

Joanna Wardzała

ORCID: 0000-0003-4475-3795

University of Wrocław

joanna.wardzala@uwr.edu.pl

Wanda Patrzalek

ORCID: 0000-0002-1545-7367

University of Wrocław

wanda.patrzalek@uwr.edu.pl

Contexts of changes in the habits in contemporary consumption: The pandemic and the crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the changes in consumption habits during the pandemic period as well as the impact of the crisis on young people's consumption behavior. The study presents the considerations which are based on the authors' own research, which involved the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data. A quantitative study was conducted in 2021 on a representative sample of Poles (total number $N = 1,268$). This study aims to determine how much and to what extent the pandemic experiences have changed the consumer behavior habits of Poles.

It was hypothetically assumed that the post-pandemic experiences had a significant impact on changing the consumption habits of Poles.

In order to determine the durability of the changes in consumption that appeared in 2021, a qualitative research was carried out in 2023, in which a crisis in the consumption behavior of young people was conducted as an in-depth analysis. This research was conducted by the FGI (focus group interview) intelligence method among five focus groups. It assumed that young people are particularly sensitive to changes and they undertake compensatory consumption behavior during the crisis period.

As the main result, significant changes were found in the consumption habits of Poles. They result from the complex and difficult socio-economic situation of our country. Emerging trends in sustainable consumption have become polarized due to the pandemic, which has resulted in an increase in health-promoting behavior, especially among older and better-educated people, while compulsive consumer behaviors have begun to appear in the consumption patterns of young people in a difficult situation, as well as compensation based on “consolation” with shopping.

1. Introduction

The article presents the contemporary contexts of consumption functioning within the trend of deconsumption in conditions of a crisis situation and compensatory consumption triggered by the post-pandemic experience as well as the fears caused by the uncertain economic and geopolitical situation. The slowdown in consumption does not result from deliberate consumer choices aimed at introducing their own pro-health limitations, but is rather an outcome of reduced purchasing power influenced by the growing rate of inflation. The necessity of adjusting to these changes, based on the social atmosphere of low confidence in the context of the international situation, may prompt the phenomenon of compensatory consumption.

The authors describe the extent to which the contexts of contemporary consumption are related to new trends in consumption resulting from the increase in the level of consumer awareness, in particular deconsumption, health-promoting, and ecological consumption, etc. (Patrzalek, 2022) and how they are the result of “safety” consumption determined by a decline in real income and deterioration of consumer sentiment, leading to addictions and compensatory behaviors. Compulsive consumption is also very important in contemporary consumption contexts, in the post-pandemic period, and has attracted the interest of psychologists who perceive this type of disorder as a symptom of behavioral addiction or loss of impulse control, and on the other hand, sociologists and interdisciplinary consumption researchers focused on diagnosing the social determinants of these disorders, treating them as irrational forms of consumer behavior.

A compensatory purchase may function as a buyer’s escape from work-related stress or personal setbacks. Thus, a given product is not purchased for its use value (or not primarily for its use value), but for the satisfaction that the act of purchasing provides to the buyer, and at the same time in the expectation that it will relieve the frustration caused by an unresolved problem (Lange, 2012).

The reason for the research was an attempt to describe and explain the emerging changes in consumption, but as a result, they were different in relation to different generations of consumers.

2. New trends in consumption against the background of global changes

Modern consumption is conditioned by changes resulting from the post-pandemic situation and the economic instability into which the world was pushed following the Russian attack on Ukraine. This, in turn, brought about a breakdown in the supply chain of the energy fuels which provide the basis of the global economy. The falling consumption dynamics result from growing economic instability and rising inflation, which reduce the households' interest in consumption. At the same time, the influx of refugees from Ukraine stimulates consumption and slightly mitigates these factors (Ministry of Finance, 2022).

The current state of international research on consumer behavior in the present contexts is a reference to the crisis situations triggered by the financial crisis in 2007–2009. At that time it was already possible to observe the emerging tendencies which established a certain model of an internally inconsistent consumer, who on the one hand wished to indulge in the forms of assurance consumption linked to prudence, and on the other, spending money on luxury items — the so-called “lipstick effect” — occurring after the financial crisis in the USA. The emerging new trends in consumption, connected with pro-health and pro-ecology consumption, were repeatedly disrupted by the subsequent pandemic and fuel crises, which caused volatility in consumer behavior connected with buying health foods as a certain form of protection against the pandemic, accompanied by the consumption of junk food as a way of coping with anxiety and crisis-related stress. Similarly, in the case of pro-ecology behavior, the emerging trends of caring about the planet and the natural environment, were placed in the context of the energy crisis in the global economy, resulting in high inflation and recession.

Studies on consumer behavior during economic crises suggest that consumers are then more prone to unhealthy consumption, e.g., convenience snacks and fast food (Theodoridou et al., 2019), as well as consumption of lower-priced products at the expense of their quality (Bejar-Agrela, Godspower-Diejomao et al., 2012). The majority of research on consumer behavior during the pandemic crisis deals with the early stage of its global transmission (Borsellino et al., 2020), and is usually based on selected purchasing aspects or categories of products. These studies focused mainly on preferences beneficial for health, linked to the increased consumption of fruit and vegetables (Bree, 2020), as well as hoarding food (Long and Khoi, 2020). O'Guinn and Faber defined compulsive buying as “chronic, repetitive buying which occurs in response to negative events and feelings” (O'Guinn and Faber, 1989). The followers of using the term “pathological shopping” argue that it better describes the nature of this phenomenon based on an individual losing control over their impulses, leading to serious consequences — psychological, social, professional, and financial (Müller, Mitchell and de Zwaan, 2015), whereas

those favoring the use of terms such as “shopping addiction” and “shopaholism” underline the resemblance of these disorders to the addiction to certain substances. The object of addiction in this case is the act of buying and thus compensating for other areas of one’s life which an individual can obtain through shopping (Reisch, Neuner and Raab, 2004; Rumpf, 2012).

This study attempted a comprehensive approach to a consumer in a time of crisis, not only in the context of their purchasing habits, which establish a certain model of economic and sociological behavior by the appearance of the new behavioral paradigms, set in the categories of fear and frustration, where consumption takes on the form of compensating for existential failures and paradoxically becoming, as in the critique of consumerism, the way of solving the problems of a modern human being.

3. Research methodology

The authors used in their own survey the triangulation of research methods aiming not only at the quantitative definition of the contexts of modern consumption related to the post-pandemic experiences, but also at the identification of the motives in both the compensatory and compulsive consumption, as the forms of relieving the crisis-related stress. The quantitative research was carried out using the method of a diagnostic survey within the framework of the research project financed from the grant awarded to develop the research potential of the Institute of Sociology at the University of Wrocław in 2021. The qualitative research was carried out using the technique of focused group surveys which were carried out among 39 young consumers, as part of the research project on the subject of the financial exclusion of young people from the perspective of compensatory consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic, financed with the IDUB funds of the University of Wrocław.

The diagnostic survey was conducted using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) technique, which in 2021, in the difficult circumstances of direct contact with participants of the survey became one of the very few methods of finding out about the respondents’ circumstances. The research area covered all of Poland. The respondents were selected purposefully, depending on the following independent variables: sex, age, education, marital status, and the net income per person in the respondent’s household. The quantitative research involved 1,268 respondents.

The analysis of the results of the quantitative research was performed based on the SPiSS statistics, whereas the qualitative research using the FGI (focus group interview) technique was realized in April 2023. The respondents comprised residents of Wrocław, aged 18–26, 50% men and 50% women. The focus groups were divided into: full-time students in employment (2), part-time students in employment (1), employed non-students (1), and unemployed (1). The results

of the qualitative research were analyzed by a research consultancy, Insight Lab from Wrocław.

4. Change in consumption habits in the post-pandemic experience

The pandemic crisis has changed human well-being in an irreversible way. The threat and anxiety connected with the COVID-19 pandemic caused a feeling of permanent fear about one’s health, as well as negatively affected psychological and social well-being as a result of the phenomenon of social distancing. The experience of the last few years has prompted the necessity of finding a new model of consumption leading to an improvement in people’s well-being. Hence, the authors attempted to identify the factors which have a negative impact on the state of well-being during a person’s lifetime, see Table 1.

Table 1. Factors reducing the state of well-being during a person’s lifetime

What impacted most negatively the well-being of the respondents during their lifetime	Replies		Percentage of observations
	<i>N</i>	Percentage	
Excessive consumption	182	8.3%	17.6%
Loss of close people	345	15.7%	33.3%
Loss of pets	142	6.5%	13.7%
The pandemic	412	18.7%	39.8%
Worse housing conditions	177	8.0%	17.1%
Pollution of the natural environment	135	6.1%	13.0%
Worse financial conditions	373	16.9%	36.0%
Loss of employment	138	6.3%	13.3%
Worse family relations	285	12.9%	27.5%
Others	12	0.5%	1.2%
Total	2,201	100.0%	212.7%

Source: own research, 2021, *N* = 1,268.

Among the factors which to the greatest extent reduced the well-being of the respondents during their lifetime were: the pandemic (18.7% of replies) and the deterioration in their financial condition (16.9%), followed by the loss of family and close friends (15.7%), deterioration in close relationships (16.9%) and excessive consumption (8.3%).

An important research issue was to establish to what extent the pandemic experience impacted the change in consumption habits. According to the survey, the pandemic impacted these habits, where 17.8% of the respondents described it

as very significant, 37.5% as fairly significant, whereas it was considered a neutral issue by 19.1%, and by the remaining 10.1% as not having such an impact, see Figure 1.

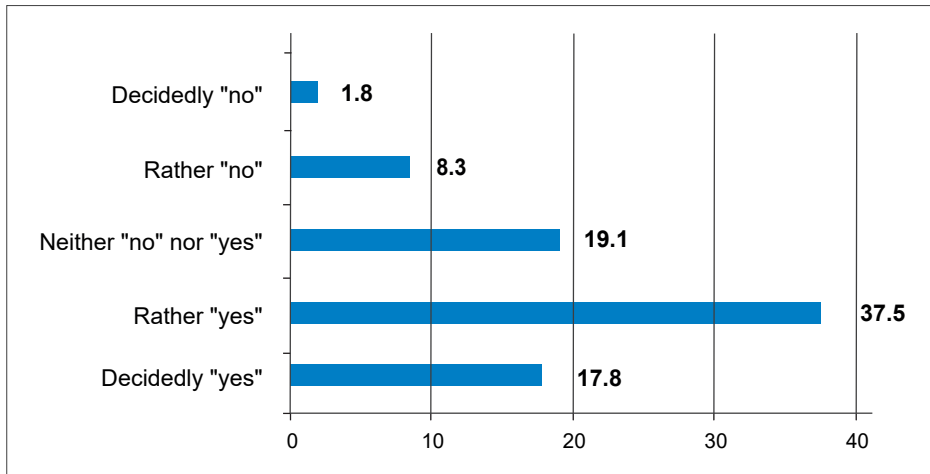


Figure 1. Impact of the pandemic on changing consumption habits

Source: own research, 2021, $N = 1,268$.

Changes in consumption habits under the influence of the pandemic were examined depending on the category of sex, see Table 2.

Table 2. Impact of the pandemic on changes in consumption habits depending on the sex of the respondent

Impact of the pandemic on the change of consumption habits	Specifications	Woman	Man	Non-binary person	Total
Decidedly "yes"	Number	162	62	1	225
	% in the sex category	24.9%	15.5%	9.1%	21.2%
Rather "yes"	Number	286	180	4	470
	% in the sex category	43.9%	45.1%	36.4%	44.3%
Neither "yes" nor "no"	Number	126	111	4	241
	% in the sex category	19.4%	27.8%	36.4%	22.7%
Rather "no"	Number	64	38	2	104
	% in the sex category	9.8%	9.5%	18.2%	9.8%
Decidedly "no"	Number	13	8	0	21
	% in the sex category	2.0%	2.0%	0.0%	2.0%
Total	Number	651	399	11	1,061
	% in the sex category	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	10.0%

Source: own research, 2021, $N = 1,268$.

The results of the research suggest that women far more than men reported that the pandemic changed their consumption habits, as 24.9% of women replied “decidedly yes,” while for men this indicator was 15.5%. Similarly, a larger percentage of men indicated a neutral impact — 27.9%, while the analogous indicator for women was 19.4%.

Elaborating on the issue of changing consumption habits caused by the pandemic, the authors attempted to establish whether the threat to health and life resulted in the increase in healthy consumption habits through a larger intake of fruit and vegetables, and mineral water, as well as a reduction in meat consumption — or was it the opposite case of stress and fear encouraging to a greater extent bad habits in consumption? The analysis of the results suggests that the post-pandemic experience brought an increase in bad habits in consumption, because they led to a growing use of stimulants as indicated by 52.1% of the respondents, including alcohol (25.3%), tobacco (16.0%), narcotics and designer drugs (10.8%). Another symptom of deteriorating consumption habits was an increase in the consumption of unhealthy snacks, indicated by 26.5% of the respondents, while there was only a slight increase in the consumption of mineral water (8.6% of replies) and vegetables (6.6%), with a similar drop in the intake of meat (6.0% of the respondents), see Table 3.

Table 3. Change in consumption habits in the post-pandemic experience

Change of consumption habits in the post-pandemic experience	Number of replies	Percentage of replies	Percentage of observations
Increased consumption of alcohol	595	25.3%	578%
Increase in smoking	376	16.0%	36.5%
Increased use of narcotics, designer drugs, etc.	253	10.8%	24.6%
Increased consumption of unhealthy snacks	623	26.5%	60.5%
Increased consumption of vegetables	154	6.6%	15.0%
Increased consumption of mineral water	201	8.6%	19.5%
Lower meat consumption	140	6.0%	13.6%
Others	6	0.3%	0.6%
Total	2,348	100.0%	228.0%

Source: own research, 2021, *N* = 1,268.

Maintaining bad habits in consumption was examined in relation to the category of age. Among persons who increased their use of alcohol due to the pandemic young people aged 18–20 predominated, as indicated by 77.8% of the respondents, followed by those aged 26–30 (55% of the replies) and 21–25 (54.7%), see Table 4.

In the next part of the study, the authors attempted to establish to what degree the post-pandemic experience resulted in the growth of the self-control activities aimed at restricting bad habits in consumption. The respondents usually indic-

ated their attention to healthy sleeping habits (17.9%), regular exercise (15.2%) and regular eating habits (14.3%), and far less the frequency of medical checkups and regular blood pressure tests, see Table 5.

Table 5. Self-control activities aimed at restricting bad consumption habits

What actions of self-control to reduce bad habits in consumption did you take during the pandemic?	Replies*		
Specifications	<i>N</i>	Percentage	Percentage of observation
Regular blood pressure tests	99	4.0%	9.9%
More frequent medical checkups	167	6.8%	16.6%
Monitoring body weight	357	14.5%	35.6%
Regular exercise	374	15.2%	37.3%
Measuring the level of blood oxygenation	96	3.9%	9.6%
Healthy sleeping habits	440	17.9%	43.8%
Cutting down on smoking	133	5.4%	13.2%
Reduced buying of unhealthy products	254	10.3%	25.3%
Regular meals	352	14.3%	35.1%
Reduced intake of alcohol	172	7.0%	17.1%
Others	14	0.6%	1.4%
Total	2,458	100.0%	244.8%

* More than one answer could be selected.

Source: own research, *N* = 1,268.

Increasing medical monitoring in the post-pandemic experience depended on the category of age, hence it was mainly indicated by older people aged 61–65 (54.5%), those over 65 (33.3%), and those aged 56–60 (21.4%), see Table 6.

In order to establish to what extent changes in consumer behavior resulting from the pandemic-related restrictions were perceived among the respondents, they were analyzed in the context of other regulations such as: the lockdown, wearing face masks, and social distancing, see Table 7. Among all the restrictions, the respondents stressed the lockdown (27.2%), followed by wearing face masks (14.8%), ban on foreign travel (14.3%), as well as the lack of access to gyms, swimming pools, tennis courts, etc. (13.3%). The inconvenience of the closure of shopping centers was indicated by 9.9% of the respondents, in addition to the lack of access to hairdressers' (6.6%) and beauticians' (5.5%) services.

Bearing in mind that the lockdown prevailed as the most perceptible form of pandemic-related restrictions, the authors attempted to establish whether this was dependent on the category of age. The results of the analysis suggest that the lockdown was felt to the largest degree by young people aged 21–25 as indicated by the majority of the respondents (79.7%), and those aged 18–20 (76.5%). The data

Table 4. Increase in alcohol consumption in the post-pandemic experience depending on age

Increased alcohol consumption	Specification	Age											
		18-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	Over 65	Total
0.0	Number	18	225	91	35	24	21	25	16	6	9	7	477
	% in the age group	22.2	45.3	45.0	41.7	52.2	48.8	54.3	57.1	42.9	81.8	46.7	44.7
100	Number	63	272	111	49	22	22	21	12	8	2	8	590
	% in the age group	77.8	54.7	55.0	58.3	47.8	51.2	45.7	42.9	57.1	18.2	53.3	55.3
Total	Number	81	497	202	84	46	43	46	28	14	11	15	1,067
	% in the age group	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research, 2021, *N* = 1,268.

Table 6. Medical checkups in the post-pandemic experience depending on the respondent's age

Increased number of medical checkups	Specifications	Age											
		18–20	21–25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	56–60	61–65	Over 65	Total
0.0	Number	68	433	164	71	42	36	39	24	11	5	10	903
	% in the age group	84.0	87.1	81.2	84.5	91.3	83.7	84.8	85.7	78.6	45.5	66.7	84.6
1.00	Number	13	64	38	13	4	7	7	4	3	6	5	164
	% in the age group	16.0	12.9	18.8	15.5	8.7	16.3	15.2	14.3	21.4	54.5	33.3	15.4
Total	Number	81	497	202	84	46	43	46	28	14	11	15	1,067
	% in the age group	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own research, *N* = 1,268.

Table 7. Limitations in consumer behavior compared to other pandemic-related restrictions

The most negative impact of the pandemic in the respondents' opinion	Replies		Percentage of observations
Specifications	<i>N</i>	Percentage	
Social isolation/lockdown	795	27.2%	74.6%
No access to gyms, swimming pools, tennis courts, etc.	390	13.3%	36.6%
Restrictions regarding the use of beauty services	161	5.5%	15.1%
Restrictions regarding hairdressing services	194	6.6%	18.2%
Restrictions on foreign travel	424	14.5%	39.8%
Closure of shopping centres	289	9.9%	27.1%
Wearing face masks	432	14.8%	40.5%
Maintaining social distance	232	7.9%	21.8%
Others	11	0.4%	1.0%

Source: own research, 2021, $N = 1,268$.

for the same social group also confirmed the highest increase in alcohol consumption, thus in the qualitative research it was assumed that young people, owing to their higher levels of perceived frustration, would undertake activities in terms of compensatory and impulsive consumption.

The qualitative research also aimed to establish to what degree the present economic and political situation (inflation, the war in Ukraine) was felt by young people. The research showed that their purchasing power was reduced, and even if they did not want to give up their favorite products, yet were forced to buy fewer cosmetics and clothes, and save up longer to acquire consumer goods. At the same time, this group demonstrated increased levels of rational shopping due to inflation:

— “I check and compare prices in different shops, and even go to three different shops in one day” (full-time students, employed);

— “I love peppers but sadly now I can only look at them. I give it a miss” (the unemployed);

— “I started to pay more attention to prices of products, I plan more, I can live without some things for two or three days; before I never thought about this” (young non-students, employed).

Some young people buy products in advance, not because they are worried about their availability in the shops or the shortage of money, but because of their sense of entitlement (Wardzała, 2019). Generation Z demands to have “here and now” all they want, without the need to go out.

Young people are also prone to impulse buying, when an unplanned purchase is made in order to improve one's mood, following sales promotion, as well as out of fear that a given product will be sold out, its price will rise, or merely

due to a sudden wish to try something new. Impulse buying occurs at moments of excitement caused by a visit to a shop (e.g., IKEA or a clothes shop), or when a long-awaited product is launched in the market (such as a book, game, or a new line of clothes of a well-known brand). Emotions such as melancholy and homesickness can also be a motivation to buy, in particular products familiar from childhood (this mainly applies to food).

— “I did most impulse buying at launches of some game. I was capable of spending all my money on such a new game. Phew, done. A relief after buying, the excitement goes down, I can play it now” (full-time students, employed);

— “I bought it because it reminded me of my childhood” (part-time students, employed).

The analysis of the replies provided by the respondents showed that young people aged 18–26, regardless of their financial status, form of employment and education, do not spend much on compulsive buying, and it is not big shopping — rather small items such as cosmetics, food, books, things for their home, and visits to pubs/restaurants.

— “I buy gadgets because of emotions, joy and excitement; I bought something and after a month it turned out to be a flop” (part-time students, employed);

— “I got confused with impulse buying — but it was ok later” (employed non-students).

Compensation shopping is not very significant in that age group; far more important is shopping treated as a reward after the achievement of a certain goal. They feel that they have to earn this by, e.g., passing an exam or after going through a difficult time at work. Shopping to compensate for something such as failure or shortcomings takes place very occasionally in a small group of the respondents and mainly concerns people who had become independent and started their adult life (took up regular employment, completed their studies or study part-time and pay for themselves, as well as the unemployed). The recompense in the form of shopping usually takes place after a hard day at work or during a bad time, and mainly in the form of food (chocolate, crisps, a good takeaway meal) and/or alcohol (drunk at home or in a pub with friends), and very rarely takes the form of more expensive purchases, e.g., clothes.

On the declarative level, compensatory spending is viewed by young people in a negative way; they admit that this is not a good way of coping with sadness and loneliness, and it may open the way to becoming a shopaholic, even though they admit to occasional episodes in such situations. Nevertheless, they make certain allowances in assessing their own behavior (despite the fact that after such shopping they may feel sad about wasting money). The respondents also very quickly recognize in the stories of others their shopaholism, treating it as pathology which should be professionally cured.

5. Conclusions

The conducted research confirms that significant changes have occurred in the consumption habits of Poles, which frequently result from the very complex and difficult socio-economic condition of this country.

The hypothesis that the changes were mainly influenced by the pandemic was confirmed. In the conditions of high inflation and Russia's aggression against Ukraine, consumers are changing their consumption behavior. The post-pandemic effect is an increase in health-promoting behavior, especially among older and better-educated people. Quantitative research shows that harmful consumption habits have also emerged due to excessive consumption of alcohol and unhealthy snacks. To the extent that this has a lasting effect, detailed research on the motives for consuming these products should be conducted. However, it should be stated that the consumption patterns of young people were dominated by bad habits, consisting of the increased use of harmful substances, often resulting from social isolation, which is felt most strongly in this group.

In crisis situations, new survival strategies began to emerge, pointing to diverse and often inconsistent consumption patterns, including: hoarding, online shopping, reward shopping and impulse shopping, creating new contexts in consumption. As a result, consumers are able to save time, experience pleasure and a feeling of security, which as indicated by research, is not achieved through saving — due to inflation. These models of behavior may provide, both for young and older people, at least to a certain extent, the feeling of having control over their own lives, and the sensation that certain decisions, also in terms of shopping, still depend on their will and not merely on the volatile, unstable reality.

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