thousand pounds. The sales of clothing with ethical certificates also increased to 36 million pounds. Annual research on the value of ethical products sold indicates its continuous growth, which confirms the spreading interest in ethical products among UK consumers.

Other studies also point to increased interest in ethical consumption among consumers. The results of a GMI survey conducted in 2005 in the USA, UK, India, Australia, Canada and Western European countries showed that 54% of consumers would be willing to pay more for eco-friendly or ethical-trade products (Devinney, Eckhardt & Giana 2006, p. 4). A small increase in the price of an ethical product would be acceptable to participants in a survey carried out by Cone Communications in 2013 in a sample of 10 thousand consumers from 10 biggest countries in the world. Research showed that 91% of consumers would be inclined to switch from a particular brand to one that could contribute to a good cause should a similar price and quality be maintained, 92% would buy an ethical product if they could, and more than two thirds of consumers claimed to have made such a purchase within the previous year (Lewicka-Strzalecka, 2015, p. 5).

In Poland, the inclination to pay more for ethical products is weaker than that presented by the results of research in Western European countries. The Polish Green Network research report suggests that only 24% of respondents would be willing to pay more for clothing, footwear and accessories produced in an ethical way. Their price could increase by 5 to 10%, with 20% of respondents claiming that this figure could stand at as much as 10–25%. As regards electronics, the accepted price increase should not exceed 10%. In the case of ethical food, the optimal increase is between 5% and 10%. The price of ethically produced toys could rise by the same percentage (Polska Zielona Sieć, 2010). In Poland, there is a marginal proportion of consumers who pay attention to information on compliance with employee rights/human rights in apparel factories and eco and/or social labelling (e.g. Fairtrade certificate, Ecolabel) indicating that the product is eco-friendly and/or comes from Fair Trade (*ibidem*).

Ethical consumption involves specific behaviours including socially responsible consumption. Interesting results are provided by Special Eurobarometer reporting on a survey concerning, among others, consumption that is socially responsible towards the natural and social environment (European Commission, 2017). One of the forms of care for the natural environment is segregation of waste. Waste is most often segregated, that is separated for recycling, by consumers in Sweden (87%), the Netherlands (82%), France (81%) and Slovenia (81%), which is done least often by people in Bulgaria (17%), Romania (29%), Croatia (44%) and Lithuania (45%). In Poland, half of consumers declare that they segregate waste. The

actions for reducing the negative effects of consumption on the natural environment include reduced consumption of electricity and water. In the European Union, consumers report varying degrees of energy consumption reduction. Energy saving is most frequently declared by consumers in the Netherlands (52%) and Sweden (49%), while only 14% of Slovaks and 15% of Croatians have cut their energy consumption. In Poland, 24% of consumers claim to have decreased energy consumption.

Slightly fewer consumers in Europe reduce water consumption. The highest percentages were reported for Belgium (38%), Spain, France and Luxembourg (37% each), whereas this proportion in Lithuania and Estonia is only one in ten consumers. In Poland, 27% of consumers declare reducing water consumption.

Another form of behaviour focused on the care for the natural environment is the replacement of energy-intensive household appliances with more energy-efficient equipment. In the EU countries, consumers most commonly replace old energy-intensive devices with new ones with better energy performance in Denmark (50%), followed by Slovenia (48%) and Malta (45%). In Poland, only 26% of consumers declare such behaviour.

Behaviours that are socially responsible towards the natural environment comprise the purchase of low-emission cars. Yet, these are occasional behaviours in most EU countries. Most low-emission cars were bought by consumers in Belgium (11%), Denmark (10%) and Malta (10%). In Poland, only 4% of consumers reported such purchasing behaviour. This type of behaviour encompasses less frequent driving and choosing public transport, a bicycle or a walk instead. The Eurobarometer survey reveals that it was most frequently practised by respondents from Sweden (55%), the Netherlands (50%) and Finland (42%). Consumers in Portugal (8%) and Cyprus (10%) least often travelled in this way. In Poland, 21% of respondents choose this form. Consumers sometimes decided to drive a smaller car, in particular when commuting to work. Those from the Netherlands (32%) and Sweden (31%) most often used a smaller car to commute to work. On the other hand, respondents in Portugal (4%), Slovakia, Cyprus and Lithuania (9%) did so least frequently. In Poland, 10% of respondents say that they choose a smaller car to commute to work.

Consumer awareness of eco-labels is important in socially responsible consumption. Most European countries promote the idea of placing such labels on product packaging. The Eurobarometer survey asked respondents about the role of eco-labels in their purchase decisions. In the EU countries, around one third of those surveyed (32%) say that an eco-label matters to them when they make purchase decisions, while a quarter (25%) state that it is not important to them. Another 39% claim they never pay attention to labels. Attitudes towards eco-labels differ significantly depending on the country. Most consumers consider eco-labels when shopping in Sweden (70%) and Denmark (57%), while this least often happens in Bulgaria

(12%), the Czech Republic and Portugal (17% each). In Poland, 20% of consumers claim that an eco-label is important, 35% report that it does not play a significant role, while 40% have never paid attention to eco-labels (European Commission, 2017). The research by A. Żelazna-Blicharz (2013) on the knowledge of labels on product packaging in Poland reveals that it is possible to distinguish a group of consumers who pay attention to producers and declare their knowledge of eco-labels.

Summarising the results of the research on socially responsible behaviour of consumers presented in the Eurobarometer, it can be concluded that there are considerable differences between the old EU countries and new members. Consumers in the post-socialist countries less frequently behave in line with ethical consumption, notably reduce consumption of energy, water, car use or sort waste. In Poland, just like in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe belonging to the EU, consumers have a limited preference for behaviours characteristic of ethical consumption.

In Poland, research on socially responsible behaviours of consumers generally indicates a greater number of people declaring such behaviours than the data presented in the Eurobarometer. For example, the results of my research conducted with a team on "*Kompetencje konsumentów jako stimulanta innowacyjnych zachowań i zrównoważonej konsumpcji*"³ (Consumers' Competencies as a Stimulator of Innovative Behaviours and Sustainable Consumption) and based on respondents' declarations indicate that Poles most often sort waste as part of the behaviours characteristic of socially responsible consumption (Table 1). A high percentage of declarations concerning waste segregation may result from the introduction of the Act on Waste Management in Poland, which increased such behaviours and the awareness of post-consumption waste segregation. Further reported behaviours characteristic of socially responsible consumption included not discarding fully valuable and consumable food, shopping with a reusable bag and giving away unnecessary things to other people. The results presented in Table 1 point out that many consumers claim to care for the natural environment. Respondents relatively rarely reported participation in collective actions for the natural environment, for example in local pro-environmental campaigns (such as Earth Day, cleaning forests or the nearest neighbourhood). This inactivity is typical of Poles, who relatively rarely declare participation in pro-social activities (CBOS, 2014).

Similar results were obtained in the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) (2011) studies on the prevalence of eco-friendly behaviours. Segregation of household waste is definitely the most important from the perspective of such behaviours. Nearly three quarters (74%) say that they sort household waste. Another form of behaviour is the avoidance of buying products that are harmful to the environment. Almost three quarters of respondents (72%) claimed that they avoided shopping for such goods.

Type of behaviour	Frequency		
	Never	Rarely	Often
Discarding food past its use-by date	47	50	3
Discarding fully valuable and consumable food	82	17	1
Sorting waste (separating glass, plastic, paper from other waste)	7	12	81
Keeping taps open while washing dishes	30	39	31
Keeping household appliances/electronic devices in the standby mode – switched on	22	35	43
Shopping with a reusable bag (eco-friendly bag)	9	21	70
Refusing to take the purchased item in a disposable plastic bag in shops	41	40	20
Giving away unnecessary things (e.g. clothes, books) to other people	4	24	72
Printing or using the overleaf of sheets of paper with only one page used	23	37	40
Choosing to drive a car although easy or faster public transport exists	30	38	32
Co-financing or being a member of non-governmental environmental organisations/campaigns	61	33	6
Participating in a local pro-environmental campaign (such as Earth Day, cleaning forests or the nearest neighbourhood).	61	33	6

Tab. 1. Frequency of eco-friendly behaviours (%). Source: The author's research carried out with a team.

Consumers' declarations that they pay attention to the organic origin of products and are ready to change their shopping habits in favour of the environment prove that consumption patterns that are socially responsible towards the natural environment could become widespread in Poland. In Poland, a relatively large percentage of consumers state that they consider organic origin when purchasing products (69% of respondents). If we take into account socio-demographic characteristics of consumers, men (71%) aged 60 and more (81%) who have completed secondary education (72%) are relatively more often attentive to the environmental performance of products. Such an attitude is least frequently exhibited by young people aged 18–29 (64%) who have completed higher education (65%). In turn, readiness to change shopping habits is declared by 84% of the Poles surveyed, with 46% of respondents firmly expressing the willingness to do so. A detailed

analysis of this indicator from the perspective of socio-demographic characteristics of respondents shows that people who are willing to change their behaviours for the sake of socially responsible consumption are usually men (51% say “definitely yes”) aged 40–49 (51%) and 18–29 (50%) with higher education (52%).⁴ Due to their declarative nature, the results allow for only limited conclusions in view of the applied research method. The research concerned respondents’ declarations that do not always coincide with actual behaviours in the area of eco-friendly consumption. For example, research by I. Rumianowska (2013) suggests that the results of studies on environmental awareness, attitudes and behaviours of Polish consumers point to considerable discrepancies between their declarations of high environmental awareness and inclination for pro-environmental behaviour and their actual actions.

To conclude, although socially responsible behaviours are characteristic of relatively older people, there is a great potential for young people to change their current consumer behaviours to socially responsible ones. This is evidenced by the picture of consumers ready to alter their current consumption for the sake of eco-friendly consumption. They are relatively young university graduates with growing awareness of the necessity to change the current consumption patterns to environmentally friendly behaviours.

What is important for socially responsible consumption is the local community. One of the actions undertaken by socially responsible consumers is supporting local producers by purchasing their products. This is most evident in the case of food; consumers want to buy foodstuffs rooted in a given local culture. There are major differences in the approach to purchasing local products in Europe. Local products are most often bought by respondents in Sweden (67%), Austria (64%) and Latvia (63%), while this practice is least frequent in Poland (23%), Portugal (29%) and Croatia (30%) (European Commission, 2017).

Another form of ethical behaviour is participation in consumer boycotts. Consumer surveys in the United Kingdom show that the question about whether they had boycotted products and/or services in the sectors of food and beverages, transport and personal products (cosmetics and toiletries) was answered in the affirmative by 48% of respondents stating that they had boycotted at least one of them within the previous 12 months. The estimated losses for companies resulting from boycotts amounted to GBP 2.56 billion. Nearly 58% of the UK population declare that they have decided not to buy a specific product at a particular shop because of concerns about its ethical reputation. Most often boycotted companies were those accused of violating animal welfare (31%), exerting a negative impact on the environment (24%) and pursuing unethical business practices (21%) (Triodos Bank, 2017).

The above findings confirming the growing interest in ethical consumption are questioned by many researchers. The arguments for rejecting the

thesis about an increased role of ethical consumption in today's society are provided by Shaw and Clarke (1999, p. 20), who posited that although respondents declare their willingness to support ethical companies by purchasing their products, ethical issues do not have a significant bearing on their actual shopping behaviour. In most cases, products with ethical attributes have a higher price than traditional products, which weakens consumers' motivation to buy them. Even to those who identify themselves as ethical consumers, prices of ethical products matter more than concerns about the unethical nature of products manufactured by producers considered to be ethical. A. Lewicka-Strzałecka (2015, p. 6) estimates that the discrepancy between the declared inclination for ethical purchases and actual purchases is 30:3, meaning that 30% of people state that they are willing to buy such products but only 3% actually do so.

The differences in the results obtained by various researchers studying the prevalence of ethical consumption can be explained in manifold ways. Some put emphasis on the behaviour of respondents in surveys. They believe that respondents in surveys on ethical issues in consumption check the answers that they consider to be socially acceptable rather than those that actually reflect their behaviour. As a result, they significantly exaggerate the real impact of ethical factors on purchase decisions. When studying the discrepancies between the results of surveys and experimental research, Auger and Devinney (2007) found that individual preferences regarding specific attributes of products were fundamentally different in experimental modelling of product choice and in surveys. Other researchers look for a source of discrepancies in external factors. M. J. Carrington, B. A. Neville and G. J. Whitwell (2014), focusing on the discrepancies between ethical consumption intentions and actual behaviour, found that rooted "unethical" shopping habits were multi-layered, involved complex behaviour sequences and were thus difficult to eradicate.

In spite of the discrepancies in studies on behaviours characteristic of ethical consumption, it can be concluded that this type of consumption has a considerable potential. This is particularly evident in highly developed countries, where ethical consumption and the volume of its market value are gradually increasing.

4. Conclusion

In today's societies, awareness is growing as regards the need to change the ideology of consumerism for the sake of sustainable development of societies. One of the forms of consumption supporting sustainable development is ethical consumption. More and more consumers are ready to pay more for environmentally friendly or socially responsible products. Meanwhile, the level of ethical consumption is difficult to estimate. I strove to answer the question: Is ethical consumption merely an idea propagated by

scientists or a real change in terms of consumption? In response, it can be cautiously stated that some consumer groups are becoming increasingly aware of the need to change their consumer habits towards ethical consumption. As a result, the volume of ethical products is also growing on the consumer market. These products are addressed to consumers who dislike perceiving themselves as mass consumers and to those who are worried about the negative impact of today's consumption on the environment and on themselves.

The above research results on the prevalence of ethical consumption indicate a growing interest in it. For the time being, these are mostly declarations, yet some of them are materialised in actual consumer decisions regarding the choice of products and forms of consumption on the market. A gradual development of ethical consumption can be forecast, but it will not be a mass phenomenon. I therefore agree with R. Cowe and S. Williams (2001) in that ethical consumption is unlikely to ever become a practice of the majority, yet there are signs showing that it is an increasing phenomenon, at least in educated middle classes.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www.greenpeace.org/poland/pl/wydarzenia/swiat/nestle/> (retrieved on 20.01.2018).
- ² Campaign to Stop Killer Coke. Tell Coca-Cola to STOP the VIOLENCE! www.killercoke.org (retrieved on 20.01.2018).
- ³ The research was carried out under the research project Kompetencje konsumentów jako stymulanta innowacyjnych zachowań i zrównoważonej konsumpcji (Consumers' Competencies as a Stimulator of Innovative Behaviours and Sustainable Consumption) No. 2011/03/b/hs4/04417 in 2011 in a nationwide sample of 1000 people aged 15–74 by means of a CATI-based questionnaire. The sample was not representative due to the initial selection of respondents according to the scope of consumer competences in the area of sustainable consumption.
- ⁴ The author's research carried out with a team.

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