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Eco-Consumerism: A Paradox of Opposing Ideas

Savica Dimitrieska, Liza Alili Sulejmani

Abstract

Consumerism and ecology are two opposing phenomena that rest on entirely different principles. Consumerism supports excessive use of goods and services, which leads to increased production, i.e., higher usage of natural resources, raw materials, energy, equipment, and labor. On the other hand, ecology advocates for the sustainable consumption of resources, minimizing energy and land use, and environmental protection. The continuous rise of production and consumption leads to deforestation, depletion of natural resources, water and air pollution, natural disasters, climate change, and a severe loss of biodiversity. Human activities threaten the health and life of all living things on the planet. Consumerism simultaneously fosters economic growth and enhances individual well-being, while also exerting a profound and often detrimental impact on environmental sustainability. However, a healthy environment is not compatible with prevailing consumer behavior, characterized by consumerism and increased production.

The paper, based on both secondary and primary data, aims to explore whether consumerism and ecology can converge in pursuit of ensuring survival, sustainable well-being, and a future for humanity.

Keywords: consumerism, ecology, natural resources, energy, environmental protection

Introduction

Throughout history, people have consumed goods and services to satisfy their needs. However, the quantity of goods they consumed has varied over time. The significant consumption of goods and services was recorded at the beginning of the 20th century, during the Industrial Revolution. Prior to this period, only the wealthy and powerful could afford to spend heavily on goods and services. With industrialization and urbanization, products became widely available to the general population at affordable prices and in quantities they desired. Cultural values started to change, consumption eventually became ubiquitous, and modern consumerism emerged (Stearns, 2006). This era was marked by the emergence of modern marketing, which came after the concepts of production, product innovation, and aggressive selling. Marketing emphasized understanding and meeting consumer needs with an excessive quantity of goods, avoiding what is known as "marketing myopia.". It supports the large consumption of products and services for the personal satisfaction of consumers. The famous phrase "Consumer is the king!" flooded the educational marketing textbooks and literature. The rise in consumer demand not only improved individual standards of living and personal satisfaction but also stimulated production and contributed to overall economic growth. So, from an economic and especially from a marketing point of view, the consumption of products is a positive trend that fosters economic growth and enhances individual consumer satisfaction. Products that were once a luxury became standard objects in many households. People started to purchase goods, since buying was no longer a distant dream, but instead a daily practice that could both satisfy personal needs and boost national economies. People spend not only on necessities or for meeting functional needs, but also for satisfying emotional, prestige, and status needs. The new paradigm is "you are what you own" (Lage et al., 2022). And another expression from that period is FOMO, or fear of missing out, the fear of having nothing when others have everything (Rivera & Lallmahomed, 2016).

However, over time, this pattern has evolved from ordinary levels of consumption to an excessive and compulsive practice known as consumerism. Consumerism, as obsessive consumption, occurs at the expense of the environment, and its rise presents a growing, continuous, and alarming threat to ecological systems. The environmental degradation driven by consumerism is substantial, as evidenced by numerous expert analyses and reports. According to the United Nations 2025 Report, the most pressing environmental problems include climate change, extreme weather, rising sea levels, an increase in floods, heatwaves, and wildfires.

Additional significant concerns encompass air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, deforestation, soil degradation, the depletion of natural resources, and the escalating problem of waste management. And all these problems are the result of human activity.

The contradiction between these two phenomena, consumerism and ecology, that is, humans against nature, is intensifying. A balanced and pragmatic approach to reconciling these opposing ideas lies in the promotion of eco-consumerism and societal marketing that support the consumption of products that are both environmentally conscious and socially responsible. This perspective does not reject consumption per se, but rather encourages the purchase of products that either do not harm the environment or whose environmental impact is minimized to the greatest extent possible.

Literature Review

Eco-consumerism unites the two contradictory terms ecology and consumerism. Driscoll's (2025) simplest definition of eco-consumerism is that it is the practice of purchasing with a focus on the environmental impact of products. (hybrid cars, organic textiles, and sustainably sourced food items, which are believed to support both ecological and social welfare). This is where the term pro-environmental behavior comes from, which means conscious behavior that reduces the negative environmental impacts of one's actions (Uribe et al., 2023). Consumers are changing their behavior and buying products that are environmentally certified or have eco-labels. (Peter & Lister, 2010). According to Korkmaz & Altan (2024), ecological products (eco-friendly products) should be defined as products that are renewable, reusable, recyclable and preserved and do not pollute the world. They should have the following vital qualities: a) they do not have negative effects on living beings; b) they protect nature; c) they use limited resources in their disposal, d) they are renewable and can be recycled and e) they contain materials which do not harm the environment. According to Durif et al. (2010), an ecological product is one whose design and features (including production and strategy) use recyclable (renewable/ toxic free/biodegradable) resources and which improves environmental impact or reduces environmental toxic damage throughout its entire life cycle. Based on the use of environmentally friendly products, consumer behaviors can also be categorized. Kostadinova (2022) explains that according to human's main life functions, consumer behavior can be ecological in the following areas: nutrition (food waste

reduction, sustainable diets, etc.), mobility (use of environmentally friendly transport, fuels and vehicles, car-sharing, etc.), housing (sustainable building, energy and water conservation, etc.), clothing (preference for ethical clothing, organic fabrics, etc.), education (teaching sustainable living, promoting sustainability, etc.), health (healthy and environment-friendly lifestyles) and leisure (sustainable tourism, leisure practices with low resource intensity, etc.).

Considering that eco-consumerism means several things (such as using ecological products, eco-behavior of consumers, eco-labels and certification, ecological gap, etc.), the following table presents some of the more significant eco-terms that are increasingly used in the literature on eco-consumerism.

Methodology

This paper uses secondary and primary data to explain and analyze its purpose. Primary data was collected through a survey for which a questionnaire with open and closed questions was prepared. The questionnaire was electronically distributed in the period July-August 2025 and collected were relevant answers from 90 respondents. The analysis of the questionnaire was done using descriptive statistics.

Discussion and Analysis

In recent years, many primary surveys have been conducted on consumer sentiment regarding the purchase of ecological products. If there is no "ecological gap" involved, the answers are very optimistic and in a positive direction for preserving the environment and using ecological products. Namely, according to the results of the primary survey, 99% of respondents are willing to pay an extra price for ecological products. Almost the same high percentage of 98% of consumers in the survey believe that individual actions of purchasing environmentally friendly products can save the environment. In the Global Outlook on Sustainability Report of the American market research company Mintel for 2024, a paradoxical change in consumer behavior towards ecological activities has been recorded. On the one hand, the belief that the end of the planet is approaching, but on the other, the increasing purchase of ecological products is astonishing (Mintel, 2025). The study reports that half of the respondents believe that their own individual actions can help the environment (Brown, 2024). However, there are different consumer behaviors for different products. Thus, in our own research, the most purchased environmentally

Table 1

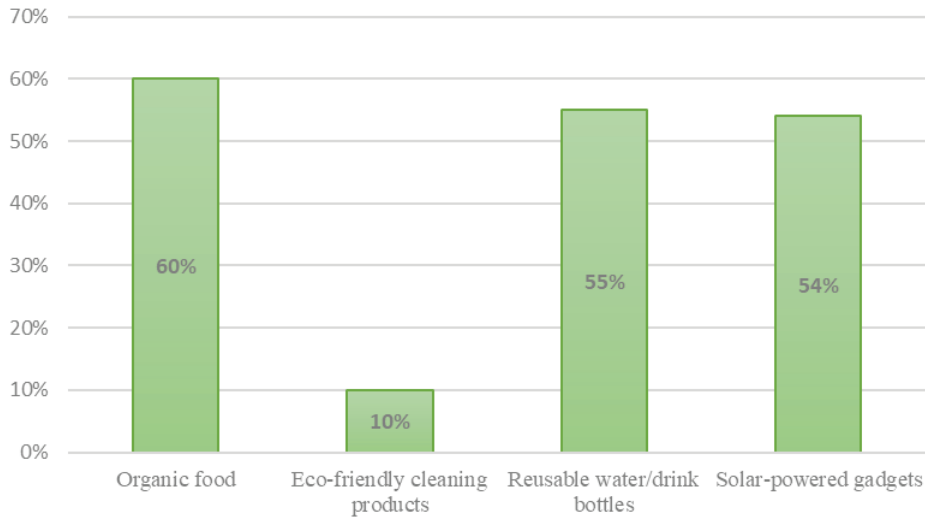
Small Eco-Dictionary

ECO TERMINOLOGY	
Anthropogenic	Originating in human activity
Biodegradable	A product or substance that can decompose naturally (by bacteria or living organisms). Meaning no waste to landfill!
Eco-anxiety	Psychological distress and constant fear of the harm that humanity may suffer due to environmental problems (water pollution, air pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity, etc.)
Ecological footprint	A measure of negative impact a person or activity has on the environment.
Fossil Fuels	A fossil fuel is formed over millions of years from organic matter such as plants and other life forms. Fossil fuels include coal, natural gas, oil and petroleum
Greendex	The Greendex is a quantitative study whreas participants were asked questions about their energy use, consumer product use, transportation practices, beliefs about the environment and sustainability, and knowledge of environmental issues. The answers were then calculated to churn out a Greendex score–the relative environmental impact of a person's consumer choices. Individual scores are averaged to create a mean score for each country. The Greendex measures the impact of the average consumer in each country surveyed; it does not measure the environmental impact of a total country.
Greenhouse Effect	Problem caused by increased quantities of gases such as carbon dioxide in the air. These gases trap the heat from the sun, and cause a gradual rise in the temperature of the Earth's atmosphere.
Greenhouse Gas	A gas that contributes to the greenhouse effect. Carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons (CFC's) are examples of greenhouse gases.
Green gap (ecological gap)	Consumers claim to buy environmentally friendly products and are concerned about the environment, but they do not show this in reality in supermarkets.
Green Living	A lifestyle which seeks to limit harm to the environment.
Greenwashing	Misleading information and false claims by companies that they are "green", when in reality they are not, which is a deception for consumers
IPCC – The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change.
Organic	The production of food or farming methods that doesn't use chemicals.
Renewable Energy	Energy which is collected from renewable resources like the sun, wind, waves and geothermal heat.
Slow Fashion	Reducing your consumption of clothes and purchasing quality instead of quantity, i.e. clothing items that can last for years or even a lifetime.
Sustainability	Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (United Nations Brundtland Commission, 1987)
Waste Stream	A waste stream follows a product from its source to its disposal, whether that's in landfill or recycling.
Water Footprint	It measures the amount of water used to produce each of the goods and services we use.
Zero Waste	A popular new movement where individuals and families try to create no waste which will end up in landfill. Often they try to limit the amount they send to be recycled as well.

friendly products are food, water bottles or bottles for other beverages, and the use of energy-efficient electrical appliances (Figure 1).

Figure 1

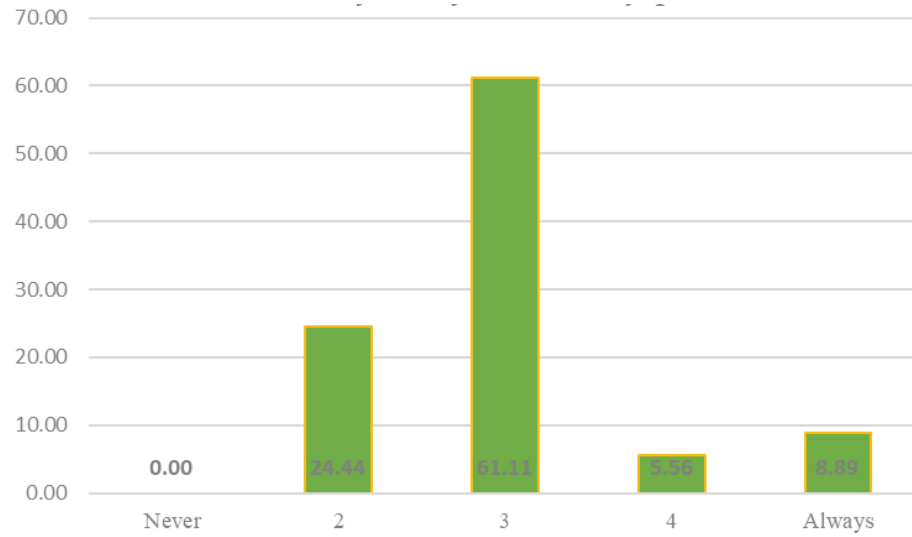
Mostly purchased eco-products



Globally, in the food industry, consumers are increasingly interested in organic food, and 27% of them are looking for alternatives to meat. In the fashion industry, 62% of consumers want to buy brands that use environmentally friendly materials in production. The largest percentage, 73% of consumers, consider product energy efficiency to be the most important in electronic purchases. In global markets, energy-efficient devices and appliances are increasingly being offered (Brown, 2024).

Figure 2

Frequency of buying eco-products

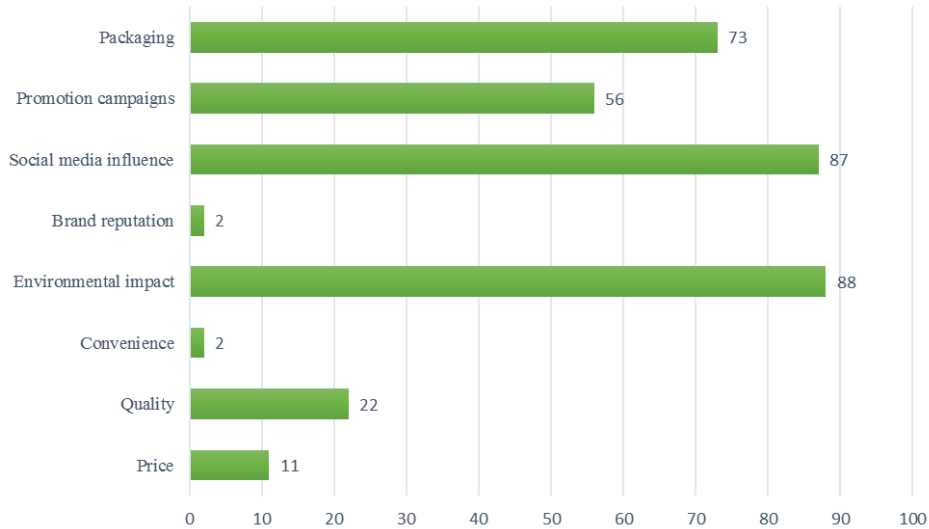


When asked about the frequency of purchasing ecological products, the respondents' "unexpected" answer was that it has never happened that they did not buy ecological products. This means that they are constantly looking for ecological products in the market to satisfy their needs. This speaks of high environmental awareness among consumers about purchasing and consuming ecological products.

When asked what factors influence consumers to buy ecological products, the results also confirm a high level of environmental awareness. Consumers mostly buy ecological products because of their willingness to protect the environment (88%). Second place, 87%, belongs to the influence of social media. For consumers, price is not an important factor, 11%, which confirms the claim that they are willing to pay a higher price for environmentally friendly products.

Figure 3

Factors influencing the environmental behaviour of consumers

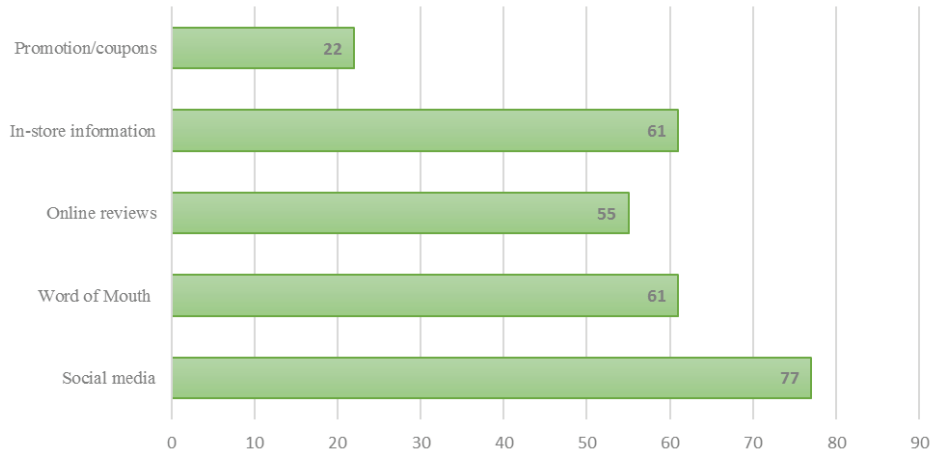


However, it should be noted that eco-consumption of products differs across generations. Globally, research shows that 68% of Generation Z and 64% of Millennials are more interested in purchasing eco-friendly products, while only 51% of Generation X and 43% of Baby Boomers share such a sentiment (Brown, 2024). This generational divide is stimulating many brands to tailor their sustainability messaging to younger consumers.

In the following figure, it can be seen that the most powerful tools for spreading information about eco-consumerism are social media and Word of Mouth. This shows that consumers trust other consumers, friends, colleagues, and relatives to buy eco-products. These are indicators that can be used by all stakeholders (government, media, environmental NGOs, businesses, etc.) that promote a clean environment.

Figure 4

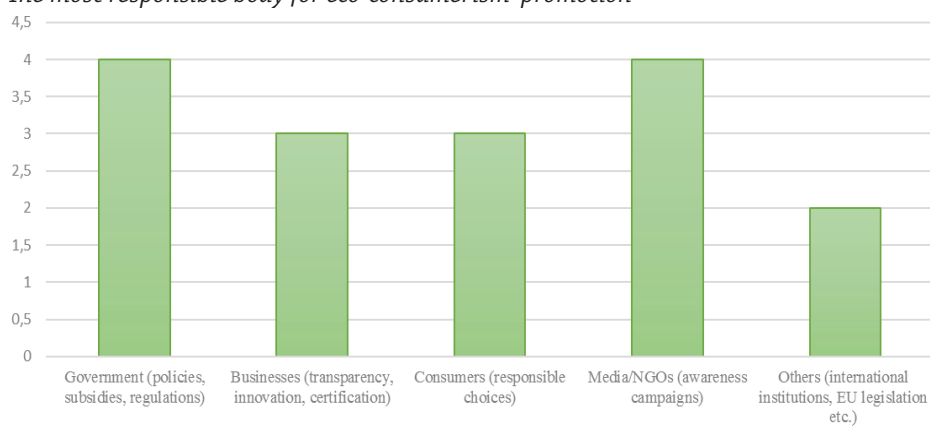
The most influential sources of information about eco-products



It is understandable that all stakeholders should care about environmental issues, but according to consumers, the government, as well as the media, are most responsible for promoting eco-consumerism.

Figure 5

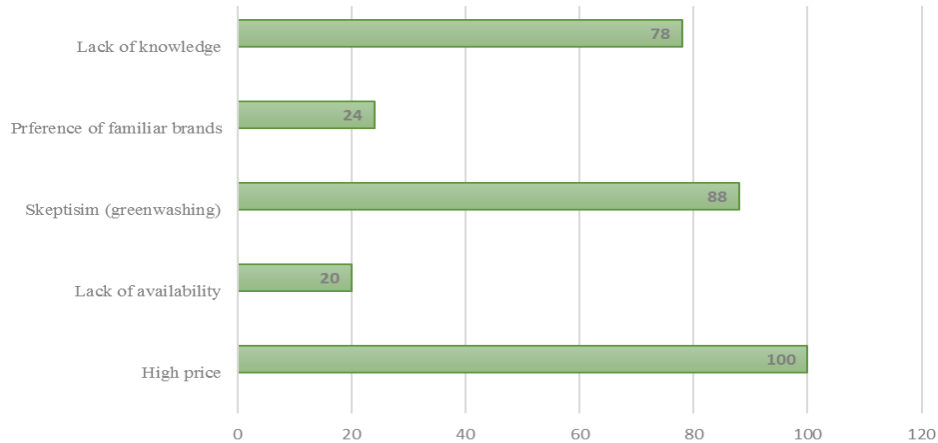
The most responsible body for eco-consumerism' promotion



The last question is very important and several conclusions should be drawn from it about the limiting factors for purchasing ecological products.

Figure 6

Limiting factors for buying eco-products



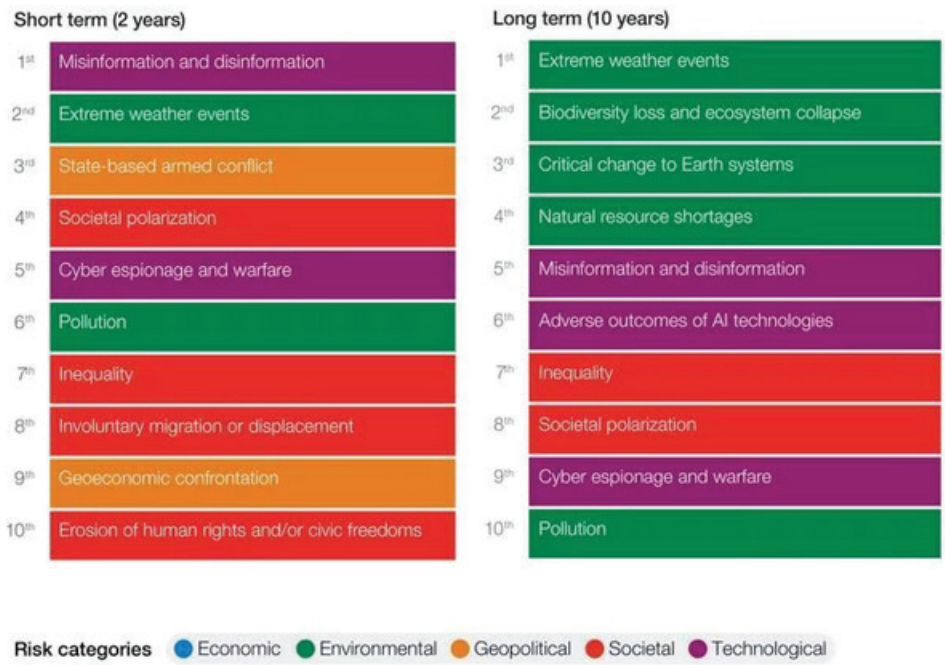
Although respondents are willing to pay extra for environmentally friendly products, they still consider price to be a limiting factor (amazing 100% of respondents share this sentiment). Environmentally friendly products are more expensive and businesses need to work more productively to reduce their cost. Businesses will also have to work to reduce and eliminate greenwashing and spread skepticism among consumers regarding their claim that they are focused on producing and promoting environmentally friendly products, which is not the case in reality.

Conclusion

Alarming data on environmental problems were presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos 2025. The Global Risk Report prepared by Elsner, Atkinson and Zahidi (2025) for the World Economic Forum lists global risks ranked by severity over the short and long term. In 10 years, all the top global risks are related to environmental threats.

Table 2

Global risks ranked by severity over the short and long term



Source: Elsner, M, Atkinson, G., Zahidi, S. (2025). Global Risk Report 2025. World Economic Forum

Eco-consumerism, as a new direction in consumer behaviour, must be actively supported and promoted by all stakeholders. Consumers need to adopt more sustainable habits if they wish to lead healthier, longer lives and ensure a liveable planet for future generations. Every individual can make a significant impact by caring for the environment in the places where they live, work, socialize, and engage in recreational activities. Businesses have a crucial role to play by offering environmentally friendly products that are backed by credible eco-labels and environmental certifications. Likewise, governments should create policies and incentives that encourage sustainable practices in industry, transportation, and commerce. Ultimately, all stakeholders—individuals, businesses, and governments—must fulfil their ecological responsibilities to secure a better future for generations to come. Accelerating progress towards achieving climate and nature goals is critical for the health of the planet and its people. (World Economic Forum, 2025) One of the

strongest messages of the forum which can also serve as a conclusion is that of Jesper Brodin, CEO of IKEA, according to which: "This is a transformation. It's not a small change. It's one of the biggest potentially we have experienced in hundreds of years, maybe in humanity." We must all make an effort so that both we and nature can live.

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