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**IMPACT OF THE CHARACTERISTICS
OF POSTMODERN SOCIETY ON THE
POSSIBILITY OF IMPLEMENTING
POSTULATES OF SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT**

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to check whether the materialistic and consumerist characteristics of contemporary postmodern society constitute an obstacle to the possibility of achieving the postulates of sustainable development. Research for the theoretical part of this study (including presenting the basic conceptual framework in the field of sustainability and the postmodern stage of society's development), has been made based on the method of critical analysis of the literature on the subject and specialized press (desk research). In the empirical part, the author makes usage of the results of qualitative study. Relates to personal, informal interview, which took place on a voluntary basis among consumptionists who declared themselves to have a materialistic worldview. The results obtained show that, although considered features quite naturally cause negative connotations, the characteristics of postmodern society have also certain advantages from the economic point of view of the processes taking place within the modern society. What's more, although it is difficult to argue with the results indicating a negative impact of one of the characteristics of post-modern society on sustainable development, this relationship cannot be considered shallow and one-dimensional. It turns out that materialism and consumerism can, for example, accompany interest in environmentally friendly products and willingness to pay extra for them. Materialists are not always unfamiliar with sustainable consumption behaviors too. Some of them also contribute to promote environmental values and products supporting them in social media.

KEYWORDS: *sustainable development, materialism, characteristics, consumerism, postmodern society*

INTRODUCTION

Since the times of James Watt and his invention of the steam engine in 1763 (Miller, 2019, p. 17), progress of civilization has accelerated rapidly. Some researchers are even of opinion that we are currently standing on the threshold of another (fourth, already) industrial revolution, a civilizational leap that is taking place before our eyes. According to K. Schwab, the current technological revolution is expected to raise humanity to even greater heights of prosperity (Schwab, 2018, p. 5). Unfortunately, technological progress is also accompanied by periorative phenomena. Modern man has to function in increasingly complex conditions, in a world of variability and uncertainty, an

abundance of data and information, the unpredictability of phenomena (as best demonstrated by the recent coronavirus pandemic) as well as the dynamism of socio-economic processes and strong globalization. Progressive technological progress is also inextricably linked to the progressive degradation of the natural environment (or natural world) which encompasses all living and non-living things occurring naturally, meaning in this case not artificial.

Currently observed, unprecedented intensity of disturbing natural phenomena poses new challenges for the humans. Data on the state of the natural environment show that we live in the so-called: *great acceleration* period, which is an unprecedented phenomenon in the 4.5-billion-year history of our planet. Only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Earth's land area is free from the influence of human activity (Grooten & Almond, 2018, p. 17). Technological development has brought the Earth to the brink of exhaustion, increasing the demand for energy, soil and water. Humans have disrupted Earth's biodiversity, known as the *web of life* which is essentially the life-sustaining infrastructure. This phenomenon is so significant that there is even talk of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Its origins date back to the 1950s. Since this period, there has been a permanent increase in temperature on the Earth's surface and the loss of biodiversity, threatening the well-being of current and future generations. There is a loss of tropical forests, degradation of the biosphere, an increase in sea fishing, destroying or fragmenting the natural habitats of many plants and animal species on land, in freshwater and in the sea, oceans' acidification, increasing food insecurity, depleted soils, a lack of access to fresh water and an increase in the spread of zoonotic diseases, to name just a few.

A well-known concept that is supposed to save the planet from harmful human activity is sustainable development – the one that can be maintained in the long term. It has been systematically gaining popularity and importance for many years. Recognizes nature loss as a purely moral or ecological issue, with a broadened sense of its vital importance to our economy, social stability, individual well-being as well as health and as a matter of justice. According to it, in order to counteract actions that are causing the land's overall health to decline, enterprises must manage their businesses in one appropriate way – so that their activities are carried out without harm to the natural and socio-cultural environment of societies. In this context, the principle of sustainable

development is a kind of directive requiring which emphasis the reconciliation of the interests of environmental protection with the goals of economic policy.

However, a research question arises at this point about the influence of the characteristics of the society that has brought the Earth's nature to the brink of exhaustion and the possibility of implementing the postulates of the humanistic concept of sustainable development evolved by the same society. What seems particularly interesting is the relationship between the postmodern property of materialism with consumption, which is still at the center of humans' lives (Evers et al., 2018) and the possibility of ensuring sustainable patterns of production and consumption of its results. Preliminarily considering this issue on a theoretical level, it can be hypothesized that, while supporting the economy, increased materialistic consumption has, at the same time, clearly negative consequences for the environment and ecological order (e.g. through excessive waste generation or promotion of a less sustainable lifestyle). In other words, long associated with negative consequences increase in consumption and materialism helps ensure economic stability but may harm environmental sustainability and create, some kind of contradiction. In the article, the author decided to attempt to verify this hypothesis, basing the theoretical part of his considerations on biblio and factual research (including an approximation of the characteristics of contemporary postmodern society), as well as referring to the results of his own research conducted according to the methodology described later in the work.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POSTMODERN (POST-INDUSTRIAL) SOCIETY AS A POTENTIAL DETERMINANT OF THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPLEMENTING THE POSTULATES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Researchers believe that societies of developed countries have now reached the third stage of development already, referred to, in the literature, with such synonymous names as: postmodern or post-industrial era. Researchers are right that *the popularity of the term postmodernism in the last decades of the second millennium is breathtaking not only for laypeople, but also for specialists*

who practice humanistic reflection. The term has become familiar in scientific publications, daily press, and in the statements of critics as well as commentators of the modern world (Buchowski, Kempny, 1999, p. 9).

Postmodernism is a continuation of the modern era (production one, which has its source in the industrial revolution – process of rapid changes in the economy, social and political relations in England in the 18th century which over time, has spread to the whole world) (Białek, 2023, p. 2), and the one preceding it, i.e. pre-modern era. Distinctions between the mentioned phases are usually made based on factors such as: the nature of ownership, different consumption possibilities, non-identical organization of work, specific motivation to work, etc. The most characteristic features that distinguish the pre-modern era from the modern one that followed it are presented in the table 1.

Table 1. Differences between the pre-modern and modern era

| Era | | Pre-modern | Modern |
|-------------------------------|--------|---|---|
| Differences | Period | Till the second half of XVIIIth century | From the middle of the 18th century to the middle 20th century |
| Dominant branch of technology | | Agriculture and animal breeding are the dominant branches of the economy. The development of technology had made it possible to increase the efficiency of crops and to create permanent settlements engaged in growing plants, harvesting crops and breeding. Home-based activities and trade in products produced by human hands are also developing. | The production of goods is developing. Sources of raw materials are companies conducting mining and processing activities (refineries, steelworks). Large industrial plants transform them into products offered, both to institutional buyers (means of production) and to individual customers. |
| Charakter of ownership | | Land is of the greatest value and the state of its ownership is related to the inherited social position. | Private property and egalitarianism. Capital, machinery and equipment, as well as production factors are in the hands of individual entrepreneurs, whose possessions are not the result of inheritance, but the result of their own entrepreneurial activities and efforts. |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Consumption possibilities | Small – <i>then, the Europe was poor</i> (Piesowicz, 1962, p. 9). Most people devote the majority of their lives to productive activities, while, at the same time, they do not obtain income, necessary to meet non-basic needs. Before the industrial revolution, most farms – as part of the natural economy – produced for their own needs, remaining largely self-sufficient. Even in cities, people baked bread and made candles on their own. Remuneration for their work was often paid in the form of natural goods (e.g. food). Market exchange concerned primarily, so-called: new luxury goods such as coffee, tea, sugar, cutlery, porcelain, tableware that only the aristocracy could afford. (Rönnbäck, 2010, p. 55). | Significant – due to, among other things, the mechanization of work, people began to have more free time. Due to the development of trade, they owned more financial resources. Together, they could have spent them on increased consumption. |
| The importance of hierarchy and status | The organization of societies is based on clear hierarchies, reflecting wide differences in social status and power among people. | A more egalitarian organization of society is valued, <i>with fewer differences in social status and power</i> (Gesteland, 2000, p. 46). |
| Scale of production | Emphasis on unit production as one of three types of production, distinguished according to the amount of goods produced. Manufacturing single (or small quantities) of unique products for own needs. The sector of unit production for sale or trade is negligible. A larger percentage of the population cannot distinguish this function. | Serial and large-scale production, which involves the production of a series of products manufactured in an identical way. By separating functions of the producer and consumer, there was a shift from small-series, factory production (based on manual operations) to a mechanized, machine-based industry that enabled mass production. |
| Work organization | Labor force in personal dependence on the employer (such as serfs), performing their tasks without mechanization, according to the customarily accepted work organization. | Citizen evolved from the role of a peasant to the role of a factory worker, around which his life and the process of building identity were organized (Bierówka, 2009, p. 71). Employees have personal freedom and can offer their work as a kind of commodity on the market. To the new way of doing work (adapted to large-scale industrial production), have been subordinated aspirations and lifestyles of millions of people. |

Source: own elaboration based on: (Dziewanowska & Kacprzak, 2013, pp. 16-18).

Modern era, being characterized in the table 1 precedes the period in which we live, i.e. the so-called: postmodern era. This term was introduced into the literature by the American sociologist D. Bell. More than thirty years have passed since the publication of the famous book: *The coming of post-industrial society*, the basic exposition of new concept. *In this book Bell put forward his famous thesis about the arrival of a new formation – the post-industrial society* (Dobrowolski, 2005, p. 88). It is worth agreeing with R. Tarnas that *what is defined as postmodernism changes depending on the context, but in its most general and most widespread form, postmodern mentality can be defined as an open, undefined group of attitudes shaped by a huge variety of intellectual and cultural trends* (Tarnas, 2002, p. 465). The new era is not a complete negation of the preceding (modern one), but rather its continuation in new conditions that have developed over the years and were shaped, among others, by:

- gradual increase in economic prosperity,
- mixing of people from non-identical cultural circles as a result of the development of transport, which allows increased migration movement,
- development of modern media as well as methods of information exchange,
- concentration of money and power,
- progressive democratization and acceptance of completely new or previously rejected ideas,
- new principles of future policy,
- progressive regression in the state of the natural environment.

It should be emphasized that many researchers do not positively assess the reality in which modern man has to function. Many authors warn that *we are currently experiencing a phase of civilizational breakdown. To some extent, elites imitate the masses and the economic component of culture destroys the rest, leading civilizations to paths that are not always friendly to humans. We only choose a small part of the possibilities offered by knowledge and technology, and they determine our choices. The problem is that we do not choose what is more beautiful and useful, but what brings faster capital growth and seems more commercial* (Huczek, 2011, p. 43).

This and similar negative opinions result from the fact that postmodernism is characterized by its own specificity. It is characterized by basic trends, such as: individualism, materialism and consumerism, acceptance of differences as well as the occurrence of contradictions. In addition to them, cultural postmodernism also brought, among others:

- pluralism, i.e. reference to various cultural traditions (e.g. popularization of dishes previously characteristic only for specific cultural circles – sushi, kebab);
- cultural relativism (negation of the division into higher and lower cultures, free approach to tradition);
- epistemological relaxation (openness to new, not always positive tendencies in the modern world);
- new aesthetic sensitivity (openness to new things, emergence of new movements, e.g. street art, negation of beauty as a canon of art – turpism);
- universality and seriality understood in terms of the production of goods in accordance with the laws of the market for the needs of dominant materialism and consumerism;
- increased role of the media in shaping attitudes and worldviews.

It is true that these trends were also noticeable in the modern era, but now they have gained much importance and become deeply embedded in culture. In the past, the role of the described characteristics was smaller. Currently, they have become the norm of behavior in everyday life while in modern times their presence in the lives of individuals was disjunctive, i.e. they were the subject of choice.

The general characteristic of the previous era was quite different. Among the most desirable social values of the past era (of pre-modern culture), researchers mention: saving, investing, multiplying accumulated capital and hard work. In the industrial society of the 19th century, work was the foundation of the recognized system of social values. Human activities were oriented towards capital account, not consumption. Based on this, the German sociologist M. Weber in his book, entitled: *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, expressed the belief that *the emergence of the modern economic world was possible only through the emergence of the work ethos associated with capitalism* (Bylok, 2013, p. 127).

The capitalist economic act was an expression of the desire to achieve profit and profitability in a lasting way. It assumed the temporality of aspirations and the appreciation of social position measured by personal merit, while at the same time refusing to allow the inheritance of privileges. It was based on the hope of making profit by taking advantage of exchange opportunities. The development of the rational-capitalist organization of free work was also associated with the emergence of a specific work ethos, which was expressed in the recognition of virtue measured by usefulness, diligence and frugality, as well as reliability in fulfilling payment obligations. Earning money was treated as a vocation. However, the importance of work was reduced to a way of satisfying the basic needs necessary for the individual to rebuild strength, which should then be used for productive work again.

In the next era of cultural postmodernism, there was a significant change in the value system, which resulted in a work ethos weakening. According to researchers, a man in the postmodern era has become largely a materialist. It is a destructive feature because materialists generally focus on possession, tend to refer to specific, rather than abstract objects and are generally characterized as more selfish, stingy, and jealous (Dong et. al., 2018, p. 391). What is very characteristic – they attribute key importance to consumption (Firat, Venkatesh, 1995, p. 240). This feature has become the subject of many studies from various disciplines. It is, therefore influenced by interpersonal variables (socialization factors; parents, peers, media) and internal variables (psychological factors; self-esteem, power, belonging and clarity of self-image) (Shrum et. al, 2021).

Generally, however, consumption is increasingly considered as a determinant of the quality of life of a person who feels a constant desire to purchase new products and use new services (Mróz, 2009, p. 13). Culture still emphasizes the need to multiply financial resources, but they are intended to serve materialism – the acquisition of goods, which, inter alia, prove social position. In their possession (and not in the work itself, performed for its autotelic value), modern man has found fulfillment. S. Słaby defines this type of consumption as modernist one, i.e. impermanent, quick and *for show* (Słaby, 2006, p. 16). It is not a way of satisfying necessary needs, but rather a way of spending free time, a method of improving one's mood, a form of reward, a way of dealing with boredom. Consumers spend their free time in huge

shopping malls called *temples of consumption* because they allow them to satisfy many materialistic needs in one place. They have also become a form of escape from everyday life for the consumer. Postmodern consumption denies traditional value systems and the need to seek an individual consumer identity in consumption (Mazurek-Łopacińska, 2003, p. 51).

Another fundamental and characteristic feature of the postmodern era is the abundance of internal inconsistencies and aporias. As researchers explain, they often arise as a result of the behavior of people who do not want to follow traditional patterns of being and behavior patterns developed over the years. The search for new, unusual paths may lead, for example, to a situation in which a woman takes up challenges whose implementation is traditionally associated with representatives of the opposite sex. Researchers see the characteristics of value lability as the causes of uncertainty, confusion and eternal dissatisfaction with oneself. They conclude that whatever path postmodern man chooses, *he will never be sure that he did what was right. There will always remain a residue of bitterness – that something was neglected, that an opportunity was not taken advantage of, that more could have been made of the circumstances. No choice will bring complete satisfaction: each will provide something, but will also deprive one of something else* (Bauman, 2011, p. 457).

The next feature, individualism, does not mean only the freedom of choice that each individual has and the right to decide about his or her own fate, but also the growing role of meritocracy. Unlike previous eras, in postmodernism, the social position of an individual depends to a greater extent on individual skills and personal competences, and to a lesser extent on the environment (family, social class) from which human comes (Dziewanowska, Kacprzak, 2013, p. 21). What matters are one's own achievements and their documentation, which is why the number of people willing to improve their qualifications is growing, e.g. by participating in various types of additional courses, postgraduate studies or training.

Finally, an important distinguishing feature of the era of postmodernism is the tendency to accept differences. *They are calculated into it, because postmodernism is increasingly taking the shape of a formation built precisely from differences, already* (Świerkocki, 1997, p. 9). In the modern world, the tendency for the majority of society to share the same views and beliefs has gradually disappeared. Due

to, among other things, migration, modern countries have become multicultural. This means that there are many religions, lifestyles and value systems among people living in the same area. Such differentiation is not only accepted, but new ways of thinking and models of behavior often begin to replace the existing ones, represented by aging representatives of the native society.

It should be remembered that despite the occurrence of globalization processes, which favor the spread of the idea of postmodern society throughout the globe, trends such as consumerism, individualism, the occurrence of contradictions and acceptance of differences still concern only selected geographical areas, specific to the most economically developed countries where almost a billion of consumers, currently live (Brzeziński, 2016, p. 29). K. Dziewanowska puts forward thesis that we are currently observing the phenomenon of values' transfer from the most developed countries to the other ones (which is facilitated, among others, by the development and increased access to communication and transport infrastructure). This may make postmodern behaviors more visible and widespread but, at the same time, many countries are just beginning to enter the modern era, and still others have only just reached the turning point between one type of society and the other (Dziewanowska, Kacprzak, 2013, p. 23).

METHOD

Paradoxically, although majority of previously presented features may quite naturally cause negative connotations, the characteristics of postmodern society have certain advantages from the economic point of view of the processes taking place within the modern society. This applies primarily to the first of the described features – increased consumption accompanying materialism. Although it is perceived as associated with excessive and unnecessary acquisition of goods, it is true that consumerism serves as an important stimulator of economic growth and social development (Świetlik, 2012, p. 13). The impact of consumption satisfying the desire to possess on the growth of a country's economic activity is quantified in the national accounts system of each country and the main category within it is gross domestic product

(GDP) – sum of the value of market production of all final goods and services produced in a specific period of time (usually one year) by production factors located in the territory of a given country (regardless of who owns them) (Callen, 2020, p. 14). It is calculated in accordance with the recommendations of the European System of National and Regional Accounts (ESA '95).

While the stimulating impact of materialism and consumption that satisfies it on economic growth is well documented in the literature (consumption was an important element in industrial society, already – its mass nature (along with demand) enabled production (and supply), on which the entire economy was based) (Zalewska, 2013, p. 140), thus this raises the question about the relationship between considered characteristics and the possibility of implementing the postulates of the concept of sustainable development.

In its fundamental assumptions, sustainable development stands in opposition to the traditional model of management subordinated solely to achieve profit. Hence, it can be assumed that consumerism, which favors the multiplication of money, will not favor sustainability. The research problem is whether this is actually the case, or perhaps this relationship is not obvious and one-dimensional (e.g. there is no doubt that significant consumption actually contributes to the formation of excessive amounts of waste, which has a negative impact on the environment but other hidden and non-obvious, relationships and interdependencies can not be neglected). The author will try to determine them in the next chapter of the work based on the results of qualitative study.

A personal, informal interview, which took place on a voluntary basis, was conducted in 2022 among 25 people who declared themselves to have a materialistic worldview (paying attention to their possessions, linking their sense of value with their assets, striving to have more than the others) and boasting a material status that allows them to spend most of their monthly income on consumption. It varies between areas, but taking into account previous statistics included in research, postmodernists spend, on average, up to approximately 75% of their income on consumption (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

The criterion for selecting respondents took this property into account, with the additional assumption that at least half of the monthly income must be spent on the purchase of goods and services that do not meet first-order needs (including fashionable clothes, watches and jewelry, stimulants, electronics, visits

to restaurants, places of culture, cafes, so on). Among the respondents, a significant part of the study population (12 people) were Generation Z consumers, i.e. people born in 2000 and later – just starting their professional career and often living on family assets (Twenge et al., 2010, p. 1117; Williams, 2010, p. 55).

Since, due to the sensitive and specific topic, it was not possible to select a sample using probabilistic techniques. In the study, there was used the convenience sampling method, one of the non-probabilistic sampling methods in which the author did not use random sampling techniques. A unit from the population was included in the sample based on an arbitrary decision dictated by the fact that the research participant was indicated by the previous respondent (selection of elements of a specific population for the study by the so-called: snowball method, i.e. recruitment of participants by other participants) (Heckathorn, Cameron, 2017, p. 101) and he met previously adopted economic criteria.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POSTULATES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS A VARIABLE DEPENDENT ON MATERIALISTIC AND CONSUMERIST ATTITUDE

The concept of sustainable development has its roots in a variety of published works and efforts in environmental activism from the 1960's onward. At the same time, it was not until the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *the Brundtland Report* and the 1992 *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* that the term *sustainable development* gained global currency. *Over 7,000 delegates from 178 countries recognised a global need for environmental protection with economic and social development, and called for sustainable development* (Cordonier Segger, Kalfan, 2004, p. 15).

Nowadays, sustainable development (which is also referred to, in the literature with the synonymous names of eco-development, gentle development, intelligent development, self-sustaining development, restrained or environmentally friendly development) is a concept, principle and multi-faceted idea. It is polysemantic and is understood slightly different depending on the

scientific discipline represented. It has also used to be defined in many ways, but the most frequently quoted definition comes from the previously mentioned report: *Our common future*, prepared by the Brundtland Commission after Gro Harlem Brundtland, a Norwegian politician who chaired The World Commission on Environment and Development on behalf of the General Secretary of United Nations. According to the definition adopted in this document, sustainable development aims to meet the development needs of the current generation, but in a way that would enable future generations to realize the same goals and aspirations. In other words, sustainable development expresses the need to maintain access of future generations to environmental values and the socio-cultural environment, as well as striving for inter- and intra-generational justice in access to goods (Toczyski, 2004, p. 15).

In practice, what is common in thinking about sustainability is expressed in the pursuit of balancing three spheres: the natural environment, the economy and the social system: *the complexity of the processes that make up the functioning of modern communities requires coherent action that takes into account social, ecological and economic conditions, leading to their sustainable development* (Toruński, Wyrębek, 2010, p. 7). This balance is perceived as a specific whole that requires harmonious integration and functioning of all three spheres because there is a systemic relationship between them – elimination of the one makes the functioning of the other two impossible (Huczek, 2012, s. 20). Sustainable development assumes therefore the need to combine activities aimed at achieving a balance between the implementation of economic goals (e.g. generating GDP), social aims (e.g. creation of jobs, preservation of the cultural heritage of a specific region, promotion of local products) and maintaining the unchanged state of the natural environment (e.g. protection of ecosystems, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, promotion of renewable energy sources, etc.). This is to be done by undertaking responsible and well-thought-out projects in various areas of human activity, related to improving the quality of life of citizens and protecting the planet, Earth.

In order for the assumptions expressed in this way to be implemented, and for sustainable development not to remain just an idea (both great and ambitious but, namely remaining in the sphere of wishes), its postulates must appeal (and be implemented) by the members of society. After all, those are

people who create the reality around them, including ones regarding the natural environment. Just like *environment influence people's everyday experiences* (Samuelsson et. al., 2018, p. 7), there is also a strong relationship in the opposite direction.

Meanwhile, the already presented characteristics of postmodern society, and in particular its materialistic and consumerist dimension, raise intuitive doubts about the possibility of postmodernism people to accept and implement the postulates of sustainability for the needs of subsequent generations. Indeed, although the literature contains various views on the relationship between increased consumption, materialism and the environment, the negative impact of the two, previous phenomena on the natural environment is quite commonly emphasized. For example, E. Suárez et al. (2020) in their study state that materialism has a negative impact on awareness of sustainable consumption (Suarez et. al., 2020, p. 5677). It has also a negative impact on pro-ecological attitudes and behaviors (Segev et. al., 2015, p. 85; Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008, pp. 885-893), and people who adhere to its values have higher greenhouse gas emissions and, in practice, are less likely to adopt sustainable consumption behaviors (Isham et. al., 2022, p. 3673). Some researchers explicit strict claim that consumerism combined with materialism in market economies harms natural environment, and these values are contrary to the values of environmental protection. They argue that the values of consuming and possessing are strongly associated with negative attitudes towards the environment and have little to do with environmental and ecological issues (Ergen et. al., 2015, pp. 511-526). Moreover, it is believed that materialistic and spending people have less ecological awareness and participate less in activities aimed at protecting the environment (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2013, pp. 69-82).

However, qualitative research conducted by the author on a group of people displaying materialistic and consumerist attitudes allowed to draw some kind different, also non-obvious (and more optimistic), conclusions. Talking to respondents revealed some facts. As a result of the study, it was established, among other things, that some of the interviewed materialistic consumers are actively involved in sustainable consumption behavior. Showing concern for their status and the way they are perceived by the others, less than half of all respondents declared that they tend to choose and purchase ecological

and environmentally friendly products. They consider the possibility of buying them (e.g. organic food), owning (e.g. an electric car) and using them (e.g. a modern heating installation at home) as a specific sign of achieving success. Ecological products are generally more expensive and are associated with the image of something new, fashionable, modern, unique and not for everyone. Therefore, nine of these people intend to continue buying ecological products (and 3 will even intensify their purchase in the near future), so as to emphasize their image as not only a successful and wealthy, but also as an enlightened person, familiar with trends and novelties as well as having knowledge about the conditions of nature in which modern man has to function and its needs. It is also worth mentioning the view of a person for whom the fact of having, not only the means but also the time (considered in terms of a luxury good) to search for ecological products (food, in this case) is a strong factor stimulating the sense of self-satisfaction. Such results confirm previous findings of researchers that, in addition to economic incentives, social motivations, respect, self-fulfillment and the need for uniqueness are the main factors influencing participation in sustainable purchasing patterns (Ek Styven & Mariani, 2020, pp. 724-738).

Although, as already mentioned, the environmental values of materialists are expected to be low, in practice they turn out to be higher. This may manifest itself, among others in:

- readiness to engage into more environmentally friendly behaviors (such as, e.g. saving energy or fuel), if there is a risk to their lifestyle. The asked ones are generally satisfied with their live styles. Hence, they are also ready to quite easily adapt to pro-ecological requirements and even make certain sacrifices for the sake of nature, if possibility of maintaining their status and possession depended on it.
- extending the time of products' usage. Respondents declared that among various consumer goods, they also buy those expensive ones, high-quality and made of valuable materials (e.g. silver, gold). As prestigious and inaccessible to everyone, such products are supposed to indicate the financial status of the owner – as already mentioned, achieving it is of great importance to materialists. At the same time, as one of the respondents rightly stated: *precious jewelry is not thrown*

away. This should be identified with the fact that the use cycle of the products described is often long. This is sometimes due to their high quality (they do not deteriorate quickly) or because of the value they represent (they are often identified with collector's items and cared by their owners). Even if someone want to get rid of such an item, it is usually not thrown away but rather sold or given to other people for further use. In this sense, purchasing durable materialistic products frees the industry from the necessity of environmentally harmful production of products that are to replace worn-out, thrown away, etc. It is worth emphasizing that nowadays items valued by materialists are even becoming a form of investing capital but the author decided to devote a separate work to this topic.

- materialists' search for new and different uses for packaging. This feature is somewhat related to the one mentioned earlier. Luxury and desired by materialists items are often packaged in an attractive, sophisticated way. In their case, the packaging is to effectively fulfill the marketing function of an instrument for promoting consumer product and, consequently, activating its sales. Such packaging (often made of high-quality natural materials, e.g. wood and being often the result of the creative efforts of professional designers), according to materialists, constitutes value in itself. One of the respondents resells the packaging, treating it as a normal product. Another not only doesn't waste his watch boxes (he doesn't throw them away), but he also found a new, alternative use for them – he treats them as unusual decorative elements of the apartment. In this way, not only do not waste packaging, but this use frees the asked one from the need to constantly buy new decorative elements for the space in which it operates.
- following appropriate and ecological methods of product disposal. According to data from Polish Central Statistical Office, at the end of December 2021 already, the size of illegal garbage dumps in Poland exceeded 200 ha. This is as much as the area of over 300 football fields (Michalak, 2023). The waste found there is not only an aesthetic problem but it also poses a serious threat to both people as well as nature. Meanwhile, all of the materialists interviewed rejected the

idea of inappropriate waste disposal. On the one hand, it is a matter of their worldview, on the other, they have sufficient resources and opportunities so they do not have to resort to condemnable practices related to littering the environment.

Finally, it turns out that materialistic people who are strongly focused on consumption can also contribute to the unintentional (but at the same time practical and effective) promotion of ecological ideas, products and solutions in their environment. This applies especially to the representatives of, so-called: Generation Z, i.e. members of the young part of society who grew up in a fully digitalized society. For this reason, these are generally people familiar with modern information exchange technologies – this is what most of the respondents declared. Comparing themselves to friends and celebrities, they are frequent users of social media that enable them to actively participate in communication, such as online forums, Facebook, TikTok, etc. Some of them are also practically involved in creating content appearing on these social networking sites, e.g. by creating blogs (a form of a virtual chronicle or a diary – website where the user can publish and share content that he/she wants to share with others) (McLeod, 2006, p. 9), publishing tweets or videos on YouTube, etc.

It turns out that the content they create cannot be considered as valueless from the point of view of the possibility of achieving the postulates of sustainable development. Two people were sure that in the past they had shared content (photos) on a social networking site in which they praised an ecological product. An even greater number of people were publishing among their friends materials emphasizing the beauty of the natural surroundings (films from holidays) – those that could convince recipients in the belief that nature has a lot to offer and that we should take care of it and strive for its good condition. Such promotion of nature by consumptionists is not without significance because these are not intrusive actions and, at the same time, they can reach a possibly wide audience: currently *social media are becoming an inseparable element of spending time by contemporary society* (Lewoń, Pietrzak-Zawadka, 2018, p. 113). Hence, the reach of the content shared there may be significant, and the proximity of the user may make them more effective than traditional measures aimed at promoting the need to protect nature.

CONCLUSIONS

In the history of mankind, specific stages of societies' development can be distinguished. Usually, the following eras are distinguished: savagery (hunting and gathering peoples), barbarism (pastoral peoples) which together make up the period of prehistory as well as the third era, called: civilization. In turn, civilization, which is distinguished primarily by the alphabet presence, is divided into: antiquity, Middle Ages, modern times and the present. There is also a popular division into three eras of civilization: 1) agricultural civilization, i.e. pre-modern times (until the mid-18th century), 2) industrial civilization (modern times) as well as post-industrial civilization, i.e. the times in which we live (from the mid-20th century to – still). At each of these stages, humanity underwent a number of changes and developed. This development (considered as a progressive process of changes within a specific system, including all factors that have been directly or indirectly influenced by these changes) always ended with significant transformations of the social structure and life model of individuals.

Unfortunately, not all of the development changes that have occurred over the years can be considered positive. The resulting condition of contemporary society cannot be also described in unambiguously positive terms. The modern world is faced with many social problems, including issues related to materialism and the accompanying excessive consumption. It is also a fact that the dynamic technological and industrial development of the so-called: the second wave (modern era) contributed, among others, to the significant exploitation of fossil fuels, greenhouse gas emissions, increased waste generation and has made humanity dependent on non-renewable energy sources, which have depleted over the centuries. Thus, it has led to a significant weakening of the condition of the natural environment in which today's people live.

The concept of sustainable development has been developed in order to maintain proper relations between the economic, natural and social subsystems. Its 27 priority assumptions regarding environmental protection and rational usage of Earth's resources were announced in 1992, already during the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. However, research that has been conducted for a long time indicates that meeting requirements of the Rio Declaration on

the environment and development may pose a great challenge for members of modern society who manifest too often a materialistic attitude and are somehow accustomed to excessive (and often unjustified by objective needs) consumption. Such results seem to be quite intuitive and consistent with the principles of common sense, anyway. At the same time, author's observations indicate that although it is difficult to argue with the results indicating a negative impact of one of the characteristics of post-modern society on sustainable development, this relationship cannot be considered shallow and one-dimensional. In not isolated cases, it turns out that materialism and consumerism have a positive impact on issues such as interest in environmentally friendly products and willingness to pay extra for them. The properties of materialism and consumption also accompany people who are not always unfamiliar with sustainable consumption behaviors. Some of them also contribute to promote environmental values and products supporting them.

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