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## BETWEEN CONSUMERISM AND DECONSUMPTION – IN SEARCH OF A NEW MODEL OF SOCIETY

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## MIĘDZY KONSUMPCJONIZMEM A DEKONSUMPCJĄ – W POSZUKIWANIU NOWEGO MODELU SPOŁECZEŃSTWA

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**Summary:** The aim of this article is to present changes in consumption linked with deliberate limitations resulting from the assumption of a particular axionormative perspective, which is an outcome in the search for an innovative model of a consumer society based on the new culture of consumption. The discourse includes examples obtained by the author in the research conducted in 2018, using the method of triangulation applied to the data from a diagnostic survey of 504 respondents in the form of a questionnaire, and from 56 in-depth interviews (IDI) carried out in five voivodeships in Poland: Dolnośląskie, Łódzkie, Śląskie, Lubuskie and Opolskie. Based on the results of quantitative research, the author verified the proposed research hypotheses concerning the dependence of limiting consumption on the age, education, changes in the levels of income, etc., whereas the qualitative research allowed to determine the motives prompting consumers to limit consumption. The theoretical basis of the conducted analyses was provided by the macro- sociological theories of the consumer society, and the latest trends in consumption based on the processes of deconsumption, pro-health and ethical consumption, as well as retro consumption.

**Słowa kluczowe:** consumer society, new culture of consumption, deconsumption, pro-health consumption, retro consumption.

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie zmian w konsumpcji dotyczących świadomych ograniczeń wynikających z przyjęcia określonej perspektywy aksjonormatywnej stanowiącej rezultat poszukiwania innowacyjnego modelu społeczeństwa konsumpcyjnego opartego na nowej kulturze konsumpcji. Egzemplifikację rozważań stanowią badania własne autorki przeprowadzone w 2018 r., w których dokonano triangulacji danych pochodzących z sondażu diagnostycznego zrealizowanego techniką ankiety wśród 504 respondentów oraz 56 wywiadów pogłębionych IDI na terenie województw w Polsce: dolnośląskiego, łódzkiego, śląskiego, lubuskiego i opolskiego. Na podstawie wyników badań ilościowych dokonano weryfikacji postawionych hipotez badawczych dotyczących zależności ograniczeń

w konsumpcji od wieku, wykształcenia, zmian w poziomie dochodów, zaś w wyniku badań jakościowych określono motywy skłaniające konsumentów do ograniczeń w konsumpcji. Podstawę teoretyczną prowadzonych analiz stanowiły makrosocjologiczne teorie społeczeństwa konsumpcyjnego oraz najnowsze trendy w dziedzinie konsumpcji bazujące na procesach dekonsumpcji, konsumpcji prozdrowotnej i etycznej oraz retrokonsumpcji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** społeczeństwo konsumpcyjne, nowa kultura konsumpcji, dekonsumpcja, konsumpcja prozdrowotna, retrokonsumpcja.

## 1. Introduction

Today's consumer society, oriented onto excessive consumption, is beginning to search for new ways of satisfying its needs based to a higher degree on limiting consumption, which provide the basis for shaping the behaviour of a new consumer who makes increasingly conscious choices resulting from his/her reflection on the detrimental aspect of excessive and uncontrolled consumption. The alternative new approach to consumption comes from contemporary trends in consumption such as deconsumption, ecological and ethical consumption, and collaborative consumption. The article presents a critique of consumer society concentrated above all on excessive acquisition and the production of consumer goods exceeding any rational limits related to the satisfaction of its needs, which consequently lead to processes of degradation affecting individuals and the wider ecosystem viewed from the perspective of the contemporary sociological and economic theories.

Within this context there arrives an attempt to seek an alternative model of consumer society which would embrace the priorities of the new culture of consumption resulting from the changing perception of one's self-image and the rationalisation of one's needs. This is based on the necessity to follow sustainable rules of behaviour which is caused by the limitations in purchase of goods and the requirements of the protection of the natural environment.

Based on the author's own research conducted in 2018, the article outlines the importance of consumption in the system of values of Polish society, depending on the education of the respondents, the limits of consumption imposed due to ideas of healthy living against the background of the differences in the respondents' level of education, watching one's weight connected with the age of the respondents, as well as the motives for accepting deconsumption as a model of behaviour.

## 2. A new model of society

A consumer society is a type of post-modern society dominated by the post-modernist vision of an individual based on a specific hierarchy of a system of values which is moving away from the traditional measures of social status determined by the category of the individual's profession towards product indicators shaping a new

image of a person in social strata. Hence individuals seek products which correspond with the social roles they play. However, the increasing departure from the traditional system of values linked with the total commitment only to one's own family (the role of the traditional Polish mother, guardian of the homestead, etc.) is beginning to give way to an image of an active woman and a business person, which brings the need to shape new dimensions for such identities focused mostly around the public roles and the resulting rules linked with not only the appropriate dress code but also diet and the visualization of the external signs linked to the styling of one's image through product indicators. The symbolism of a brand becomes personalised into the selection of such goods which to the highest degree suit the user's personality, and individuals seek brands of products confirming their personality.

The choice of branded products by an individual becomes an important element in constructing his/her image. Its dimension can be perceived in a real and an ideal context. The real image of a person is created through sociological constructs of the subjective and the reflected self. The former contains elements of self-perception and images of oneself received from other individuals, whereas the latter, the ideal one, refers to the sphere of volition linked to the way a person would like to see himself/herself and the way he/she would like to be seen by others. The correction of the real image of an individual when confronted with the ideal one is carried out using the symbols of an ideal brand complementing the actual imperfections of the consumer. The ideal image of a consumer creates in consumer society an illusion, being a certain kind of transference, that through consumption it is possible to alter the dimensions of social relations, which by making certain choices of products would lead to changes in the perception of those individuals not only in respect of their social status but also their personality.

In a consumer society people buy symbols and logos, not goods. The postmodernist differentiation of reality and appearances creates Baudrillardian *simulacra*, copies of nonexistent beings and superheroes. In the opinion of Baudrillard, this explains insatiability regarding products and consumers' dissatisfaction [Baudrillard 1998, p. 7].

The new model of consumer society is directed towards sustainable consumption and reducing the amount of acquired goods in favour of their higher quality and respect for the relevant rules regarding the production and distribution of goods. Sustainable consumption means moderation in buying products and their full use in accordance with the products' life cycle, as well as its extension and recycling. The passage from material consumption to non-material consumption, and also from instrumental values towards autotelic values connected with observing the right of all living creatures to a dignified life respecting their wellbeing, constitutes the indicators of the new model of society. This search is accompanied by attempts at building authentic social relations based on trust and authority, whose 'life cycle' is becoming increasingly shorter since in consumer societies the dominating supermarket-type relationships, with their superficiality and instrumental character, are being transferred into the life in society.

In the new model of society, the category of an individual as an atomistic element of society is replaced by the category of social capital. Every person is a carrier of potential capabilities and talents, and investing in them is a new added value which is spread to other individuals. Such a perspective in the view of society may eliminate imperfections of the market system in which too far-reaching competition reduces the potential of less resourceful persons. In such a model, creativity and innovation become the paramount values. The matter of creativity can be interpreted in both a primary and secondary context. The former, as the authentic novelty, is rare and generated by a relatively small number of individuals in society, usually resulting from their inborn abilities. The latter is more widespread and relates to unquantifiable factors connected with the talents, predispositions and passions of a given person, therefore it is of a more mechanistic nature and is usually an acquired skill linked to the popularization of innovations. In shaping creative attitudes it is indispensable to provide conditions for self-development which are connected with planning one's own career path, while innovativeness requires the creation of an appropriate educational framework linked to the programme of developing creativity.<sup>1</sup>

Basing the new model of society on investment and innovation consumption requires redefining the category of a human being and a new way of interpreting human nature, in the context of the characteristics of capital in which in the economic sense investment brings return. In the 21st century one can observe the highest level of return on human capital out of all investments made, especially in comparison with the primary sector of economy. In a society understood in such a way, the main emphasis is placed on the development of services concerning education, research, health and wellness, medicine, culture and tourism. Material consumption is beginning to give way to the consumption of services and of innovation, embracing eco-consumption, collaborative consumption and retro consumption.

## 2.1. Consumerism and deconsumption

The change of values in the post-modernist era is linked with the phenomenon of consumerism. Consumption has become an instrument of creating an individual's identity within the social space and determines the individual strategies of actions.

Consumerism as a phenomenon is identified with unsustainable consumption which is not justifiable in terms of needs and production costs, and remains in contrast with sustainable consumption resulting from controlled development based on the analysis of the economic and ecological consequences of excessive production and over-consumption [Mróz 2009].

Consumer societies are dominated by the belief that the ultimate aim of human endeavour is to purchase goods, and a person's value is confirmed by his/her possessions. Thus traditional values related to categories such as happiness, family and authority are focused on consumption. Authenticity is replaced by appearances

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. [Czetwertyński 2019, p. 83].

and social relations are characterized by superficiality and fortuity. The value of a person is reduced to a commercial value, where oneself and everybody else are treated as commodities [Fromm 2005].

The following aspects are symptomatic for consumerism:

- exaggerated acquisition of products and services exceeding the actual needs of the consumer,
- addiction to consumption treated as a value, striving for this becomes compulsory,
- accepting consumption as a measure of the quality of life,
- attaching too much importance to the image created through the use of products creating the consumer's identity,
- creating artificial needs which justify the necessity to possess certain, often completely unnecessary products,
- enslavement of the individual resulting from the ceaseless acquisition of assets to protect oneself from the loss of status resulting from one's material standing [Patrzalek 2019, p. 31].

Havas Worldwide in collaboration with Market Probe International carried out a questionnaire survey among 10 574 persons aged over 16 from 29 countries in North and South America, Asia and Europe, Poland included, which aimed at defining their attitude to consumerism. The report on the survey results shows that a solution for the issue of consumerism is not the reduction of consumption itself, but rather the choice of intelligent consumption which is based on the correct distinction between beneficial and harmful consumer expenditure. These choices have to be consistent with the approved social values. Intelligent consumption is based on the high quality of products. For the majority of respondents (76% of typical consumers), the higher quality of consumption means higher requirements and less waste [Havas Worldwide].

The opposite of consumerism is the phenomenon of deconsumption, whose origin can be found in the civilisational changes caused by the transformation of social structures. Deconsumption means an alternative approach to consumption based on reducing consumption or the use of goods, which mostly leads to a change of lifestyle and the way of satisfying one's needs. Deconsumption is connected materialistic to a non-materialistic form of consumption which increases the importance of services.

Deconsumption can be viewed in different dimensions:

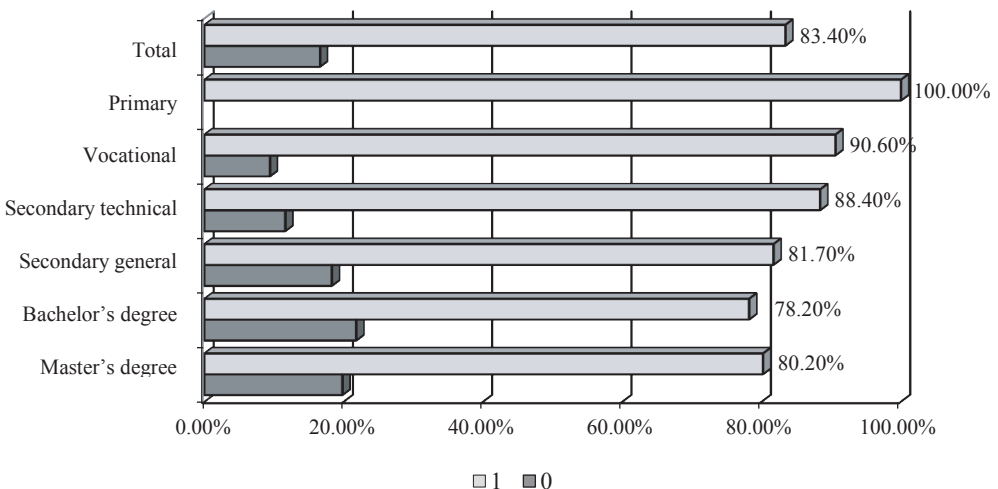
- limiting consumption due to uncertain income conditions of a household (assurance consumption),
- giving up quantitative consumption in favour of qualitative (pro-quality) consumption,
- restricting material consumption in favour of that non-material (servicization of consumption),
- reducing excessive consumption to adapt to the actual needs of the consumer, abandoning apparent consumption in favour of pragmatic (rational) consumption [Carpentier 1996, p. 15; Patrzalek 2013, p. 18].

## 2.2. Consumption in the system of human values

The author's own research conducted in 2018 using the method of diagnostic survey and the technique of standard questionnaire, among 504 respondents selected in respect of the purpose and numbers- according to gender, age, marital status, education, place of residence, number of people per household and the net income per member of household per month, defined the relevance of consumption within the structure of the axionormative system. The questionnaire survey was carried out by students of sociology from Wrocław University as part of field research led by the author, which also resulted in limiting the choice of the defined area of study.

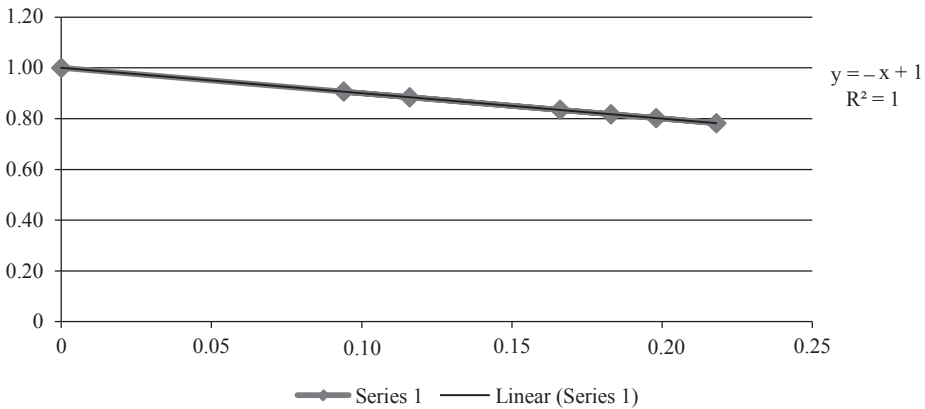
Polish society is traditional and its dominating value is family happiness. This was indicated by 83.4% of those questioned, followed by other values connected with personal investment such as: health (75.7% of the indicated responses), education (23.1%) and professional career (19.3%), followed by having children (18.9%). Consumption was placed last and was indicated by 8.3% of the respondents. The category of family happiness was analysed in relation to the education of the respondents. The research assumptions included hypothesis **H1** stating that the lower the level of the respondent's education, the greater the importance attached to the value of family happiness.

The research confirmed hypothesis **H1**, because the lower the level of the respondent's education, the higher the importance of the value of family happiness. For the respondents with primary education the value was 100% in the opinion of those questioned, and this is similar in the case of respondents with vocational schooling, i.e. 90.6% of the indications, as shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Family happiness and the level of education,  $N = 504$

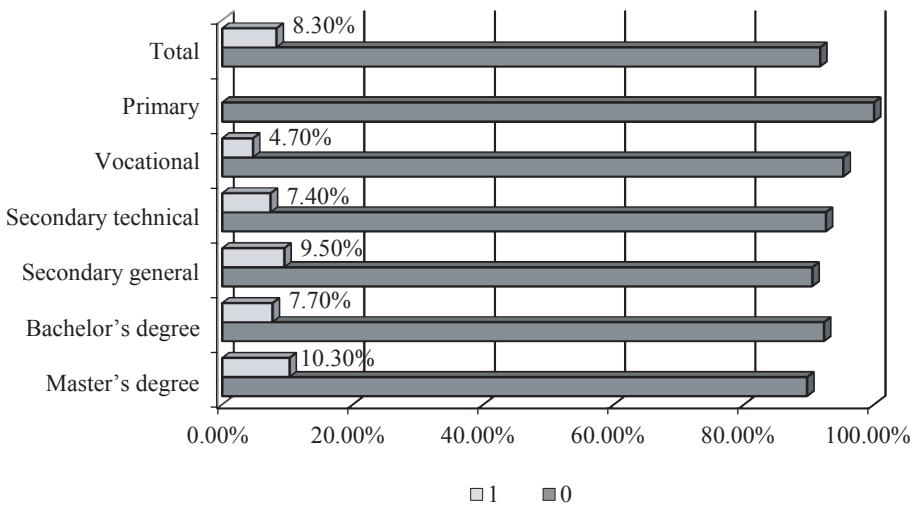
Source: own research.



**Fig. 2.** Dependence of family happiness on respondents' education,  $N = 504$

Source: own research.

The value of family happiness depends on education. This results from linear regression function  $y = -x + 1$  that the lower the level of education, the higher the rank of the value of family happiness  $R^2 = 1$  (see Figure 2). This dependence suggests a certain implication that the higher the attachment to family values, the lower the tendency to invest in personal capital constituted by a person's education, in favour of the family.



**Fig. 3.** Consumption in the respondents' system of values and their education,  $N = 504$

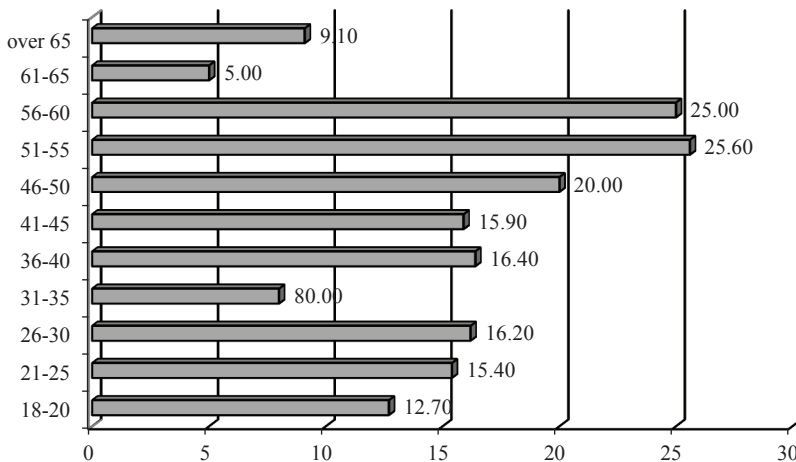
Source: own research.

The value lowest dichotomously within the system of those examined, was obtained by consumption, whose value was examined in relation to education. In the research the author posed hypothesis **H2** regarding the dependence of consumption on the respondent's level of education. This was mostly indicated by university graduates with a Master's degree (10.3% of the responses), followed by those with a general secondary level of schooling (9.5%) and those with a Bachelor's degree (7.7%), see Figure 3. These were not high indicators, therefore it can be said that this dependence is weak. The respondents with secondary-level education indicated consumption more often than those holding Bachelor's degrees. Such differentiation of this dependence shows the lack of a clear relation between the phenomenon of consumption and the variable of the respondents' education.

### 3. Innovative consumption

The issue of lifestyle in connection with society's health arose after the Second World War, with the emerging civilizational diseases connected with hypertension, the cardiovascular system, cancer, neurosis, etc., resulting from stress, a sedentary lifestyle, pollution of the environment and noise [Patrzalek 2019, pp. 61-62].

The author's research found personal health to be second in the ranking of the selected values. Pro-health consumption was included in innovative consumption which arises from the restrictions in consumers' behaviour resulting from their concern for their own health. Bearing in mind the range of innovativeness in undertaking deconsumption activity related to the value of health interpreted as



**Fig. 4.** Limiting consumption due to their care for personal health, and age in %, *N* = 426

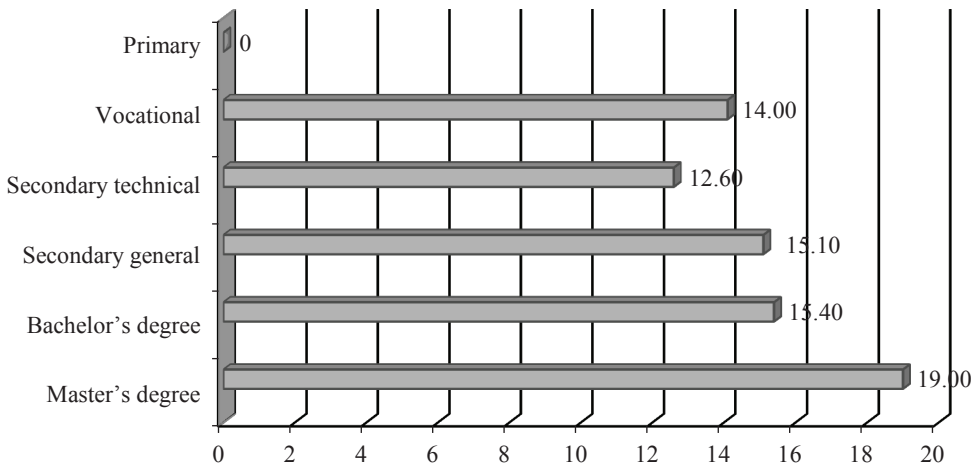
Source: own research.



personal investment, the research examined that dependence in relation to the variable of the age and education of the respondents. The author posed hypothesis **H3** regarding the limits in consumption due to their care for personal health in relation to the category of the respondents' age.

The most frequent limits in consumption linked to care for one's health applied to older respondents aged 51-60 who jointly constituted 50.6% of the participants and the mature ones aged 46-50 (20% of the responses), see Figure 4. Therefore this confirms the dependence that the higher the age, the greater the importance attached to the category of health.

Another postulated hypothesis, **H4**, was the assumption that the higher the level of the respondent's education, the greater the limitation of consumption due to the care about personal health. This hypothesis was confirmed by the research results because the consumption limited due to caring for one's health was mostly indicated by respondents with a university Master's degree (19%) and a Bachelor's degree (15.4%), followed by the respondents with a secondary education (15.1%), see Figure 5.



**Fig. 5.** Limiting consumption due to caring for one's health and education in %,  $N = 417$

Source: own research.

An innovative approach to consumption means the assumption that what we eat has a significant influence on our body shape, hence the limits in consumption through the application of diets eliminating unhealthy products demonstrate consumers' creativity. Personal image has become an important message in communication in the social strata, testifying to responsible consumption. Limiting consumption related to caring about one's appearance was examined in relation to the age of the respondents. It was hypothetically assumed in **H5** that age impacts on limiting consumption related to caring for one's figure.

Limits in consumption due to caring for one's figure, depending on the category of age, show a similar distribution of this variable in the particular age groups within the range 0-20%, with a small advantage for senior persons aged 61-65 for whom it was 21.4%, and for persons aged 41-45 (12.7%), while for the younger groups analogous indicators were: for the age 26-30, 13.2%; 31-35, 11.8%; 21-25, 10.9%, as shown in Figure 6.

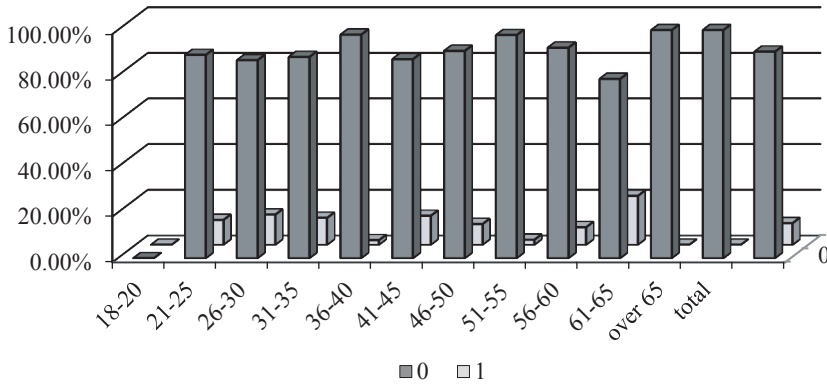


Fig. 6. Limiting consumption due to caring for one's figure, and age in %, N = 426

Source: own research.

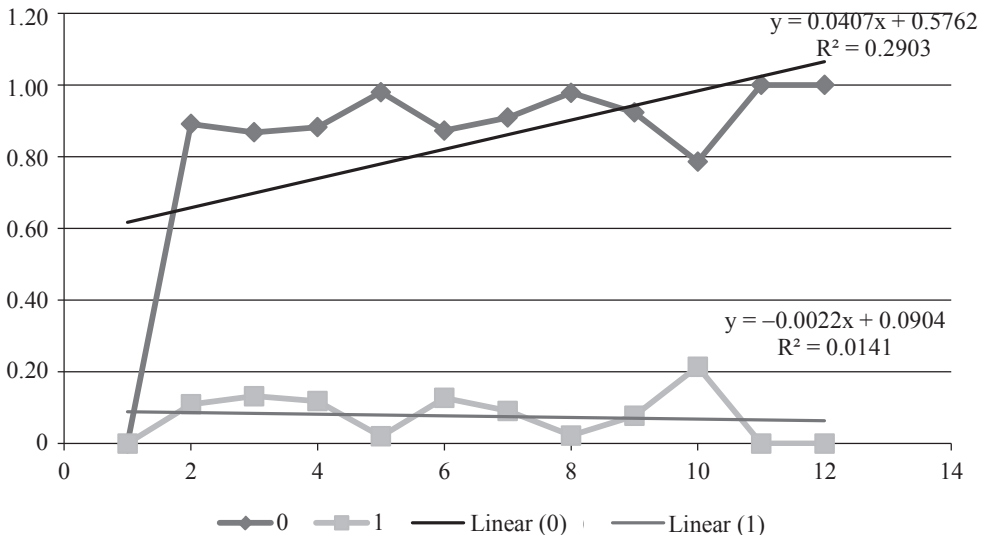


Fig. 7. Dependence of limiting consumption due to caring for one's figure, and age in %, N = 426

Source: own research.

The dependence between limiting consumption due to caring for one's figure shows a negative correlation related to the category of age  $y = -0.002x + 0.0090$ , see Figure 7. The analysis of the dependence function implies that there is a weak dependence between limited consumption due to caring for one's figure and the age ( $R^2 = 0.0014$ ).

#### 4. Motives for deconsumption in qualitative research

In qualitative research, using the technique of in-depth interview IDI, carried out on 56 respondents from the same regions as in the case of quantitative research by students of sociology from Wrocław University as part of field research led by the author, and based on the analysis of transcriptions of the examined declarations it was possible to establish the motives for the implemented deconsumption behaviour. The qualitative research also looked for the metaphors in deconsumption behaviour of the respondents; nowadays the study of metaphors constitutes a new approach to research on consumer behaviour. According to G. Zaltman, without the emotional context, consumers would not be able to ascribe values to certain features of products because of the low correlation between intentions and the actual behavior [Zaltman 2003, p. 53]. The technique of revealing metaphors is based on an individual in-depth interview with a consumer, hence the choice of that technique in the author's own research.

In the context of the value of health and restricted food consumption resulting from caring for one's figure, the respondents indicated the eliminating diets aimed at the exclusion of products containing unhealthy ingredients such as sugar, fat and gluten, giving up consumption of excessive amounts of e.g. alcohol, cigarettes and coffee, but also from a new approach to food consumption related to counting calories. Among the metaphors indicated by the respondents in relation to unhealthy (junk) food was the metaphor of obesity, while in relation to consumption of sweets the image of childhood. The rise in consumer awareness is linked with searching for information about products before their purchase in respect of the contents, place and method of their production, and based on the understanding that excessive consumption leads to negative consequences both for the health and psyche of consumers as well as for the natural environment.

Creating the new lifestyle is becoming increasingly noticeable in the behaviour of Polish consumers. Its emergence is connected with the growing value of health through the care for the correct body shape, personal image and good looks. Over the last two decades, society has appreciated the value of a healthy lifestyle based on following a proper diet, regular exercise, limited alcohol consumption and giving up smoking [Shilling 2008, p. 751].

Innovative forms of deconsumption include retro consumption, connected with returning a life cycle to products which mostly have an emotional value for the consumer, based on traditional models and customs in consumption. In the author's own research the respondents indicated not just furniture and antique objects, family heirlooms, culinary and cosmetic recipes, cars, bicycles, motorcycles, militaria and houses, but also items of everyday use such as clothes, shoes and jewellery. The motives for retro consumption are linked with the symbolic value of those products as well as with the concern about the protection of the natural environment and economic reasons related to the lower cost of restoring the practical value to the old products rather than the cost of buying the new ones.

## 5. Conclusion

The issues presented in this article concerning the creation of a model of society according to the rules of the new culture of consumption, based on the results of the author's research, prompt certain concluding reflections. The search for a new model of society should include the change of the image of the modern individual seen from the perspective of activities based on self-improvement and development as an entity investing in his/her own social capital, requires the inclusion of new trends in consumption, among them deconsumption and innovative consumption. Modern Human Capital has a tendency to migrate within the global labour markets which does not allow for the return on investment in its country of origin, however the transfer of skills between countries can impact on generating external effects [Parlament Europejski; OECD 2010]. This also requires the inclusion of new trends in consumption such as deconsumption and innovative consumption. The former is bound in an obvious way to the latter because an individual, from being a passive consumer focused on thoughtless and excessive purchase, turns into an active consumer concerned about his/her own health, the natural environment and personal image in the social strata. The phenomenon of consumerism in post-modern consumer societies is becoming a common attitude in life, making consumption a tool for the creation of an individual's identity. The motives related to reversing these trends concern shaping a creative attitude connected with deliberate limitations in consumption, resulting from the assumption of a particular axionormative perspective which is the effect of deconsumption and conscious limitations based on observing ethical norms protecting all living creatures. Generating such an attitude, in the long run leads to rationalizing consumption on the basis of the actual needs of consumers and the related healthcare, as well as to undertaking innovative actions in consumption, which mean investing through consumption into one's own development and self-improvement. In the new culture of consumption the category of wellbeing is extended, embracing not only humans but also animals and plants protecting the

ecosystem. Human wellbeing is significantly influenced by positive social relations. Investment in social relations through consumption is linked with a sharing economy. Sharing means that consumption becomes a form of cooperation [Russell 2014, pp. 1595-1600]. Research results show that the level of sharing consumption in Poland is relatively low. Yet at this stage of research it is difficult to determine whether this results from the wish to limit consumption aimed at its sustainability or it is a motive for saving, characteristic for developing countries [Rudawska 2016]. The importance of pro-health and pro-ecology values goes beyond the boundaries constituting the local community, and becomes a global challenge for contemporary humanity facing the degradation of life on Earth. Their propagation is reflected in the creation of models of sustainable development in European countries and the rest of the world up to 2050, through increasing the effectiveness of the use of resources and land, and reducing waste and food production [Sustainable 2019], formulated in Strategy Europe 2020 including the OECD Innovation Strategy based on promoting green activity both in the sphere of consumption and the economy.

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