

Consumers Perceptions and Attitudes toward Sustainable Consumption: Insights from Romania

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian consumers aged 25 to 34 from urban areas toward sustainable consumption, identifying the benefits that foster positive attitudes and the barriers that contribute to negative attitudes. Within this scope, a qualitative approach was employed, involving 20 in-depth interviews with business administration graduates residing in urban areas. Thematic analysis using QDA Miner software and word cloud visualization was used to identify key themes and sub-themes from the answers provided by interviewees, focusing on the benefits and barriers to sustainable consumption. Benefits included environmental (e.g., reduced carbon footprints), social (e.g., community awareness), economic (e.g., support for local businesses), and personal (e.g., improved quality of life) benefits, with personal fulfillment and health as key motivators. However, barriers were more prevalent, encompassing economic constraints (e.g., limited income, high price sensitivity), inadequate waste management infrastructure, limited knowledge and awareness (e.g., low environmental education, unclear eco-labels), cultural and social factors (e.g., traditional norms), and personal factors (e.g., skepticism, time constraints). These barriers significantly hinder the adoption of sustainable practices despite positive attitudes. This study contributes to the literature by providing a qualitative perspective on sustainable consumption in Romania, a relatively underexplored context, by offering insights into the interplay of benefits and barriers among Romanian consumers aged 25 to 34 from urban environments. The findings underline the need for policy interventions, such as improved recycling infrastructure and educational campaigns, to bridge the gap between awareness and action and promote sustainable consumption practices among Romanian consumers.

Keywords

Sustainable consumption, perceptions, attitudes, benefits, barriers, Romanian consumers

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Introduction

Since its emergence, the sustainable consumption concept has evolved in several directions and has become an important global issue, especially in recent decades. Sustainable consumption can be defined as consumption designed to satisfy basic needs while simultaneously minimizing the utilization of natural resources, reducing waste, and eliminating the use of materials that are harmful to the environment (Vergura et al., 2023). Additionally, sustainable consumption is conceptualized as the act of reducing the consumption of products and services in a manner that takes into account the needs of subsequent generations (Montreuil Carmona et al., 2024).

From a consumer's standpoint, sustainable consumption signifies the choices and actions made by individuals to meet their immediate necessities while minimizing negative environmental, societal, and economic impacts (Vergura et al., 2023), especially in the age of globalization (Toma, 2005). Related to sustainability and social responsibility (Toma, 2006; Toma, 2008), this behavior aims to preserve resources and enhance well-being for future generations and includes practices such as reducing waste through thoughtful consumption and opting for eco-friendly products made from sustainable materials (Hammad et al., 2019). Despite numerous studies examining the views of Romanian consumers aged 25 to 34 regarding sustainable consumption and practices, the majority of these investigations are predominantly quantitative (Tomşa et al., 2021; Gherheş and Fărcaşiu, 2021). Consequently, there exists a significant need for qualitative research, which provides in-depth and comprehensive insights into complex phenomena by capturing the perspectives and motivations as they facilitate the exploration of subjective experiences, identify emerging themes, and enhance the understanding of the social, cultural, and behavioral dynamics associated with sustainable consumption. To address this identified gap, the authors conducted 20 in-depth interviews and utilized QDA Miner software for data analysis.

A variety of factors shape consumers' choices, especially when it comes to sustainability. For instance, economic aspects, such as income and product pricing, can significantly influence consumers purchasing decisions (Gherheş and Fărcaşiu, 2021). When financial resources are limited, individuals often prioritize more affordable options, frequently at the expense of eco-friendly alternatives. Social influences are equally important in consumers' decision-making processes, encompassing peer pressure and cultural norms (Thanki et al., 2022). In the digital age, platforms such as social media amplify trends related to sustainability, fostering a heightened awareness and encouraging community support for eco-conscious practices (Diaconeasa et al., 2022). Personal factors also play a significant role, as individual values and levels of environmental awareness guide preferences toward sustainable options (Tomşa et al., 2021). Psychological factors introduce another layer of complexity; perceptions and motivations often lead to a healthy skepticism of greenwashing. More consumers are questioning the legitimacy of vague or misleading eco-claims, demanding transparency and accountability from brands that present themselves as sustainable (Santos, Coelho and Marques, 2024). Technological advancements, particularly the rise of e-commerce, have made it easier for consumers to discover and purchase sustainable products (Montreuil Carmona et al., 2024). Finally, demographic factors, especially age, significantly shape preferences. Millennials and Generation Z tend to demonstrate a greater awareness of environmental issues and a stronger commitment to sustainability compared to older generations (Casalegno, Candelo and Santoro, 2022). This generational shift reflects a broader societal movement toward increased environmental responsibility and an enhanced demand for sustainable living practices.

Building upon the theoretical framework previously established, the authors conducted a comprehensive literature review that examined the following aspects related to sustainable consumption: the meaning of the concept, its theoretical implications, and the factors that may influence consumers' adoption of sustainable consumption habits. Consequently, the authors developed the following research questions: **(Q1)** What are the benefits of sustainable consumption that may cultivate positive attitudes among consumers?; **(Q2)** What barriers to sustainable consumption may contribute to negative attitudes among consumers? This study attempts to address this research gap by proposing a new research framework for future investigation. The objective is to identify and analyze the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian consumers aged 25 to 34, who have graduated from business administration programs and live in urban areas, regarding sustainable consumption.

The findings suggest that, while the informants generally exhibited a favorable attitude toward sustainable consumption and demonstrated awareness of its benefits, they identified more barriers than advantages concerning sustainable consumption. Therefore, although Romanian consumers aged 25 to 34 in urban areas are receptive to environmentally responsible practices, the challenges and contextual constraints they encounter significantly reduce their propensity to engage in sustainable consumption. The purchase of sustainable goods is often impeded by consumers' perception of these products as expensive. This paper is structured as follows: the second section presents a review of the existing scientific literature, the third section details the materials and methods employed in the data collection and analysis process, the fourth section addresses the results and their interpretation, and the fifth section reveals the conclusions of the paper.

1. Review of the scientific literature

1.1. From sustainability to sustainable consumption

The origins of the concept of sustainability can be traced back to the 19th century when it was first used in Germany (Montreuil Carmona et al., 2024). Subsequent to this, the concept of sustainability underwent expansion in the United States of America (USA) with the seminal contribution of Gifford Pinchot, a pioneer of the American conservation movement (Ayar and Gürbüz, 2021). As initially theorized in relation to natural resources and agriculture, the concept has since been expanded to encompass a broader range of techniques that facilitate the consumption and sustainable management of resources. Moreover, numerous business organizations all over the world have designed and implemented not only new corporate and/or business strategies (Toma and Grădinaru, 2016), but also innovative sustainable business models (Toma and Tohănean, 2019) in order to become socially responsible companies (Toma, 2013; Marinescu and Toma, 2015).

At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, sustainability was defined as a comprehensive approach that seeks to fulfill the needs of current and future generations (Haider, Shannon, and Moschis, 2022). Sustainable development is predicative on the understanding that present decisions have long-term repercussions, thereby emphasizing the necessity of achieving equilibrium between economic and social advancement and environmental conservation (Vergura et al., 2023). The Brundtland Commission of the United Nations defines sustainability as development that addresses the needs of the present without jeopardizing the capacity of future generations to address their own needs (Kostadinova, 2016). These increasing environmental concerns led to a related concept, namely sustainable consumption. First introduced at the Oslo Symposium in 1994, sustainable consumption emphasizes the importance of purchasing and using services and products in a way that effectively meets basic human needs while also enhancing quality of life (Haider, Shannon, and Moschis, 2022).

1.2. Consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards sustainable consumption

Consumers generally express a favorable attitude toward environmentally friendly practices, acknowledging their vital role in promoting environmental protection and fostering social responsibility. However, perspectives among consumers vary considerably (Trudel, 2019). Some feel a personal obligation to contribute to sustainability, considering that individual actions can lead to significant change (Milfont and Markowitz, 2016). In contrast, others argue that the responsibility for sustainable practices should primarily lie with governments and corporations, which possess greater resources and influence to effect systemic change (David Lee et al., 2016). Furthermore, perceptions of eco-friendly products differ widely. While some consumers associate these products with higher quality and ethical standards, viewing them as superior choices that align with their values, others remain skeptical and consider eco-friendly items to be no different from traditional products in terms of function or effectiveness (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019). This diversity of attitudes highlights the complexity of consumer behavior regarding sustainability and reflects the ongoing debate about individual versus collective responsibility in addressing environmental challenges (Trudel, 2019; Imbrișcă and Toma, 2020).

Encouraging individuals to adopt sustainable behavior represents a significant challenge for our society today, as highlighted by the Ayar and Gürbüz (2021). Within the context of sustainable consumption, a significant issue arises: consumers often show reluctance to engage in practices that demand personal sacrifices, such as committing additional time, making extra effort, or changing established habits. This resistance may arise from various factors, including the perceived inconvenience of sustainable choices, the initial costs associated with more environmentally friendly options, or the absence of immediate rewards (Sheoran and Kumar, 2022). As a result, even when the ultimate goal is to benefit society by promoting sustainable practices and fostering a healthier, more sustainable future, individuals often prioritize their immediate needs and comfort over long-term advantages that contribute to the collective good (David Lee et al., 2016). This discrepancy creates a significant barrier to the widespread adoption of sustainable behaviors and underscores the need for innovative strategies to motivate and assist consumers in embracing these vital changes (Milfont and Markowitz, 2016).

2. Research methodology

A total of 20 Romanian consumers participated in this qualitative study. The informants were randomly selected from a group of 32 individuals and comprised of 10 males and 10 females. The participants were selected from among Romanian graduate students in business administration, specifically focusing on

individuals aged 25 to 34 who reside in urban areas. As graduate students in business administration, they are familiar with the concept of sustainability and its practices. Moreover, individuals in the early stages of their professional careers typically possess requisite financial resources and a significant level of financial independence. In-depth interviews were conducted to address the research question. The interview guide included the following questions: How would you define sustainability?; What does making sustainable choices mean to you?; What are the benefits of sustainable consumption?; What factors may hinder you from making sustainable consumption choices?"

To explore the benefits and barriers to sustainable consumption among Romanian consumers, online word cloud software was used to visualize the key themes that emerged from participant responses. A thematic analysis was further conducted to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of the informants concerning sustainable consumption. Thematic maps were developed to identify and report significant themes within the data. Initial codes were derived from informants' responses and organized into potential themes; these were then refined further. The analysis began with transcribing the interviewees' answers, followed by repeated readings to familiarize ourselves with the content. Significant lines related to the research questions were identified and summarized in participants' words. Each of these summaries was assigned a concise code name to encapsulate its essence and facilitate effective data management using the QDA Miner software. The identified codes were then grouped into themes, the definition of which came from data extracts relevant to these themes. This approach resulted in two distinct themes that reflect the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian consumers aged 25 to 34, thereby providing insights into factors influencing sustainability consumption choices.

3. Results and discussion

The analysis of word clouds led to a better understanding of how individuals perceive sustainable consumption as a concept and a practice. Through the analysis of thematic maps derived from the informants' responses, the authors were able to identify key factors influencing sustainable consumption and explore the potential implications of sustainable decision-making. As illustrated in Figure no. 1, the term **digitalization** emerged as the most frequently mentioned word associated with sustainability, highlighting the growing importance of technology in shaping sustainable behavior.



Figure no. 1. Terms associated with the sustainability concept

Given the respondents' tech-savvy nature and high activity on digital platforms, most informants associate sustainability with innovations such as e-commerce platforms for promoting eco-friendly products, digital tools, or smart mobile applications for optimizing energy use. Urban environments, with superior access to high-speed internet and technological infrastructure, reinforce this perception, making digital solutions more visible and accessible. The emphasis on digitization indicates that consumers perceive technology as a facilitator of sustainable behavior, enabling informed choices and efficient use of resources: "Digitalization promotes the development and utilization of technologies under the aspect of sustainability" (Respondent 11; age 31; male). Furthermore, the increasing integration of digital solutions into sustainability initiatives on a global scale might have influenced respondents' strong association of sustainability with digitalization.

Following digitalization, other terms associated with sustainability were as follows: **cost, the environment, waste, resources, and management**. Cost indicates an awareness of the economic implications of sustainable practices, suggesting that financial barriers or incentives have a significant impact on consumer behavior. Environment and waste indicate a strong concern for environmental impacts, with consumers likely to associate sustainability with reducing pollution and minimizing waste through recycling or circular economy practices. Resources indicate a recognition of the necessity to conserve natural resources such as

water. Management reflects a belief in structured approaches such as policies or corporate strategies to achieve sustainability goals. Additionally, it refers to how one plans the income and expenses of a household. In a nutshell, the aforementioned terms illustrate that most informants perceive sustainability as a complex interplay of economic, environmental, and personal factors.

On the other hand, as shown in Figure no. 2, the term **choice** emerged as the most frequently mentioned word associated with sustainable consumption, followed by **product** and **expensive** among participants. The participant's emphasis on choice may reflect a wider cultural shift among younger urban Romanians towards individual responsibility in addressing environmental challenges: "Sustainable consumption is a choice that each of us should make" (Respondent 2; age 26; female). Furthermore, it may indicate that the informants attach significant importance to autonomy with regard to sustainable consumption. The emphasis on product reveals a focus on the tangible aspects of sustainability, such as the quality, origin, or environmental friendliness of goods: "Sustainability is linked to green products. Examples include smart home systems that save energy" (Respondent 8; age 29; male). The term expensive underlines the perception that sustainable products are often more expensive, which can be a barrier for individuals despite their interest in sustainable consumption: "Sustainability is expensive. I know it is for the greater good, but many cannot afford to make sustainable choices" (Respondent 8; age 29; male). Sustainable consumption was perceived by most informants as a conscious effort to align their purchasing habits with environmental and ethical values.



Figure no. 2. Terms associated with the sustainable consumption concept

3.1. Reviewed theme no. 1: Benefits of sustainable consumption (positive attitudes)

The authors have identified the benefits of sustainable consumption as one of the two themes that emerged during the in-depth interview sessions. The analysis of the informant's responses yielded three potential sub-themes: environmental, social, economic, and personal benefits. In the context of *personal benefits*, **fulfillment** has emerged as a significant motivational factor. One participant highlighted, "If we all take steps to consume sustainably, our children and grandchildren will benefit from an even better future. Contributing to this collective effort provides me with a sense of fulfillment" (Respondent 19; age 32; female). Most informants stated that engaging in environmentally responsible behaviors enhances their sense of purpose and personal satisfaction. **Health** considerations also play a crucial role in sustainable consumption choices, with many participants favoring organic foods and natural products. One informant stated, "Sustainable consumption refers to purchasing healthier, natural products produced in conditions benefiting consumers and the environment" (Respondent 5; age 28; female).

Furthermore, sustainable consumption was frequently associated with an improved **quality of life**: "Sustainable consumption enhances the quality of life. We can eat healthier and breathe in cleaner air" (Respondent 13; age 26; male). Concerning *environmental benefits*, the interviewees demonstrated a strong awareness of the broader ecological impacts of their choices. Commonly cited outcomes of sustainable consumption include the **reduction of carbon footprints**, the **preservation of natural resources**, and the **minimization of pollution**. "I often encounter advertisements from companies on social media that emphasize carbon footprint reduction. Sustainable consumption involves making choices that minimize our impact on the environment and its resources" (Respondent 7; age 33; male). Regarding *social benefits*, several informants emphasized that sustainability fosters education and awareness at both individual and collective levels. One participant highlighted, "My children's kindergarten has initiated a community garden, which serves as an excellent opportunity to educate everyone, particularly the children, concerning the importance of sustainable agriculture. While at kindergarten, they only consume products grown in this garden. Making sustainable choices is essential and requires both education and collaboration. These choices contribute to a better society" (Respondent 15; age 30; female). In terms of *economic benefits* associated with sustainable consumption choices, supporting **local consumption** was perceived as a means

to support the development of local businesses, decrease reliance on imports, and cultivate stronger community ties: “I usually opt for purchasing locally made products, including clothes and food, as this reduces our reliance on imported goods” (Respondent 17; age 34; female).

3.2. Reviewed theme no. 2: Barriers to sustainable consumption (negative attitudes)

The second theme that emerged during the in-depth interview sessions was barriers to sustainable consumption. The analysis of the informant's responses yielded three potential sub-themes: **economic factors** (limited income, high price sensitivity, and limited government incentives); **infrastructure** (limited waste management infrastructure); **knowledge and awareness** (lack of awareness, low environmental education, and lack of labeling awareness); **cultural and social factors** (cultural norms and low trust in institutions); **personal factors** (skepticism toward green products, time constraints, and short-term thinking).

The *financial constraints* hinder most informants from making sustainable consumption choices. All interviewees indicated that their **limited income** significantly influences their purchasing behavior, despite their willingness to acquire sustainable goods (e.g., green products, perceiving them as healthier options): “I am familiar with the benefits of green products for personal health and the environment. However, my current income constraints limit my ability to purchase these items. As a result, I often opt for products that are on sale” (Respondent 20; age 27; male). Eco-friendly products are often more expensive than conventional ones for several reasons. These include environmentally friendly production methods, strict certification processes, and higher costs associated with sustainable sourcing. Many Romanian consumers tend to be **price-sensitive**. Although higher prices are frequently linked to better quality, when financial constraints arise, individuals often choose lower-quality alternatives. This creates a paradox where, despite their intentions to adopt environmentally responsible practices, they are often undermined by economic pressures, ultimately undermining their commitment to sustainable living.

Moreover, **inadequate waste management infrastructure** has been identified as a barrier to the sustainable disposal of products. For instance, one informant highlighted, “Disposing of goods in an environmentally friendly way is challenging due to a lack of necessary infrastructure” (Respondent 16; age 31; male). Another significant barrier to sustainable consumption identified among participants was the **lack of knowledge and awareness**: “I am not familiar with the criteria that determine whether a product is sustainable. I seek to make more informed choices; however, I do not know where to begin or what specific information to look for on product labels” (Respondent 1; age 27; male). This knowledge gap is accentuated by minimal exposure to **environmental education**, which restricts the development of a foundational understanding of sustainability principles and their practical implications. Furthermore, **difficulties in comprehending eco-labels and certifications** hinder consumers’ ability to identify and trust sustainable products, as the complexity or ambiguity of such labeling systems often leads to confusion or skepticism.

Cultural and social factors further impede sustainable consumption choices among informants. Deeply embedded cultural norms rooted in **traditional consumption patterns** often favor conventional, non-sustainable products over their eco-friendly alternatives: “During my childhood, the concept of organic or sustainable products was not something that was given any thought. It is not part of our culture to prioritize sustainability, so I continue to buy and use the products I am familiar with” (Respondent 4; age 29; male). These established habits, shaped by historical and socioeconomic contexts, lead to resistance to the adoption of newer, more sustainable options, as consumers may perceive such changes as inconsistent with established practices. Additionally, **widespread skepticism toward authorities and business practices** regarding sustainability initiatives further undermines engagement with sustainable consumption.

Personal factors also pose impediments to sustainable consumption choices among informants. For instance, as stated by most interviewees, **time constraints** associated with busy urban lifestyles limit the opportunity for these consumers to research and evaluate sustainable products, thereby prioritizing convenience over environmental considerations: “Understanding how to make informed and sustainable consumption choices is crucial, yet time is a limited resource” (Respondent 9; age 32; female). In addition, a propensity for short-term thinking, where immediate needs take priority over long-term environmental benefits, undermines the adoption of sustainable consumption practices.

While the informants demonstrated a generally positive attitude toward sustainable consumption and exhibited familiarity with its associated advantages, they also identified a greater number of barriers than benefits. The predominance of these barriers underscores the notion that positive attitudes alone are insufficient to catalyze meaningful changes in consumption patterns.

Conclusions

Sustainable consumption has become a pivotal theme in the global conversation concerning environmental responsibility and resource management. Numerous institutions have proposed ways to motivate individuals and companies to engage in sustainable consumption practices. However, most consumers continue to engage in unsustainable practices characterized by excessive consumption.

A qualitative research approach was employed, which resulted in several contributions that are in line with the aim of this paper. From a theoretical point of view, the initial contribution addresses the identified research gap, namely the necessity to identify and analyze the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian consumers in a qualitative manner, concerning the benefits and barriers to sustainable consumption. The present study examined sustainable consumption, focusing on its primary benefits and barriers for consumers. The analysis yielded two key themes: the benefits of sustainable consumption (fostering positive attitudes towards sustainable consumption) and the obstacles in adopting sustainable consumption practices (fostering negative attitudes towards sustainable consumption). Informants noted improvements in quality of life, environmental protection, and community growth as benefits of sustainable consumption. However, they highlighted several barriers, such as financial issues, lack of waste management infrastructure, limited knowledge, cultural consumption beliefs, and financial and time constraints. The identified barriers are more significant in terms of their impact than the benefits. This suggests a disparity between the knowledge individuals have and the actions they take.

From a practical point of view, this research highlights the importance of government policies and actions in the sustainable consumption domain. The government should facilitate the adoption of sustainable habits among consumers through the implementation of awareness campaigns. Furthermore, the government should introduce specific legislation that imposes sustainable consumption on an individual level. Public higher education institutions should consider incorporating courses centered on sustainable consumption into their curricula. This initiative aims to enhance students' awareness of sustainable consumption practices and foster a deeper understanding of their significance in contemporary society.

This study provides important insights into the perceptions and attitudes of Romanian consumers regarding sustainable consumption. Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge several limitations inherent in this research. Due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, the findings may be influenced by participant biases linked to the chosen research methodology. Furthermore, the study was conducted among Romanian consumers, residing in urban areas only, aged 25 to 34.

Despite these limitations, the current research highlights critical issues concerning Romanian consumers' attitudes and perceptions towards sustainable consumption. Considering the relatively even demographic distribution between rural and urban areas in Romania, there is a significant opportunity to extend this study to include rural regions. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate other age groups, such as those aged 35 to 44 and 45 to 55. These expansions could provide further valuable insights and improve the general understanding of sustainable consumption practices within the Romanian context.

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