

## ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS OF YOUNG CONSUMERS ON THE EXAMPLE OF STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RZESZÓW

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### ABSTRACT

The justification for the selection of the topic and undertaking the research were information gaps in the field of the behaviour of young consumers in the area of activities related to the environment. The study used a deliberate selection of the sample due to the direction and year of education, as well as the stratified selection – the population structure and the divisions into layers according to specific characteristics were known. The technique of auditorium survey was used. The analysed students are characterised by a high level of environmental awareness and a sense of responsibility for them as informed and pragmatic consumers. They engage in pro-ecological behaviour and, as committed and ecological consumers, create the desired patterns of consumer behaviour. The analysed students have a sense of responsibility for the surrounding environment, and the belief in individual influence is reflected in pro-ecological behaviour.

**Key words:** ecological awareness, environmental protection, consumer behaviour

**JEL code:** D12

### INTRODUCTION

The constantly deteriorating condition of the natural environment determines the search for more effective ways to care for the surrounding nature. This search focuses on activities in the field of technology (modern technologies that protect and restore the ecosystem balance) or socio-economic, political, and legal, taking the form of cooperation of social and economic organizations to develop both environmental protection mechanisms and their effective implementation. Nevertheless, the area of key importance in the area

of education relating to social and individual awareness, where a change in attitude and sensitivity to environmental issues is necessary, expressed, inter alia, in changing the lifestyle, which will be changed in consumer behaviour.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Defining the concept of environmental awareness is difficult because of the compilation of elements from both the social and natural sciences. It was requested to manage the awareness of the quality of social ele-

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ments whose social elements were introduced into the thinking and standards of people who became part of the awareness, quality, and quality awareness of society (Bieniasz-Marek, 2004; Papuziński, 2006). To define the state of ecological awareness, Burger introduced two conceptual categories: the pro-ecological attitude as clear and decisive advocacy of environmental protection and ecological indifference, which can take the form of favouring environmental protection but not demonstrating a pro-ecological attitude, a form of indifference and lack of interest in the issue, noticing the problem of protection but lack of activity in this area and a form of conscious opposition to environmental protection (Burger, 2005).

The level of awareness of Poles is constantly monitored. The most extensive research in this area was carried out by the Institute for Sustainable Development (InE), operating since 1990. Fragmentary design studies are also undertaken for selected areas and issues (Albińska, 1999/2000; Bayer Sp. z o.o, 2005; Bołtomiuk and Burger, 2010; Center for Ecological Education, 2010). It is also worth noting the review of research carried out in the years 2009–2015 on the awareness, attitudes, and behavior of Poles, extended to topics and problems for which there is a lack of reliable data (TNS Polska dla Ministerstwa Środowiska, 2015), specific – including teachers, children, and youth.

It is these groups that are extremely important from the perspective of spreading ecological knowledge and shaping ecological habits. It is important to strengthen the belief among children and adolescents that the fate of nature and responsibility for its condition does not only depend on the world of trade and politics but also (to the greatest extent) on individual individuals, being the sum of their small and larger decisions.

Environmental education of the society is the task of, among others for schools at all levels, but also universities. Sustainable development requires investments not only in modern and/or pro-ecological technologies and rational management of natural resources but above all high ecological awareness, which also means readiness to engage in solving problems related to the protection of the natural environment (Moryń-Kucharczyk, 2016).

## **MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH**

The rationale for the selection of the topic and undertaking the research was the research deficit and information gaps in the field of the behaviour of young consumers in the area of activities related to environmental protection. The research used the method of a diagnostic survey, the technique of an auditorium survey due to the high degree of sample control, and the same measurement conditions for all respondents. The survey questionnaire consisted of nine questions (closed disjunctive, semi-open conjunctive, and scaling questions) and metrics. The selection of the sample was purposeful due to the field of study (education programmes containing the content of environmental education) and the year of education (first; students of the University in Rzeszów) and the stratified structure – the population structure and division into layers according to specific characteristics (field of study: Finance and, Biology, Agriculture, Economics). The research sample consisted of  $N = 143$  people, which constitutes 80% of the population.

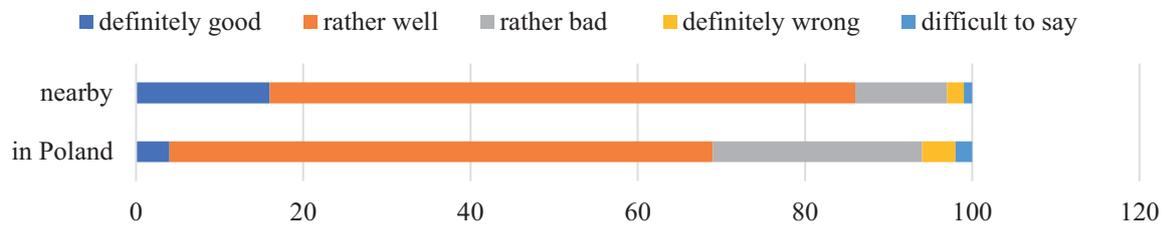
The research aimed at obtaining answers to the following research problems:

1. What level of environmental awareness and the sense of responsibility for it characterize students as informed and pragmatic consumers.
2. Do students, as committed and ecological consumers, undertake pro-ecological consumer behaviour, creating the desired patterns of such behaviour?

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

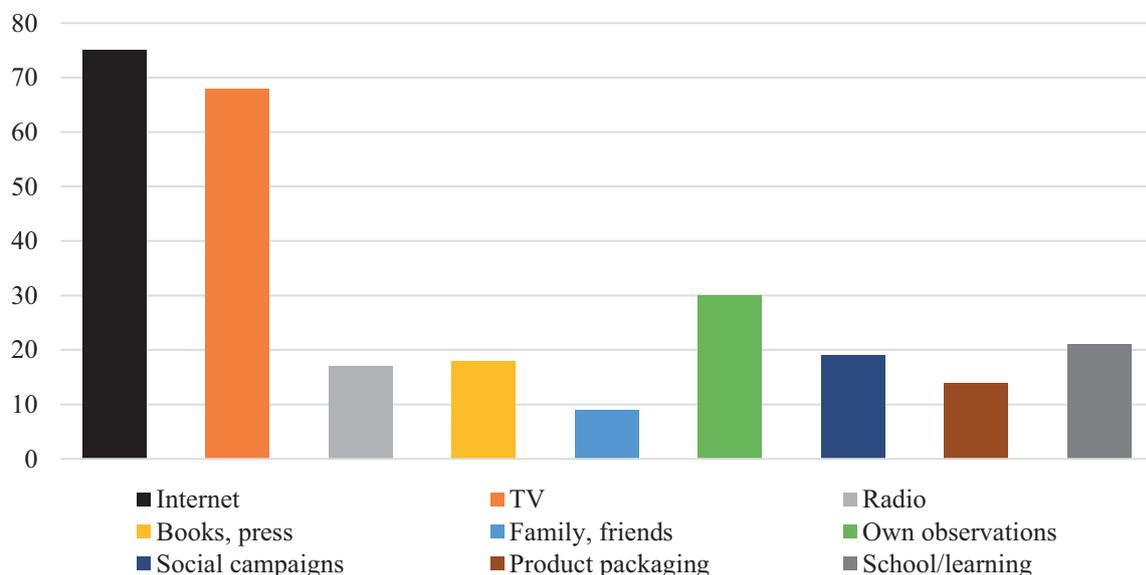
The social side of the person-opinion relationship. Good environmental condition first with the preliminary assurance that it was determined by 67% (in Poland) and 85% in the area, respectively. In this context, initiatives to explore what accounts for the main sources of information.

For 3/4 of the surveyed students, the main source of information about environmental protection was the Internet, and 68% indicated television. These media constitute an information reality for young consumers. It should be noted that the respondents then indicated their observations (31%) and the school/



**Figure 1.** Assessment of the state of the natural environment

Source: own study.



**Figure 2.** Sources of information on the state of the natural environment

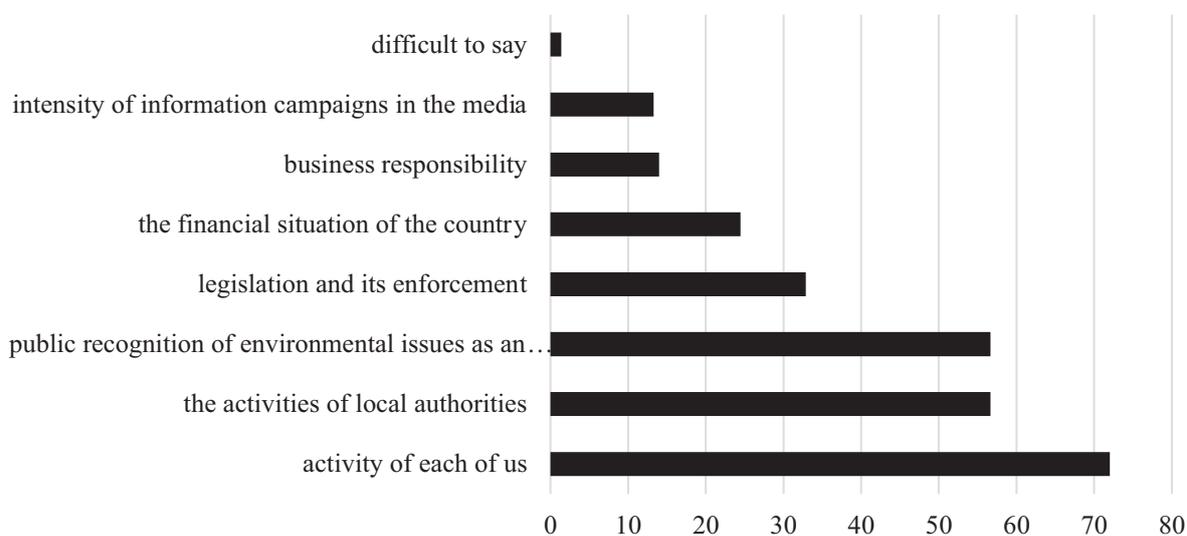
Source: own study.

/university (22%) as a source of information about the natural environment. This confirms the need to continue environmental education, noting its important role in spreading knowledge, conducive to shaping correct attitudes. What is surprising, however, is the small number of indications for family and friends as a source of knowledge in the field studied (9%).

In terms of the functioning of the respondents as informed and pragmatic consumers, it is extremely important to indicate what / whom the state of the environment depends on. Has the increase in the level of ecological knowledge and sensitivity to

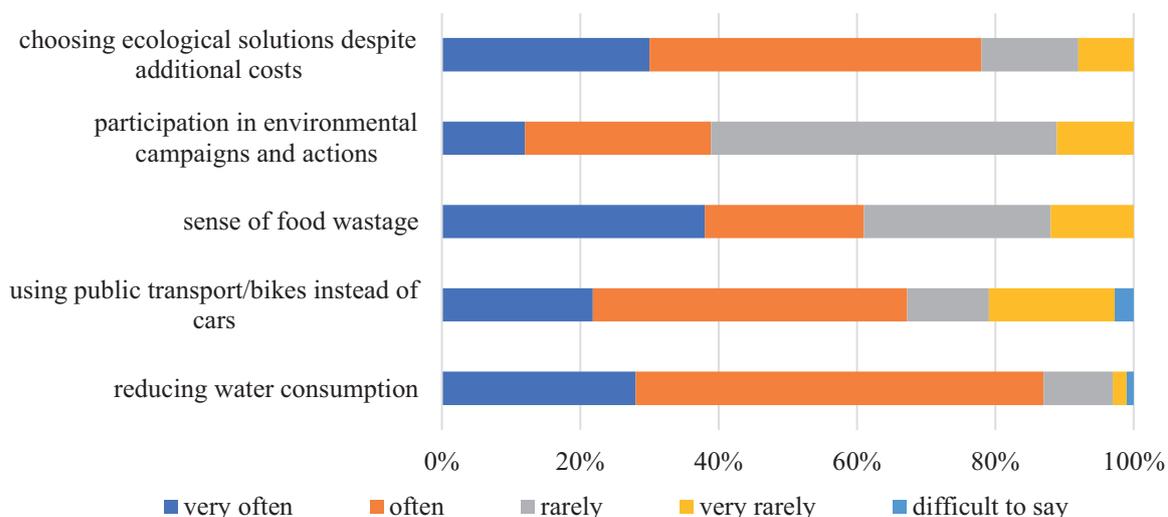
the problems of the natural environment as a feature of young consumers (students) also shifted the burden of responsibility for the environment from state institutions to the local government, local communities, and, most importantly, individual level?

As they feel responsible for the surrounding environment (3/4 of the respondents believe that it depends on the activity of each of them), the conviction about the possibilities of individual impact on the environment should be reflected in pro-ecological behaviour also in the context of everyday life (shopping behaviour). In this context, it should be checked whether



**Figure 3.** Responsibility for the condition of the natural environment

Source: own study.



**Figure 4.** Declared pro-ecological consumer behaviour

Source: own study.

there is a discrepancy between the declared values and the actual actions. The value itself, the sparkle of values, is not a volume with their real value.

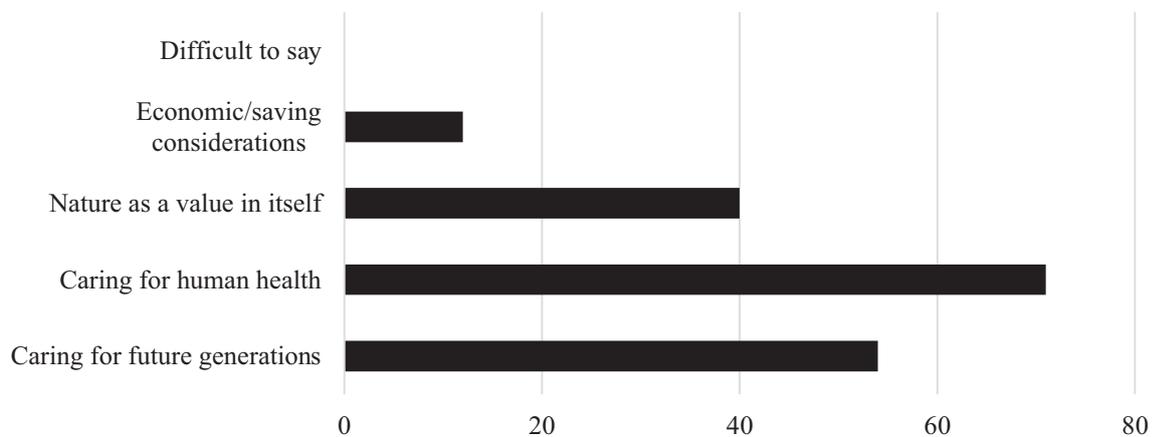
Most of the respondents declare the implementation of behaviours that can be treated as pro-ecological. More than 3/4 declare saving and ra-

tionalization of water consumption, while almost 3/4 replace the car with a more ecological bicycle or public transport. The young generation is by far the most active physically, hence the use of the bicycle as a means of transport that combines 'business with pleasure' is slowly becoming standard. It is quite

a common sight in urban reality, which also enters smaller towns. Young consumers also learn to take more rational actions in the purchase of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). Although changes in purchasing behaviour are influenced by the trends described above, their implementation takes time. The motive of pro-ecological behaviour may, however,

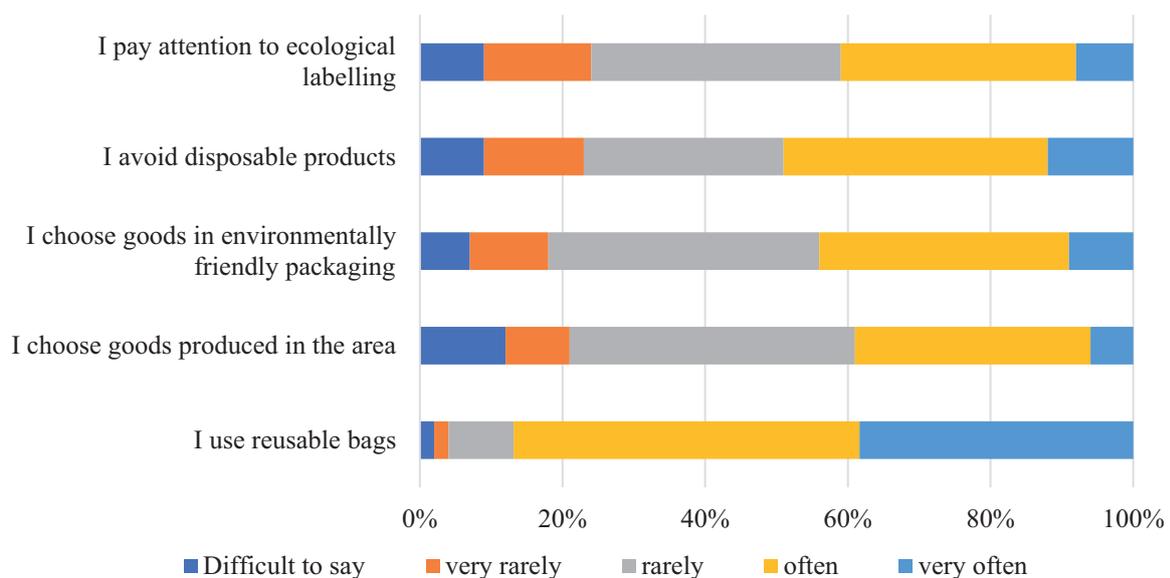
raise doubts – is it a high level of ecological awareness or – more likely – economic reasons? This question is partially answered by the declaration of over half of the respondents – rarely and very rarely – choosing ecological solutions if they entail additional costs.

The deepening of the analysed thread is directly asked about the reasons why it is worth protecting



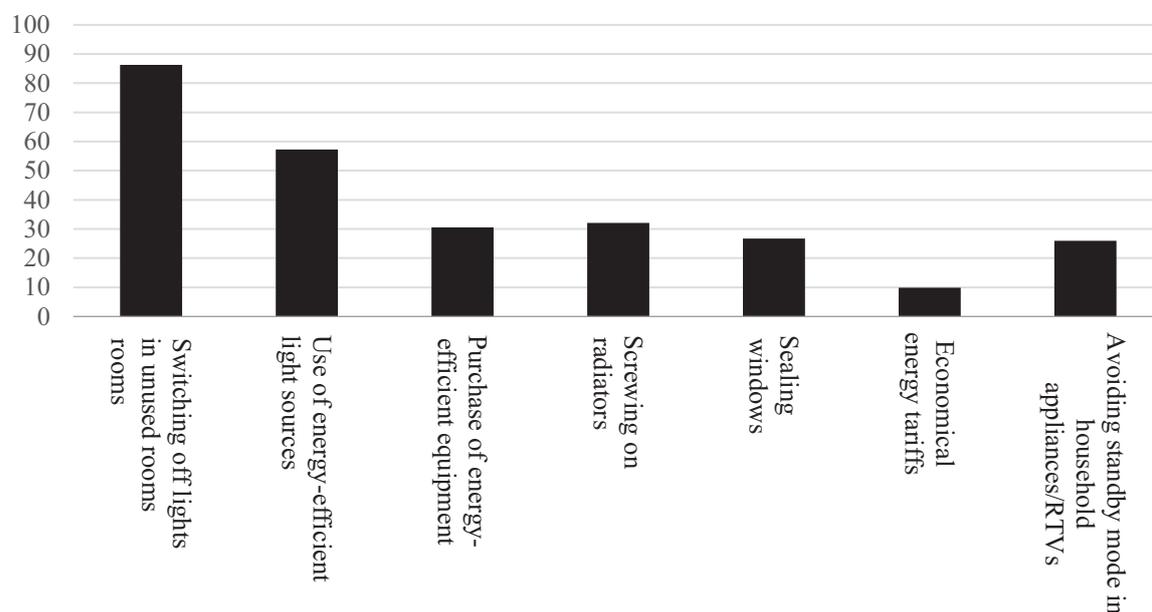
**Figure 5.** Reasons for the need to protect the natural environment.

Source: own study.



**Figure 6.** Implemented pro-ecological consumer behaviour of the respondents

Source: own study.



**Figure 7.** Realised energy saving methods

Source: own study.

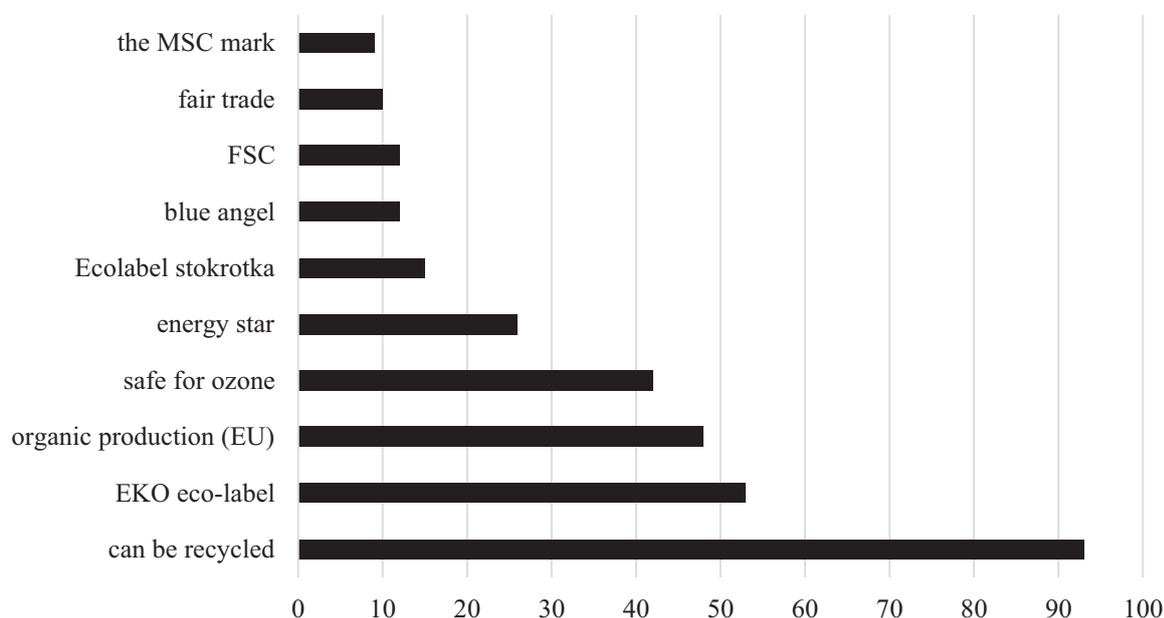
the environment. Nearly 3/4 of the respondents indicate without hesitation that they care for human health, and more than half – that they care for future generations. The economic aspect was indicated as the least important reason.

How does the implementation of actual pro-ecological consumer behaviour look like against this background and does knowledge translate into practice? You can know hundreds of rules, but not apply them at all. Eighty five percent of respondents use reusable bags and nearly half (49%) avoid disposable/perishable products. Respondents also pay attention to labels related to ecology and the environment (49% in total). Unfortunately, environmentally friendly behaviours are often not implemented – seldom and very rarely (52% in total), goods in ecological packaging or produced in the vicinity of their residence are selected (51% in total).

A deepening of the analysed thread is the question of rationalization of consumption – the most identical to environmental protection – resource, i.e. energy. Among 131 respondents who save energy, it most

often takes the form of turning off lights in unused rooms (86%) and using energy-saving light sources (57%). Behind such behaviour, however, is probably the pragmatism of users in the form of measurable financial benefits. This is also confirmed in consumer behaviour, where the priority of choice is often saving money, as is the case, for example, in the case of choosing energy-saving devices.

In terms of the consumer behaviour of engaged young consumers, the recognition of ecological product labels is an important factor in product selectivity – then how does this work in practice? Does the declaration go hand in hand with the recognition of pro-ecological labels? It turns out that of the ten most common markings, the most recognizable one is the one symbolizing that the product is recyclable. This is because its presence on the packaging is an effect of an obligation, and the commonness of its presence on everyday goods gives the average consumer a chance to come into contact with it many times. Half of the respondents also indicated the eco-label EKO and organic production (EU).



**Figure 8.** The degree of recognition of ecological product labels

Source: own study.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ecological awareness is the cause and consequence of human concerns about the quality of life in a situation of constantly progressing degradation of the elements of the environment. Therefore, a change in attitude and sensitivity to environmental issues is necessary, expressed, inter alia, in a change in lifestyle, which will be illustrated by changes in consumer behaviour.

The presented research shows a fairly uniform picture of the environmental awareness of students as informed and pragmatic consumers. Their informational reality in the form of the Internet has been supplemented with an indication of the informative role of the school, which confirms the need for environmental education conducive to shaping correct attitudes.

Young consumers feel responsible for the environment around them. Their belief in the individual impact – as committed and ecological consumers – translates into pro-ecological behaviour, use reus-

able bags, avoid disposable/perishable products and reduce energy consumption. However, the concern for the environment verbalised and implemented by the respondents did not always go hand in hand with the actual pro-ecological behaviour, especially if it meant incurring additional costs. However, this does not change the fact that they contribute to reducing the consumption of environmental resources.

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