

## CIRCULAR ECONOMY, EDUCATION AND POLICY DRIVE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION – A LITERATURE REVIEW

### Author(s) / Szerző(k):

Nádasy Bernadett  
Magyar Agrár- és Élettudományi Egyetem,  
Gazdálkodás- és szervezéstudományok Doktori Iskola

### E-mail:

bernadett.nadasy@gmail.com

**Cite:** Nádasy Bernadett (2026). Circular economy, education and policy drive sustainable consumption – a literature review. *OxIPO – Interdiszciplináris tudományos folyóirat*, VIII. évfolyam 2026/1. szám. 33-45.  
**Idézés:** [Doi: https://www.doi.org/10.35405/OXIPO.2026.1.33](https://www.doi.org/10.35405/OXIPO.2026.1.33)



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**EP / EE:** Ethics Permission / Etikai engedély: KFS/2026/O1-0002

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*Anonymous reviewers / Anonim lektorok:*  
3. Anonymous reviewer (Ph.D.) / Anonim lektor (Ph.D.)  
4. Anonymous reviewer (Ph.D.) / Anonim lektor (Ph.D.)

### Abstract

Younger generations are frequently thought of as the beacon of light when it comes to salvaging our future by mainstreaming sustainable behaviour – not all research outcomes support that. Education, availability of reliable infrastructure and well-tailored policy incentives appear to be a more reliable factor in the shift towards sustainable consumption, while circular economy acts as a powerful enabler in the transition. The current paper analyses 57 scientific articles published between January 2004 and May 2021 with a systematic review methodology revolving around the topics of sustainable consumption, circular economy, and consumer behaviour with the aim of identifying researchers' main findings that concern named topics, the methodologies they applied and identifying gaps and questions for further research.

**Keywords:** sustainable consumption, circular economy, consumer behaviour, education, public policy, sustainability, literature review

**Diszciplíne:** Economics and Management Sciences

### **Absztrakt**

*A KÖRFORGÁSOS GAZDASÁG, AZ OKTATÁS ÉS*

*A SZAKPOLITIKA ELŐSEGÍTIK A FENNTARTHATÓ FOGYASZTÁST – IRODALMI ÁTTEKINTÉS.*

A fiatalabb generációkat gyakran a jövő megmentésének zálogaként tartják számon a fenntartható viselkedés széles körű elterjesztésében – azonban nem minden kutatási eredmény támasztja ezt alá. Az oktatás, a megbízható infrastruktúra elérhetősége és a megfelelően kialakított szakpolitikai ösztönzők megbízhatóbb tényezőknél tűnnek a fenntartható fogyasztás irányába történő elmozdulásban, míg a körforgásos gazdaság erőteljes katalizátorként működik az átmenet során. A tanulmány 57, 2004 januárja és 2021 májusa között megjelent tudományos cikket elemez szisztematikus irodalmi áttekintési módszertan alkalmazásával, a fenntartható fogyasztás, a körforgásos gazdaság és a fogyasztói magatartás témaköreire fókuszálva. A kutatás célja az e területekkel kapcsolatos főbb kutatói megállapítások azonosítása, az alkalmazott módszertanok feltárása, valamint a további kutatásokat igénylő hiányosságok és nyitott kérdések meghatározása.

**Kulcsszavak:** fenntartható fogyasztás, körforgásos gazdaság, fogyasztói magatartás, oktatás, szakpolitika, fenntarthatóság, irodalmi áttekintés

**Diszciplína:** Gazdálkodás- és szervezéstudomány

### **Introduction**

The term ‘Sustainable Consumption’ first emerged at the Earth Summit in 1992 (Cohen, 2010). ‘Circular Economy’ is somewhat older – it was first mentioned in 1988. Research evolved for both terms and the defined phenomena in the past decades, attracting increasing attention from scholars, public figures, and scientific opinion leaders alike. Both terms contain an inherent contradiction – consumption, by nature is not sustainable and the economy, as we’ve known it for hundreds of years, is

not circular, it has a point where it begins and one where it ends, but these rarely coincide. What these two terms also have in common is the struggle to grasp the concepts, probably at least partly due to the inherent contradiction. Although we can clearly define the terms, it might be difficult to tell how the concepts look in practice exactly. Despite the contradiction and unclear practical approach, Circular Economy is frequently referred to as the holy grail, the ultimate strategic framework for a sustainable future. While Sustainable

Consumption is also encumbered by the same promise – if only we consumed a bit more sustainably – whatever that exactly entails -, all our worries about the future would be resolved.

The importance of consumer behaviour, knowledge and attitude in shaping sustainability outcomes was highlighted by authors in a Szabad Piac roundtable discussion (Csepeli, Molnár, Ropolyi, Szlávik, Szűts, Vasali, 2022). They suggest that sharing information with consumers on sustainability issues related to consumption is not sufficient, a moral shift and development of consumers is necessary to achieve real impact.

The purpose of this research paper is to analyse existing literature on the relationship between Sustainable Consumption and Circular Economy. Since both terms have a wealth of past research, a systematic review of literature is conducted. The goal of the systematic review is to recover, analyse and synthesize literature already available on consumer attitudes towards sustainable consumption with a focus on products and services created through circular economy business models.

The primary question of the review: What studies are available on consumer acceptance and attitudes towards sustainable consumption with a focus on products and services created through circular economy business models?

Further to that, the nature of research on

sustainable consumption, with a focus on the following secondary questions is examined: 1) What areas and attitudes towards sustainable consumption are researchers concerned with? 2) What geographical areas are covered by the studies? 3) How is consumer attitude assessed in the studies? What methods are used? 4) What are the gaps identified?

### **Methodology**

The research topic is the intersection of three terms: circular economy, sustainable consumption, and consumer behaviour. Therefore, when conducting the review of relevant literature, the intersection of either circular economy and sustainable consumption, circular economy and consumer behaviour or sustainable consumption and consumer behaviour was searched for in the title of the article.

The reviewed databases for the systematic review include Google Scholar, Science Direct and ProQuest.

The review contains articles published between January 2004 and May 2021.

The Table 1 and Figure 1 contain the numbers of search records in the three examined data-bases for the three search categories.

Further to the initial search, only peer reviewed scholarly articles, doctoral thesis and conference papers were included in the review. Books and non-English papers were excluded, as well as duplicate titles (Table 2).

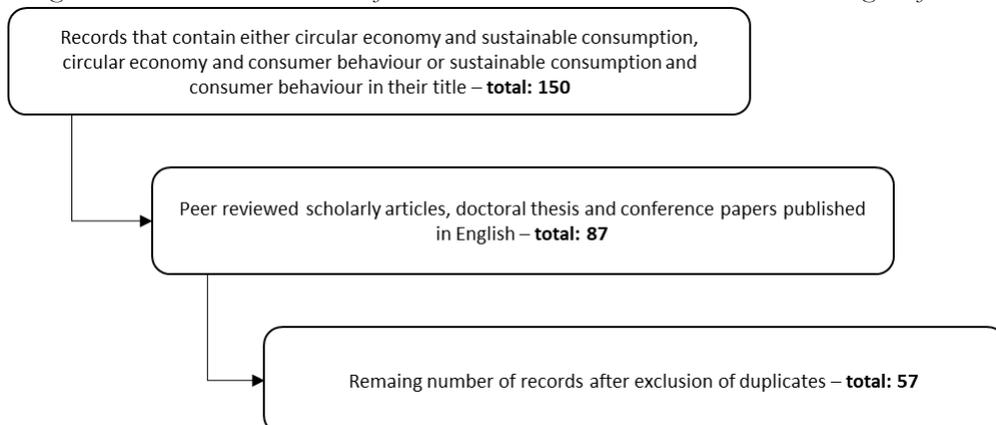
Table 1. the numbers of search records in the three examined databases for the three search categories.

Database	Number of records		
	Circular economy AND sustainable consumption	Circular economy AND consumer behaviour	Sustainable consumption AND consumer behaviour
Google Scholar	25	12	41
Science Direct	5	1	6
ProQuest	15	14	31
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>78</b>

Table 2. Peer reviewed scholarly articles, doctoral thesis and conference papers.

Exclusion logic	Remaining number of articles		
	Circular economy AND sustainable consumption	Circular economy AND consumer behaviour	Sustainable consumption AND consumer behaviour
<b>Only peer reviewed scholarly articles, doctoral thesis and conference papers published in English are included</b>	Google Scholar: 15 Science Direct: 5 ProQuest: 8 TOTAL: 28	Google Scholar: 9 Science Direct: 1 ProQuest: 6 TOTAL: 16	Google Scholar: 18 Science Direct: 6 ProQuest: 19 TOTAL: 43
<b>Exclusion of duplicate records</b>	TOTAL: 15	TOTAL: 11	TOTAL: 31

Figure 1. The initial total number of 150 articles was reduced to 57 which were investigated further.

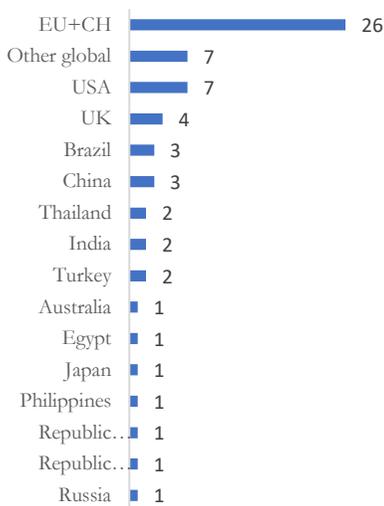


## Analysis

### Geographic distribution of reviewed sources

The below chart shows the geographic distribution of the reviewed sources, based on the countries where the research related to the source was performed (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Geographic distribution of reviewed sources

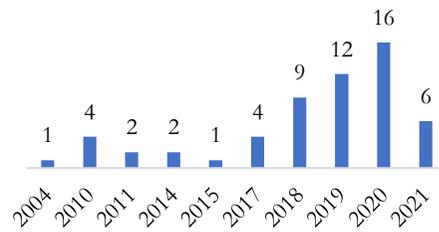


In cases where several countries were involved in the same paper, the countries are represented separately, therefore altogether 63 records are indicated. The results show that more than half of the studies (30 out of the 57) were performed in Europe – the EU, the UK and Switzerland. Of the European countries three stand out with four published studies each: the UK, Poland and Denmark. While Slovakia and Italy are represented by 3-3 studies.

### Distribution of reviewed sources by year of publication

The Figure 3 shows the distribution of the reviewed sources based on their year of publication. The results show that there's been a steady increase in interest in the examined topics since 2017 – the research only includes articles published in the first 5 months of 2021.

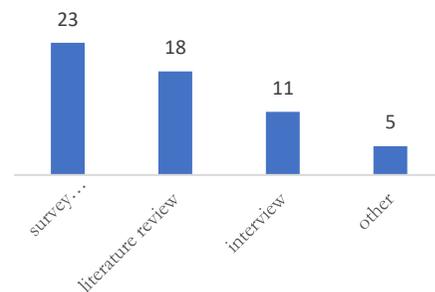
Figure 3. Distribution of reviewed sources by year of publication



### Applied research methodologies in the reviewed publications

The reviewed publications applied three main research methodologies – survey questionnaires, literature review and interview with consumers – the most popular method being the first one (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Applied research methodologies in the reviewed publications



## Findings

*Circular economy acts as an enabler of sustainable consumption*

Maintaining current welfare level for future generations while decreasing pressure on the environment is a challenge. Since the aim of circular economy is to keep material value in use for as long as possible and minimise waste, when implemented, it can act as a successful enabler of sustainable consumption. Tunn, Bocken, van den Hende and Schoormans argue that keeping diverse customer needs in mind when defining these business models is key in a successful transition. Convenience and flexibility of the business model is crucial. The most successful business models, in terms of sustainable consumption are the ones that reduce consumer effort and overall consumption levels. They highlight that different business models may be successful with different consumer segments (Tunn, Bocken, van den Hende and Schoormans, 2019). Tseng, Chiu, Liu, Jantaralolica add that circular economy not only supports sustainable consumption, but also enables economic growth (Tseng, Chiu, Liu, Jantaralolica, 2020) as it offers a sensible alternative for economic growth, decoupling it from resource depletion (Ribeiro-Duthie, 2019).

Consumer attitudes toward sustainable consumption are key in a shift towards sustainability transition and the transition towards a circular economy.

Bahram, Dhanda and Hill' global research based on the analysis of available

statistical data find that consumption, measured in a country's GDP, and environmental degradation, measured as CO<sub>2</sub> emission, are strongly linked - the higher the GDP rate, the higher the CO<sub>2</sub> emission. At the same time, countries with a lower GDP level realise their consumption in a more polluting way – they produce CO<sub>2</sub> at a greater absolute rate than countries with a higher GDP (Bahram, Dhanda and Hill, 2004). Both findings underline that consumption is a key factor in sustainability transition. Klaver finds that consumer engagement is an important factor in circular economy transition and argues that sustainable consumption initiatives need to address the decrease of consumption to achieve real and lasting sustainability impact (Klaver, 2018).

Del Mar Alonso-Almeida, Rodríguez-Antón, Bagur-Femenías and Perramon agree that consumers are becoming more and more conscious about the impact of their consumption and examine the potential of institutional promotion. They find that institutional promotion has a positive impact on the circular economy transition – both in terms of consumer acceptance and competitiveness. Their research shows that soft initiatives have considerable impact on both competitiveness and consumer behaviour, while hard ones are only successful in the case of the latter. They also argue that making the benefits of circular economy more visible is needed to increase consumer commitment (Del Mar Alonso-Almeida, Rodríguez-Antón, Bagur-Femenías and Perramon, 2020).

In the research conducted by Nair and Maram in India the authors conclude that consumers are becoming more and more conscious about their purchasing decisions and have positive attitudes towards green products, but higher price, quality concerns, reliability are of concern. Therefore, a green marketing mix is needed to promote sustainable products and services and manufacturers, and the government also needs to be included in the promotion (Nair, Maram, 2015).

While most authors find that consumer attitudes are changing in the right direction, Canto, Grunert and Barcellos suggest that the change towards sustainable behaviour requires a new mentality. The new mentality can be reached through different ways in different consumers - a customer may have gain, normative, or hedonic motivations, or a combination of these. The authors suggest that the Goal-Framing Theory (GFT) could be a useful tool in designing influencing strategies for different customer groups (Canto, Grunert and Barcellos, 2019).

Testa, Iovino and Iraldo performed a study on consumers' information seeking about product packaging. They argue that consumers' individual tendency to seek information is relevant in consumption decisions. This information seeking is necessary to generate sustainable purchasing behaviour, thus companies need to provide clear information about product packaging - ecolabels play an important role here (Testa, Iovino and Iraldo, 2020).

*The food and clothing industries are the most researched industries in relation to sustainable consumption*

Studies related to both industries found that consumers knowledge of the environmental impact of these industries is limited. In a research conducted in the United Kingdom on a small sample (in-depth study of 10 women), Crommentuijn-Marsh finds that consumers are aware of sustainability issues, but their awareness of the clothing industry's impact is low, environmentally responsible considerations and consumption were by products of other determining factors (e.g. limited interest in fast fashion, or peer influence). Promotion of environmentally sustainable consumption proved to be successful if it matched consumers' already applied core practices (Crommentuijn-Marsh, 2017).

Similar to the findings related to the clothing industry, Hartmann and Siegrist found that consumers' knowledge on the sustainability implications of the food industry, and meat production specifically, is low. So is consumers' willingness to substitute meat with alternative protein sources (Hartmann and Siegrist, 2017). The strongest factor influencing meat consumption in the EU is income (Dzene and Yorulmaz, 2011). Another study, conducted in Poland found that respondents prefer seasonal food and limit meat consumption, but this behaviour is not derived from a sustainable consumption consideration (Wielicka-Regulska, 2020). Code-roni and Perito conducted a research with

the involvement of 477 Italian adults – they found that 56% of all respondents and most of sustainability-conscious customers are open to consuming waste-to value (WTV) food products. Besides, origin and nutrition values are also important for conscious customers (Code-roni and Perito, 2020).

*Key factors in the sustainable consumption transition: policy, infrastructure and cooperation*

Mont and Power examine the impact of individual consumption choices and find that making individual consumption more sustainable is not enough for a large-scale advance in a sustainability transition; instead, system-level changes are needed (Mont and Power, 2010). Witt adds to this notion that regulations are necessary for reverting consumption pattern (Witt, 2011). Without policy intervention to regulate consumption, consumer transition towards sustainable behaviour is unlikely. Wilkinson and Williams, who examined consumer attitude towards releasing waste from electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE) into the circular economy, complete the picture by underlining the importance of granting the availability and ease of use of infrastructure that facilitates transition towards sustainable consumption (Wilkinson and Williams, 2020). Diddi et al. examined motivators and barriers to adopting sustainable clothing consumption behaviours (SCCBs) in the clothing industry in the US. They conclude that the cooperation of policy makers and business is needed to shift consumer attitudes and

implement circularity in the fashion industry (Diddi, Yan, Bloodhart, Bajtelsmit and McShane, 2019). Abuabara, Paucar-Caceres and Burrowes-Cromwell reach a similar conclusion when examining the recycling of coffee capsules in Brazil – they argue that collection should be convenient for consumers and respective policies should be aligned to support circular economy transitions as well (Abuabara, Paucar-Caceres and Burrowes-Cromwell, 2019). The findings are likely adaptable to further industries and countries as well.

*Relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and attitudes towards sustainable consumption are inconclusive*

The review shows that the inconclusive nature of the findings might be, at least partly, due to the different geographic location of the surveys. A research performed with the involvement of 393 participants in Turkey concluded that gender and generation of consumers show strong correlation with sustainable consumption choices. Baby Boomers show the highest level of unnecessary consumption while Gen Z the lowest, females show higher levels of sustainable consumption attitudes than males (Bulut, Kokalan Cimrin and Doan, 2017). However, other studies reach a different conclusion. A study, conducted in Denmark on the waste sorting preferences of households, finds that households who recycle waste are heterogenous based on both sociodemographic characteristics and waste sorting preferences – it must be noted though that

the Danish society is overall very supportive towards waste recycling (Nainggolan et al. 2019).

Finney finds that the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and sustainable consumption in the literature is inconclusive, therefore marketing targeting sustainable consumption behaviour should appeal to altruistic needs. He highlights that the decision-making process is very different for consumers who follow a sustainable consumption pattern and those who do not (Finney, 2014).

Hazen, Mollenkopf and Wang performed a study on consumers' switching attitude towards remanufactured products. They found that attitudes are strongly correlated with switching intentions and moderate the impact of price, government incentives and environmental benefits and both micro and macro level factors have a strong impact on consumer attitudes. Whereas the relationship with demographic characteristics needs to be further examined (Hazen, Mollenkopf and Wang, 2020).

*Study results on intergenerational differences in the attitude towards sustainable are contradictory*

Although age counts as a sociodemographic characteristic, it is highlighted separately as the reviewed papers appeared to put particular emphasis on this dimension. Once again, the results on the relationship between age and sustainable consumption choices are sometimes contradictory.

A good part of the reviewed articles found that younger generations are more open to sustainable consumption than older ones. Drugdová and Poliačiková found that generations Y and Z care about environmentally responsible types of sale, while packaging and package size are less important for all generations in Slovakia (Drugdová and Poliačiková, 2019). A study conducted in Poland found that although conscious consumption is gaining popularity overall, the demographic adapting the quickest are mostly the tech-savvy younger generations (Zalega, 2014). A research in the Republic of Serbia found that young people take the issue of environmental sustainability more seriously than previous generations and conclude that the education of young generations is key to shaping their consumption habits and awareness about sustainability (Krašulja, Ilić and Marković, 2020).

Contrary to the above, Lakatos and colleagues found that generation X showed the most favourable attitude towards sustainable behaviour (recycling, ecological consumption) in Romania. They acknowledge and highlight though that the findings are unexpected, and differences exist between the attitudes of Romanian respondents and those in Western Europe (Lakatos et al, 2018).

*Education is an efficient tool in the transition towards sustainable consumption*

Frank and Stanzus find that self-inquiry-based learning and self-experience-

based learning have a good potential to increase consumers' willingness to consume in a sustainable way (Frank and Stanzus, 2019). Didham and Choi suggest that a dedicated Education for Sustainable Consumption (ESC) policy is necessary. In the policy individual motivational factors need to be implemented, while assuring a supportive social and political system combined with the availability of sufficient infrastructure. They highlight that the local cultural context must be respected and accounted for in policy planning (Didham and Choi, 2010). A study conducted in Indonesia that examined consumer's willingness to choose food and beverages in sustainable packaging found that persuasive communication was the most efficient method for promoting sustainable consumption to consumers, followed by consumer education, knowledge sharing and attitude alteration (Ming-Lang et al, 2020). A similar result was reached in the UK by Clark, who found that consumer education is effective in altering habits and attitudes. At the same time, customers have limited time and lack necessary information about sustainable packaging disposal, therefore producers need to display sustainable packaging solutions towards customers (Clark, 2020).

#### *Consumer beliefs and personality traits*

Some of the reviewed studies approach sustainable consumer behaviour from the perspective of consumers' personal beliefs and personality traits. Yarimoglu and Bin-

boga examine "the antecedents and consequences of ecologically conscious consumer behaviour (ECCB)" in Turkey. They find that perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) – the confidence that an individual's actions have the potential of creating lasting impact – is the most important factor in following an ecologically conscious behaviour. Altruism ranked second and environmental concern the third. The authors find that the narcissism personality trait has a negative impact on sustainable consumption choices (Yarimoglu and Binboga, 2019). De Morais, Pinto and Cruz-Jesus found a similar conclusion about altruism when examining consumer engagement in the circular economy in Portugal – they conclude that pure altruism is consumers' main driver in green buying, but commitment towards the circular economy plays an important factor too (De Morais, Pinto and Cruz-Jesus, 2019). Yigit finds a strong correlation between consumer mindfulness – acceptance of the present situation without judgement - and sustainable consumption behaviour (Yigit, 2020).

#### *Research needs to be extended to developing countries and transitioning economies*

Because the majority of the previous studies on consumer acceptance towards sustainable consumption were performed mostly in developed countries – only 13 out of the reviewed 57 studies were performed in developing economies – research needs to be extended more exten-

sively to transitioning economies and developing countries. Unnithan highlights this issue in their research (Unnithan, 2020).

### Conclusions

As part of the systematic literature review, 57 articles were analysed thoroughly and 36 of them featured in the final version of the paper.

The review finds that several authors agree that circular economy acts as an enabler of sustainable consumption. They also seem to agree that consumer attitudes are key in achieving the shift in consumption – the industries receiving the most attention are the food and clothing industries, along with consumer willingness in waste sorting. Several writers find that the most important tools in nudging consumers towards sustainable consumption are education, the right policies in place along with the availability of necessary information and infrastructure. Besides that, some authors highlight the importance of cooperation and coordination between policy makers and actors along the supply chain. Findings are sometimes controversial regarding the influence of sociodemographic factors, especially age, on consumer attitudes towards sustainable consumption, some authors suggest further research on the topic, along with extending the research of sustainable consumption to developing countries and transitioning economies.

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