

## RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AS SUSTAINABILITY ORIENTED BEHAVIORS

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**Abstract.** *The paper presents the findings of a survey based study investigating predictors of socially conscious consumption in Romania, a European country confronted with many societal issues, whose citizens were found to be highly concerned about some of the environmental problems, but less aware about some important others. The paper presents in brief the Romanian context and the theoretical background, focusing on the role of socially conscious consumers and the literature explaining the importance of cultivating pro-social behaviors, as necessary ingredients towards sustainability. Data collection and statistical analysis are detailed, discussing the findings and research limitations, as well as potential directions for the future studies. In line with previous literature, the present study finds the positive influences of education and civic engagement on socially responsible consumption behavior. Results indicate education as a highly relevant demographic characteristic in predicting consumer's responsibility. The paper emphasizes the need of investment in Romanian education, and the multiple benefits Romania would gain by narrowing the gap in this important area, but not only.*

**Keywords:** *Socially conscious consumption; social responsibility; civic engagement; education, Romania.*

### Introduction

Civic life of modern consumers is subject of intense academic education and research debate. Social implications of consumption are scrutinized and non-material needs, such as civic participation, are analyzed (Briceno & Stagl, 2006), because consumption habits and patterns are one of the main causes for serious environmental problems, and not only. Developed and even emergent societies are increasingly worried that present consumer culture, stimulating excessive and selfish consumption, negatively influences societal values and civic engagement, hurting social cohesion and integration, as well as long term sustainable development. As a consequence, social responsible behaviors, consumer citizenship, socially conscious consumerism and relationships between various types of responsible consumption and civic engagement have been thoroughly investigated (Antil, 1984; McGregor, 2002; Keum et al., 2004; Briceno & Stagl, 2006; Cotte, 2009; Atkinson, 2011; Bocken et al., 2014; Cho, Keum & Shah, 2015; Chang, 2017; Crişan, Zbucnea & Moraru, 2017).

Consumerism is more and more criticized for the negative influences on various social goods, such as civic values and social connection (Atkinson, 2011). There are, however, newly developed trends towards a so called socially conscious consumption, or responsible consumption. Consumer responsible behaviors and civic minded consumers can change the way companies operate on markets, to incorporate societal interests and ensure greater sustainability. Pro-social consumer orientations are cultivated, because they can positively influence civic engagement and sustainability. Such efforts result in support for social responsible companies (Bocken et al., 2014; Andrei et al., 2017), despite of the fact that socially responsible consumers are not always willing to pay a premium price for the products sold by CSR involved companies, and serious gaps exist between stated intentions and real behaviors (Cotte, 2009; Bradu & Zait, 2016; Chang, 2017; Zbucnea, 2013).

Recent studies indicated that consumers not only undertake socially responsible actions in support of those companies they perceive as honest players in the market (Andrei et al., 2017, but they also manifest the willingness to become activists and fight against big societal issues (i.e. pollution, depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, unethical business practices and so on), as Chang (2017) emphasized. In this way, they develop a civic conscience and become better citizens, involved and active (Zait, 2017), some authors indicating a growing number of those adopting socially responsible behaviors across the world (Cotte, 2009).

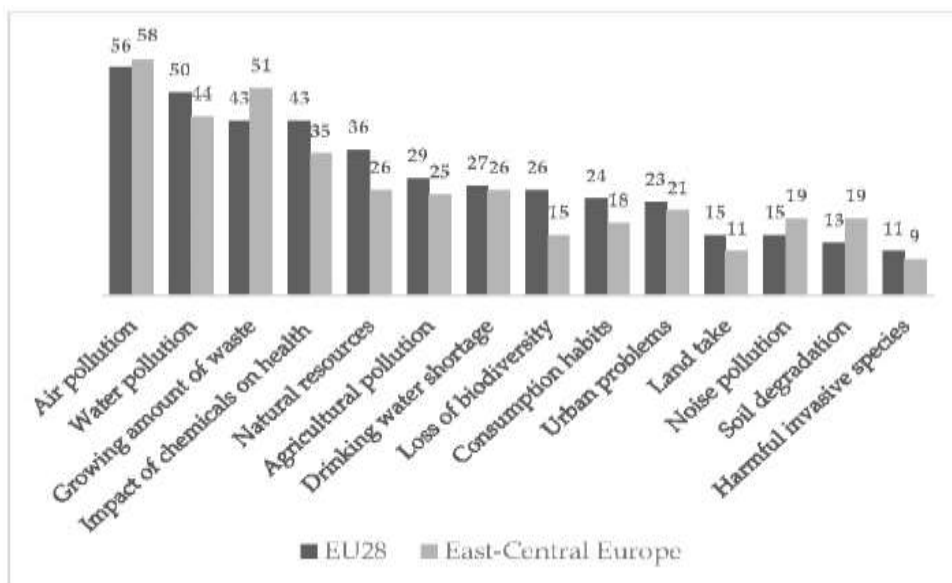
However, defining and describing the social conscious consumer is not an easy task, since many studies discovered that the most common descriptors used in consumer research – both demographics and psychographics – often lead to contradictory results and suggest that more personality variables and values should be considered for better explanations. To make things even more provocative, nowadays democratic societies struggle for cohesion and integration through diversity and pluralism, allocating even more weight to civic minded behaviors and community feelings, civic engagement being sometimes the only one holding a pluralistic society together (Bertelsmann, 2003).

Therefore, environment and society interests are more and more valued, by both companies and consumers (Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2008), and we are witnessing an increase in the levels of civic participation but a simultaneous growth of consumption of all types: both socially conscious consumption, and status oriented, selfish consumption. This reality indicates the need of investigating the connections between the level of civic participation and the type of consumption behavior a person adopts: socially conscious or status-oriented consumption. We remind here that socially conscious consumption refers to a buying behavior that benefits society as a whole, consumers being aware of the public consequences of their purchasing actions, while status-oriented consumption involves purchasing of products that reveal an individual's social position, heavily materialistic (Cho, Keum & Shah, 2015).

### **Research assumptions**

Considering described context, our study was designed to diagnose the relationships between socially responsible consumption behavior and civic engagement in Romania. an EU country from East-Central Europe zone, confronted with many societal issues, whose citizens were found to worry less than other Europeans about the negative impact of consumption habits, but to be highly concerned about environmental issues

such as air pollution, as Luca et al. (2018) indicated in a study discussing the main environmental concerns in European Union. Highlighting that 60% of Romanians are worried about air pollution (comparing to 56% at EU-28 level), water pollution (45% of Romanians, comparing to 50% at EU-28 level), the growing waste (37% of Romanians, comparing to 43% at EU-28 level), health impact of the chemicals which are used in consumer goods (33% of Romanians, comparing to 43% at EU-28 level), and the depletion of natural resources (24% of Romanians, comparing to 36% at EU-28 level), Luca et al.(2018) reported consumption habits among top 10 environmental concerns of Europeans. Their study has found that almost a quarter (24%) of EU-28 citizens are worried about the negative impact of consumption habits, while slightly lower concerns on this issue (18%) were found among people from East-Central Europe zone which includes Romania, as well as Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia (see details in Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Main environmental concerns in EU28 and East-Central Europe (Luca et al., 2018, p.5)**

Given the aforementioned considerations, the study hypothesized that:

*H: Civic engagement exerts a positive influence on socially responsible consumption behavior.*

The research tested assumed relationship on a Romanian sample, taking also into account the potential influences which might appear due to participant's characteristics such as: education level, family income, work experience, age, gender, urban or rural area of provenience.

### **Method, measurement and data collection**

A survey study was conducted to explore responsible consumption phenomenon in Romania, using an online questionnaire applied with 259 participants (64.9% female, ages 19-30, Romanian nationality students enrolled in the academic year 2016-2017 at

undergraduate (62.5%), master (33.3%) or doctoral studies (4.2%) in Bucharest or Iasi - two of the largest university centers of the country).

Applied questionnaire collected data on 41 items (detailed in Table 1) measuring on 5 points Likert scale (1= not at all; 5 = very much) the level of person's engagement in civic actions (1 item denoting civic engagement dimension: "*I have often participated in activities such as volunteering, environmental protection actions, community support actions, social projects of non-governmental organizations*"), and socially responsible consumption behavior (40 items comprised in SRCB scale advanced by Antil, 1984; Antil & Bennett, 1979), plus participant's demographic data (8 traits: education level, family income, work experience, age, gender, urban or rural area of provenience, county, nationality).

The questionnaire was applied in the local language, after a translation and back translation process employed to ensure cultural adaptation of the 40 items of SRCB scale (Antil, 1984; Antil & Bennett, 1979).

The sum-scores of participant's ratings on the 40 SRCB items (detailed in Table 1 according to original scale of Antil, 1984; Antil & Bennett, 1979) were computed into the variable '*socially responsible consumption behavior*', which was further used in the statistical analysis.

SPSS software package was used to perform data analysis.

**Table 1. Socially responsible consumption behavior (SRCB scale of Antil, 1984; Antil & Bennett, 1979)**

### Items

1. People should be more concerned about reducing or limiting the noise in our society.
2. Every person should stop increasing their consumption of products so that our resources will last longer.
- \*3. The benefits of modern consumption are more important than the pollution which results from their production and use.
4. Pollution is presently one of the most critical problems facing this nation.
5. I don't think we are doing enough to encourage manufacturers to use recyclable packages.
6. I think we are just not doing enough to save scarce natural resources from being used up.
7. Natural resources must be preserved even if people must do without some products.
8. All consumers should be interested in the environmental consequences of the products they purchase.
- \*9. Pollution is not personally affecting my life.
10. Consumers should be made to pay higher prices for products which pollute the environment.
11. It genuinely infuriates me to think that the government does not do more to help control pollution of the environment.
12. Non-returnable bottles and cans for soft drinks and beer should be banned by law.
13. I would be willing to sign a petition or demonstrate for an environmental cause.
14. I have often thought that if we could just get by with a little less there would be more left for future generations.
15. The government should subsidize research on technology for recycling waste products.
16. I'd be willing to ride a bicycle or take a bus to work in order to reduce air pollution.
- \*17. I would probably never join a club or group which is solely concerned with ecological issues.

## Items

- \*18. I feel people worry too much about pesticides on food products.
- \*19. The whole pollution issue has never upset me too much since I feel it's somewhat overrated.
- 20. I would donate a day's salary to a foundation to help improve the environment.
- 21. I would be willing to have my laundry less white or bright in order to ensure that I was using a nonpolluting laundry product.
- 22. Manufacturers should be forced to use recycled materials in their manufacturing.
- 23. I think that a person should urge his/her friends not to use products that pollute or harm the environment.
- 24. Commercial advertising should be forced to mention the ecological disadvantages of products.
- \*25. Much more fuss is being made about air and water pollution than is really justified.
- 26. The government should provide each citizen with a list of agencies and organizations to which citizens could report grievances concerning pollution.
- 27. I would be willing to pay a 5% increase in my taxes to support greater governmental control of pollution.
- \*28. Trying to control water pollution is more trouble than it is worth.
- 29. I become incensed when I think about the harm being done to plant and animal life by pollution.
- 30. People should urge their friends to limit their use of products made from scarce resources.
- 31. I would be willing to pay 10 RON more each month for electricity if it meant cleaner air.
- 32. It would be wise for the government to devote much more money toward supporting a strong conservation program.
- 33. I would be willing to accept an increase in my family's total expense of 120 RON- to promote the wise use of natural resources.
- 34. Products which during their manufacturing or use pollute the environment should be heavily taxed by the government.
- \*35. People should be willing to accept smog in exchange for the convenience of automobiles.
- 36. When I think of ways industries are polluting the environment I get frustrated and angry.
- 37. Our public schools should require all students to take a course dealing with environmental and conservation problems.
- 38. I would be willing to stop buying products from companies guilty of polluting the environment even though it might be inconvenient.
- 39. I'd be willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of slowing down pollution even though the immediate results may not seem significant.
- \*40. I rarely ever worry about the effects of smog on myself and my family.

Note: \*Denotes items that are reverse coded.

## Data analysis and results

Descriptive analysis indicated the following structure of the sample: N=256 participants of Romanian nationality, 64.9% female, ages 19-30, undergraduate (62.5%), master (33.3%) and doctoral (4.2%) students, with an approximate family income per member under 2000 RON (68.7%), or over 2000 RON (31.3%), most of them (81,5 %) having a

little working experience or no experience, and only 18,5% reporting a consistent working experience.

Considering *socially responsible consumption behavior* as dependent variable, regression analysis was applied to test potential influences exerted on it by independent variables: *civic engagement*; *education*; *work experience*; *income per family member*; *age*; *gender*.

Statistical results (details in Table 2 and Table 3) indicated that two of the six independent variables considered, namely *civic engagement* and *education*, predict dependent variable *responsible consumption behavior* ( $F = 63.473$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), explaining 60,2 % of its variance ( $R \text{ square} = 0.602$ ).

Regression analysis output detailed in Table 3, have shown that *socially responsible consumption behavior* is positively influenced by *education* ( $\beta = 0.136$ ;  $t = 2.967$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and *civic engagement* ( $\beta = 0.728$ ;  $t = 16.931$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ; research hypothesis confirms).

The other 4 variables included in the analysis (*age*, *gender*, *family income per member*, *work experience*) were found to have no significant influences on *socially responsible consumption behavior*, as it is indicated by  $\beta$  coefficients detailed in Table 3.

**Table 2. Results of regression analysis. Model Summary and ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model Summary		R	R Square	R Square Adjusted	
		0.776	.602	.592	
ANOVA					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	73592.675	6	12265.446	63.473	.000 <sup>b</sup>
Residual	48696.051	252	193.238	-	-
Total	122288.726	258	-	-	-
<b>a. Dependent variable:</b> Socially responsible consumption behavior					
<b>b. Predictors:</b> Civic engagement, Education, Work experience, Income per family member, Age, Gender.					

**Table 3. Results of regression analysis. Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

Model	B	Std. error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	87.6	4.697		18.649	.000
Civic participation	22.719	1.342	.728	16.931	.000
Age	-2.386	1.912	-.076	-1.248	.213
Gender	2.682	1.873	.059	1.432	.153
Education	5.150	1.736	.136	2.967	.003
Work experience	4.902	3.233	.088	1.516	.131
Income per family member	-3.522	2.176	-.075	-1.619	.107
<b>a. Dependent Variable:</b> Socially responsible consumption behavior					

Overall, the results obtained on the Romanian student sample indicate that person's level of education (in this case enrollment in undergraduate, master or doctoral studies) and person's engagement in civic actions have positive influences on person's socially responsible consumption behavior.

### **Conclusions and discussions**

Analyzing the data collected from 259 students (ages 19-30) enrolled in Romanian universities (undergraduate students 62.5%, master students 33.3% and PhD students 4.2%) the present study offers insights regarding responsible consumption phenomenon in Romania. The study finds positive relationships between responsible consumption and civic engagement, respectively between responsible consumption and education, indicating a profile of socially conscious consumers among young and educated Romanians.

In line with previous literature (Bodur & Sarigöllü, 2005; Andrei et al., 2017), the results of the present study indicate that person's level of education (in this case participant's enrollment in undergraduate, master or doctoral studies) and person's engagement in civic actions have positive influences on the tendency of consuming responsible and committing into "a deliberate effort to acquire, use and dispose of products in manners minimizing negative consequences and maximizing positive ones on both environmental and social levels", as Ertz (2016, p.6) described socially responsible consumption behavior.

Although the literature acknowledges that the level of income (which is known to induce price sensitiveness), as well as work experience should influence responsible consumption decisions (Gandhi & Kaushik, 2016; Kai & Liang, 2016; Vătmănescu et al., 2017, 2018) the present study finds no influences on these directions. The lack of significant influences exerted on responsible consumption decisions by participant's income and work experience in the present study might be a limiting consequence of a student sample. In this vein we mention that only 18,5 % participants reported a consistent working experience. Also, the single item measurement of civic engagement ("I have often participated in activities such as volunteering, environmental protection actions, community support actions, social projects of non-governmental organizations") represent a second limitation. To overcome these limitations, future studies might consider one of the multi-item measurements of civic engagement indicated in the literature (Doolittle & Faul, 2013; Jugert et al., 2013; Zait et al., 2017), as well as a larger sample. comprising all population categories.

Finally, the findings regarding the positive impact of both education and civic engagement on socially conscious consumption indicate education as most relevant among demographics in predicting consumer's responsibility. The result highlights the need of investment in Romanian education and the benefits Romania would gain by narrowing the gap it actually has in this important area comparing to other EU-28 countries.

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