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**Title:** I buy, therefore I am? The consumption behaviour of Polish students

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**Citation style:** Żak Monika. (2017). I buy, therefore I am? The consumption behaviour of Polish students. W: U. Swadźba, R. Cekiera, M. Żak (red.), "Praca - konsumpcja - przedsiębiorczość : świadomość ekonomiczna młodego pokolenia" (S. 131-143). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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# **I buy, therefore I am?**

## **The consumption behaviour of Polish students**

### **Introduction**

Consumption is a concept inextricably connected with the everyday life of Poles. Consumption may indeed affect every aspect of our lives and all kinds of needs, both basic and of a higher order. Choices associated with the consumption of material, spiritual and cultural goods are made daily. It seems that nowadays there are no goods or services that cannot be consumed. Another issue, however, is which premises people follow when making everyday choices and decisions. What is important to us and how much are we willing to pay for it in order to satisfy the need to consume? In many cases, it is easy to cross the thin line between consumption and consumerism, which is becoming a serious problem of the modern world. This paper will present the attitudes of Polish students towards consumption. An image of a student-consumer, who must make many choices in everyday consumption justified by one's material, social and mental situation, will be drawn.

### **Consumption in theory**

Consumption has accompanied humans since the dawn of history, albeit its perception has been evolving throughout different periods of time – from meeting the basic, existential needs, through higher needs, to human func-

tioning in a consumer society, and sometimes in the clutches of consumerism. The importance of consumption for the life of an individual, as well as the functioning of the whole society, was already noticed in previous centuries. French economist Charles Gide wrote about consumption that it is "the ultimate cause of all the economic processes and its importance is much greater than it would seem judging by its humble and oft-neglected place, within the system. This is a field still barely explored and it will probably serve one day to renew the whole of science"<sup>1</sup> (GIDE, 1900: 553). Consumption – as can be seen today – is an important determinant shaping the lives of individuals and entire societies. The word itself comes from the Latin phrase *consumptio*, which means consumption and a verb form *consumere* means to consume. According to Małgorzata Bogunia-Borowska one can identify "[...] three main areas of consumption analysis. Firstly, consumption is treated as a descriptive category in the humanities and the indicator of economic processes. Secondly, consumerism is the field of the consumer movements occurring in the defense of consumer rights. Thirdly, anti-consumption or anti-consumerism are treated as a social movement to combat the ideology of consumption"(M. BOGUNIA-BOROWSKA, M. ŚLEBODA, 2003: 155). Different approaches to consumption point to the ever increasing number of research areas. Each of the areas of science attempts to analyse consumption from its own point of view: economics examines consumption in the context of consumer behaviour, economic development or the circulation of money, while in sociology emphasis is put on consumption in the context of lifestyles or the functioning of people in specific social structures, while anthropology focuses on the symbolic and biological importance of consumption for the functioning of societies. This article will focus mainly on consumption behaviour, with many different factors at play. "Consumption can therefore be treated and dealt with:

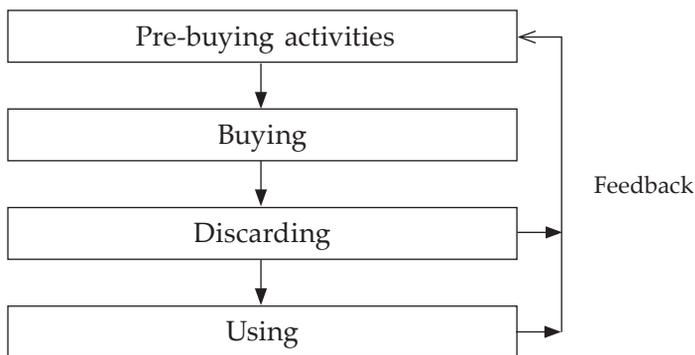
as an ideology, expressed on the one hand in an attitude toward tangible and intangible assets, on the other hand shaping micro- and macro-structural relationships in the world;  
 as part of a system that organizes social, economic, political and cultural orders;  
 as a factor integrating various elements of the system – system's utilities, encouraging and facilitating the maintenance of social order"  
 (BOGUNIA-BOROWSKA, 2003: 157).

Consumer choices, being part of the global consumption patterns, are always dictated by the needs and capacities to satisfy them. "Needs" can generally be defined as a conscious lack of something. This awareness makes

<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Polish edition by the author of the article.

a person take up the activities and actions aimed at supplementing this lack and feeling the satisfaction or pleasure arising from the disappearance of a specific internal dissonance. It may be noted that with the development of society, there is an increase in the number of needs that each one of us wants to satisfy. In the past, when we had to deal with limited resources and capacity, the number of needs was much smaller, and everyone had to individually analyse the real needs as confronted with to the possibilities of meeting them (the supply of goods and services, as well as resources at the disposal of the consumer). Nowadays, needs are only to a small extent determined by the need to survive and function. In most cases, it is the needs that have been imposed on us by functioning in a consumer society that are satisfied through consumption. "Defining consumption in reference to satisfying its needs raises questions about the nature of those needs and their finiteness, and implies research problems concerning the issue of those. In an economy where demand is considered a factor of development, there emerges also a matter of creating consumer needs serving its increase" (ROMANISZYN, 2007: 95). Manufacturers and service providers are aware of the necessity of dynamic activities in the sphere of creating needs. There is an emphasis on such elements of social life that can only be supported and boosted through consumption (Cf. ZOZULAK, ZOZULAKOVÁ, 2015). We are small cogs in a huge machine whose sole task is to construct successive gaps, needs and ways to meet them. "To increase the capacity of consumer consumption, one should never let them rest. They must be constantly exposed to new temptations, keeping them in a state of constant turmoil, continuing excitement and indeed capable of distrust and discontent. Lures requiring them to change the account should confirm this suspicion, while offering the opportunity to exit the state of dissatisfaction: 'You think you've already seen everything? In fact, you have seen nothing yet!'" (BAUMAN, 2006: 58).

Figure 1. The cycle of needs



Source: G. ANTONIDES, W.F. VAN RAAIJ, 2003: 95.

Needs are perceived as liquid – new ones keep replacing those already satisfied. We feel an irresistible urge, even compulsion to take action that often requires a lot of hard work and effort to be able to tick off another item on the list of our needs. This is so because virtually everything around us (other people, marketing activities, technology development, etc.) triggers new needs and ideas on how to satisfy them. “The fact that mass production was able to satisfy the existential needs of people in highly developed countries, consumption increasingly takes a ‘wishful’ form. It no longer serves to satisfy primary needs in the first place i.e. physical needs, but seeks to meet the needs of a higher order, associated with self-realization, shaping one’s own identity, etc.” (BYŁOK, 2013: 9). The increase in the number of perceived needs affects the consumer behaviour of all people. Increasingly, the identity of a person is not proven by who one is, but by how much one possesses.

## Consumer behaviour

The universality of the concept of consumption is beyond dispute. The individual as a consumer has become an important element in the functioning socio-economic system. As Zygmunt Bauman writes: “[...] the brutal undisputed fact is that you need to primarily be a consumer before you can think about becoming anything else”<sup>2</sup> (BAUMAN, 2006: 59). Being a consumer, therefore, is one of the most important daily roles everyone plays. From an early age we are surrounded by a world of products and services that seem to us to be absolutely necessary. Contemporary daily life poses a number of challenges and tasks faced by every human being. They cover both, generally speaking, the issue of survival and the functioning in a social environment. In fact, being a member of various social groups determines our everyday behaviour, determines our lifestyle, and implies the need for development in the emotional, spiritual and material areas. “Modern consumers in the era of globalization and the Internet live in conditions of extremely rapid change in the social environment, economic and political conditions; these are also times of spectacular development of modern information and communication technologies, which has multiple implications, including those in the sphere of professed value systems, lifestyles and consumption patterns” (MRÓZ, 2010: 15).

Human being as a consumer becomes a subject of interest in various fields of life: economics, psychology, sociology, etc. Each of these aims to

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from the Polish edition by the author of the article.

identify the factors and conditions that affect the daily consumption decisions. One of the most important areas of research in consumption is the analysis of consumers' decisions and choices. What we are talking about then is consumer behaviour, otherwise called consumption behaviour. These behaviours "form one of the two spheres of human economic activity. They are aimed at directly meeting the needs of the consumer, and thus imply the use of the means of consumption. These means are the result of other spheres of economic activity, namely the world of work" (RUDNICKI, 2000: 14). Consumer behaviour revolves around acquisition, possession and use of resources that can meet these needs. For the purposes of this article we will use the definition of consumer behaviour as formulated by Ewa Kieźel "[...] consumer behavior is a coherent totality of activities, ones related to making choices in the process of satisfying consumer needs in given social, cultural and economic conditions. Consumption behavior thus would cover a set of actions aimed at obtaining consumption resources and using them in order to satisfy needs, as well as the assessments of the accuracy of decisions made" (KIEŻEL, 2003: 17–18).

Consumption behaviour accompanies individuals at all times, since we continuously make decisions related to some forms of consumption. "The market behavior of consumers is influenced by various stimuli and shaped by many determinants. On the one hand, consumer market behaviour realizes the consumers' individual needs and desires. On the other hand, it is influenced by external factors" (WŁODARCZYK, 2013: 85).

Each daily activity is associated with making many consumption decisions: the type of bread you eat in the morning for breakfast, choice of radio station you listen to while driving to work by car, the type of coffee we drink in the workplace, the place we shop at, etc. The multitude of choices that we make every day makes us work out a specific method of operation. This method depends on many individual and the objective factors, which create our consumption behaviour. In literature two main types of determinants of consumer behaviour are usually distinguished: internal and external. Internal determining factors are mainly: needs, motives, perceptions, attitudes, personality, learning, risks associated with purchases. External factors for consideration are: economic conditions – income, price, product, advertising, point of sale; socio-cultural conditions – family, reference groups and opinion leaders, social group, cultural factors (Cf. RUDNICKI, 2000).

Increasingly, the meaning of lobbying for newly arising creators of consumption patterns is also underlined. "Currently, it is the environment of the expanding and strengthening influence of the 'consumer industry' that decides for or with the producer on mass-consumption, not a group of anonymous consumers or any special clients. Behind this term hide ex-

perts on the patterns of consumption, including smaller and larger fashion designers, professionals in advertising and marketing, media experts and the entertainment industry, including the tourism industry” (ROMANISZYN, 2007: 121). The activities of the consumer industry have a significant impact on the daily decisions and choices of each of us. We are cogs in a big consumption machine. Very often, we act according to the consumer goods industry, which in a way imperceptible to us creates our needs and suggests the means to satisfy them. “The society of consumption is also a society of apprenticeship for consumption, social training of and implementation of consumption, in other words, the new and specific model of socialization implicated in the emergence of new forces and monopolistic restructuring of the economic system with a high level of production”<sup>3</sup> (BAUDRILLARD, 2006: 94).

Research on consumer activity in the market is very often based on accepted models of consumer behaviour. “These models allow for systematization and integration of knowledge about consumer behavior and a better understanding of some of its dependence, sometimes very complex. The basic value of consumer behavior patterns is their heuristic nature, as they enable those using them further independent problem solving included in the models” (RUDNICKI, 2000: 216). There are many different ways to develop research models. The most common models are: structural, stochastic and simulation. Within these methods of forming models, there is a wide range of research proposals that emphasise the individual determinants of consumer behaviour on the market. These models allow one to specify which elements of the game on the market for goods and services influence the decisions of consumers the most. These types of factors include: individual needs and attitudes of consumers, their motives and value systems, the availability of goods and services on the market, information on the product and service, personal experiences and information from third parties, advertising.

All consumers, in a more or less conscious way, act on the basis of the above elements. By making everyday choices associated with the consumption of certain goods and services we rely on various methods of analysis of our needs and possibilities. This applies to both young and mature generations, even though their situation may radically differ. The research results of studies on the attitudes of Polish students on consumption will be presented in the rest of this article.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from the Polish edition by the author of the article.

## Polish students as consumers

In 2015 a study was conducted among students of several Silesian Universities aimed at determining the level of their economic awareness. Since consumption is one of the elements of economic awareness and attitudes, questions about the attitudes towards it were also included in the prepared questionnaire. Participants were asked to respond to several issues related to their attitude towards consumption. The first of the issues raised concerned the assessment of their own attitude to everyday purchases. The students were asked to select three statements that best characterised the way in which they carry out everyday purchases (Table 1).

Table 1  
Statements describing the way of making everyday purchases (in %);  $N = 400$

Statements concerning the way of shopping	Percentage of answers
I buy only what I need, trying to save money	75.0
Before I buy anything I check if I can afford it	48.5
I usually buy products that I've known for a long time	59.3
I usually check prices in different stores and try to buy as cheaply as possible	49.3
While shopping I usually put everything I need into the cart	22.3
I don't usually have the time to compare prices at different stores and buy something right away	18.8
I buy the best, regardless of price	6.0
Shopping is a chore for me, I do it only when I have to	19.3

Source: Research team's own calculation.

The results of the study indicate that students try to approach the task of daily shopping wisely. They are mostly driven by economic factors, the price of the product and whether it is really necessary or important for them. They try to buy only what they need, bearing in mind the imperative of rational spending and saving. In addition to that, before purchasing, they check prices in different retail outlets and only after comparing them, they buy in a place that offers a selected product at the best price. Interestingly, in the course of everyday purchases, respondents choose products they already know the quality of thanks to previous experience of using them. It is a psychological phenomenon that is quite common, especially in older generations, but in the case of young people, the freshness of a product it

is also very often important, although is not confirmed by the results of the research. Students participating in the study put more emphasis on proven products at an affordable price. A small percentage admitted that they buy everything they need regardless of price. It should be noted that despite their young age, the students represent a very mature approach to spending money. It is noticeable here that the rush to buy and consume goods and services at any price, is dictated solely by fashion and blind imitation of others. It is very important that young people are an easy target for the advertising industry and marketing. "The socio-cultural ones constitute an important but, in Poland, still poorly researched group of factors determining consumers' behaviors, while it is precisely various influences from other consumers in the buyer's milieu that lead to his or her following suit" (BURGIEL, 2003: 217–218).

Polish students, judging from their declarations, seem to be immune to the problem of imitation and work to be driven mostly by common sense and to take the economic factors into consideration. One should, accordingly, consider how their personal economic situation (their own and their families', households') affects the decisions related to everyday choices during shopping. To what extent do the contents of one's wallet determine the quantity and quality of purchased goods and services? The three most frequently chosen statements on everyday purchases were confronted with the opinions of students about the financial situation of their households (family houses, or those carried out individually by the students). Based on the collected data it can be concluded that the attitude associated with the daily consumption (the way of making everyday purchases) is related to the assessment of one's situation (Table 2). The most frequently declared financial state is reflected in the statement: We do well, but cannot afford extra expenses. This points to the fact that students assess their financial situation positively, but not euphorically, which translates into the following approach to daily shopping: buy what you really need, but at the most reasonable price.

The analysis of the material conditions in the respondents' households indicate that we are dealing with a rational approach. Note, however, that it is a subjective assessment and not supported by additional financial analysis. It is interesting, from this point of view, to check how the possession of potential savings by the students themselves affects their attitude towards daily consumption. Having savings can give us a hint of the financial situation of the student and indicate what actual style of action it represents in relation to money: whether they wish to enjoy the moment and spend funds on daily pleasures, or try to manage them sparingly to be able to save as much as possible in the long run.

Table 2  
 Statements regarding making everyday purchases and the evaluation of material conditions in the respondent's household (in %); N = 400

Statements concerning the way of shopping	Assesment of household material conditions						
	We have enough money for everything (e.g. expensive trips abroad, frequent changes of new cars, etc.)	We do well, but cannot afford extra expenses	We do ok, we need to save	We live frugally, but we have enough to eat	We live very poorly, often short of money even for food	Other answer	No response
I buy only what I need, trying to save money	10.0	62.7	18.3	6.7	0.3	0.7	1.3
I usually buy products that I've known for a long time	11.4	63.2	19.4	3.4	0.0	1.3	1.3
I usually check prices in different stores and try to buy as cheaply as possible	10.7	60.9	18.8	7.6	0.5	0.5	1.0

Source: Research team's own calculation.

Table 3  
 Statements regarding making everyday purchases in relation to respondent's savings (in %); N = 400

Statements concerning the way of shopping	Savings of respondent							Total
	Up to 150 €	From 151 to 300 €	From 301 to 1000 €	From 1001 to 2000 €	Above 2001 €	Not have savings	No answer	
I buy only what I need, trying to save money	19.3	14.0	24.0	11.3	17.3	13.3	0.8	100.0
I usually buy products that I've known for a long time	19.4	12.7	21.5	11.0	16.5	18.1	0.8	100.0
I usually check prices in different stores and try to buy as cheaply as possible	15.7	15.7	25.9	11.2	16.2	15.3	0.0	100.0

Source: Research team's own calculation.

The data in the Table 3 indicate that the declarations on savings do not directly translate onto decisions related to everyday purchases. The declared amount of savings does not translate directly onto the way of making purchases. It can be noted that the respondents that do have savings approach the issue of spending very reasonably. What could be concluded on the basis of this is that the daily consumer choices of the students are not directly related to the funds they have at hand. It can therefore be assumed that consumption behaviour patterns are rather the result of socialisation in a family where patterns associated with consumption of goods and services and shaping consumer attitudes are transferred. The family environment is a point of reference, and often a role model. Such a phenomenon is “[...] an implementation of the consumption model identical or similar to the pattern characteristic of other individuals or groups” (GAJEWSKI, 1994: 107). Simply having savings also indicates a certain level of economic awareness and consumer attitudes.

The last element to be presented as part of the problem is the attitude of students to buying branded products. Very often it is said that young people put primary emphasis on well-known brands, regardless of their price. It is connected with the prevailing fashion and tendency to follow suit. Famous brands by recourse to the attachment mechanism are trying to permanently attach customers to the product and the logo. “In the context of that imitation, or duplication of other people’s behavior, we are talking about the effect of imitation (imitation). This phenomenon is mostly related to children and adolescents, and role-models of young people are generally well-known athletes, heroes of adventure films, popular musicians etc. The most prominent, virtually every day, manifestation of the effect of imitation is the importance of fashion and clothing and its rapid expansion in many social circles” (BYWALEC, 2009: 121).

The respondents were asked to comment on the statements relating to buying well-known brands. The aim of the question was to obtain answers on how well-known brands or logos determine the choice of a particular product or service.

The results contained in the Table 4 indicate that for Polish students, most important is to buy things of good quality, not necessarily of well-known brands. The vast majority of the respondents pointed to the importance of quality in the selection of goods and services. Over 60% of the researched students admitted that neither brand nor well-known logo are a decisive factor when making choices. Equally, many people said they are not particularly guided by well-known brand or quality, but by a reasonable price above all. It should be noted, however, that a reasonable price is value for money, which means that, in fact, quality is the factor at work, and in most cases determines the choice of a particular product or

Table 4

Statements regarding buying products of well-known brands (in %);  $N = 400$

Statements regarding buying brands	Answer					Total
	Definitely Yes	Rather Yes	Rather Not	Definitely Not	Hard to say	
I would like to buy things of a good brand and quality, but I usually can't afford it	10.8	33.8	38.0	11.0	6.4	100.0
It's important for me to buy things of good quality	34.5	57.5	5.8	1.0	1.2	100.0
It's important for me to buy things of good brands	6.3	28.8	43.5	17.0	4.4	100.0
The quality and good brand is less important for me than buying at a reasonable price	20.8	39.8	23.5	4.5	11.4	100.0

Source: Research team's own calculation.

service. Once again, the results indicate that Polish students are primarily driven by common sense when making everyday purchases and expending their resources.

## Conclusion

The results show that in the case of Polish students we are dealing with a very mature and sensible attitude towards consumption. Their consumption behaviour is based on rational models, namely the analysis of price and product quality. There is also a noticeable attachment to well-known goods and services, which manifests itself in everyday consumption choices. The students showed a high level of economic awareness in the field related to the consumption of goods and services. Their consumption behaviour is based on both financial opportunities (own or family's), as well as patterns of information provided at home or in the closest environment. It should be noted that in the case of young consumers we are not dealing with the phenomenon of imitation, which indicates that the vast majority of students have already left the period of imitation behind.

Rational consumption behaviour manifests itself mainly in the approach to everyday purchases, and is guided by insistence on good quality and not only on well-known branded products and services. The price here is thus treated as a kind of a signpost to the fact that the students themselves point

out that the choice is not motivated by the lowest price, but by a reasonable one, which includes both the quality and the calculation of value. This article is part of a larger research project, and the results presented herein are only its small fraction.

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Monika Żak

## Kupuję, więc jestem? Zachowania konsumenckie polskich studentów

### Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy problematyki zachowań konsumpcyjnych polskich studentów. Celem badań, których fragmentaryczne wyniki zostały w nim opisane, było określenie

świadomości ekonomicznej polskich studentów. Konsumpcja jako jeden z ważniejszych wyznaczników tej świadomości, również stała się przedmiotem badań. Konsumowanie dóbr i usług jest jedną z podstawowych aktywności człowieka, dlatego tak istotne jest kształtowanie odpowiednich postaw konsumenckich. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań dotyczących zachowań konsumpcyjnych studentów: ich stosunku do wydatkowania środków w trakcie codziennych zakupów, postaw wobec znanych marek oraz świadomości mechanizmów rynkowych.