

Understanding Sustainable Consumption: Consumer Awareness, Information Sources, and Stakeholders

Compreendendo o Consumo Sustentável: Consciência do Consumidor, Fontes de Informação e Partes Interessadas

Leila Dal Moro Doutorado em Engenharia Civil e Ambiental. Atitus Educação, Escola de Negócios e Tecnologia. Brasil. leila.moro@atitus.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0456-4260>

Yasmin Gomes Casagrande Doutorado em Administração. Universidade Federal do Mato Grosso do Sul. Brasil. yasmin.casagrande@ufms.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9363-9716>

Janaína Macke Doutorado em Administração. Universidade de Caxias do Sul. Brasil. jmacke@ucs.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7781-7161>

Jandir Pauli Doutorado em Sociologia. Atitus Educação, Escola de Negócios e Tecnologia. Brasil. jandir.pauli@atitus.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4618-6958>

Daniela Medeiros Mestranda em Administração. Atitus Educação, Escola de Negócios e Tecnologia. Brasil. danielamedeiros.mestrado@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4326-7919>

Alcindo Neckel Doutorado em Geografia. Atitus Educação, Escola Politécnica. Brasil. alcindo.neckel@atitus.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5435-3096>

Giana Mores Doutorado em Agronegócios. Atitus Educação, Escola de Negócios e Tecnologia. Brasil. giana.mores@atitus.edu.br
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3733-2220>

ABSTRACT

This study explores differences in citizens' perceptions of responsible consumption, sources of information about sustainable practices, and the agents responsible for sustainability initiatives. It assesses the level of awareness regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The data collection instrument garnered 312 valid responses, which were analyzed using descriptive statistics and variance analysis. Individuals with lower knowledge of the SDGs showed lower agreement with the statement that the media provides reliable information on sustainability. However, external factors such as institutional trust levels and pre-existing biases in information-seeking behavior may influence this relationship. However, individuals exposed to sustainability information through the media do not necessarily develop a deep understanding of the SDGs. This study highlights

the need for more effective integration of sustainability discussions within organizations, considering the growing importance of this issue.

Keywords: Sustainability management. Brazilian consumers. Sustainable production and consumption. Sustainable Development Goals.

RESUMO

Este estudo explora as diferenças nas percepções dos cidadãos sobre o consumo consciente, as fontes de informação sobre práticas sustentáveis e os agentes responsáveis pelas iniciativas de sustentabilidade. Também avalia o nível de conhecimento sobre os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS). O instrumento de coleta de dados gerou 312 respostas válidas, analisadas por meio de estatística descritiva e análise de variância. Os resultados indicam que indivíduos com maior conhecimento sobre os ODS tendem a exigir informações mais detalhadas nos rótulos e embalagens dos produtos e reconhecem a responsabilidade individual como aspecto importante para a promoção de práticas sustentáveis. Por outro lado, aqueles que recebem informações qualificadas sobre sustentabilidade por meio da mídia nem sempre demonstram um profundo entendimento sobre os ODS. Este estudo ressalta a necessidade de integrar as discussões sobre sustentabilidade de forma mais efetiva nas organizações, dada a crescente relevância do tema.

Palavras-chave: Gestão da sustentabilidade. Consumidores brasileiros. Produção e consumo sustentáveis. Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Consumption is fundamental to human existence, encompassing basic needs such as water, energy, food, clothing, shelter, and leisure. However, consumerism—characterized by excessive consumption driven by symbolic motivations rather than just utilitarian ones—has its roots in economic and social transformations. As analyzed by Bauman (2007), the logic of modern capitalism fosters a system where consumption satisfies needs and defines identities and social positions. This phenomenon has been amplified by the advancement of marketing and advertising strategies, which promote the constant replacement of products and perceived obsolescence, creating a continuous cycle of desire and disposal (Ewen, 1976).

In addition to economic forces, cultural and psychological factors play a role in the spread of consumerism. As argued by Rocha (1985), advertising operates as a symbolic narrative that assigns values and meanings to consumer goods, persuading individuals to see products as extensions of their identity and social status. Baudrillard (1970) reinforces this idea by suggesting that, in contemporary society, objects are consumed not only for their utility but also for what they represent within a system of signs and social distinctions. The relentless pursuit of novelties and prestige symbols drives the economy but also has significant environmental and social consequences.

There are theoretical and practical gaps in responsible production and consumption. Thus, this research addresses the following questions: How do citizens perceive responsible consumption, their main sources of information about sustainable practices, and which entities and social actors are responsible for driving sustainability? The aim is to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities in promoting responsible consumption and supporting public policies and strategies that encourage sustainable practices in society.

For future generations, leaders, and change agents, sustainability is a multifaceted challenge that demands innovative solutions and collaborative efforts to preserve our planet's health. Spreading knowledge and raising awareness among stakeholders is essential. Society's conduct and behavior will determine the effectiveness of sustainability and deepen the understanding of its fundamental principles (Pizzutilo and Venezia, 2021).

Achieving the balance between the pillars of sustainability directs our efforts and foresees transformative changes within current social structures. This balance should be viewed as an indicator of wealth and inclusive and sustained growth (Bonnedahl et al., 2022). Economic activities have driven transformations, promoting rampant consumption and increasing waste. Securing raw materials such as energy, food, and water is essential. Sustainable habits can improve the quality of life when information is accessible to all. Habits, practices, and actions can transform sustainable behaviors into routines that benefit the planet (Roos, 2015).

Human needs have increasingly relied on producing unnecessary goods, leading to the harmful appropriation and use of resources. To address the management of natural resources, new legal arrangements are needed. This includes measures for energy efficiency, increased flexibility and resilience, and encouraging the participation of all citizens, particularly in operations benefiting low-income communities (Cunha et al., 2021). Furthermore, promoting urban cycling and other mobility solutions can foster sustainable transportation among citizens (Jordi-Sánchez, 2018).

Companies play an important role in sustainability by providing information about products with eco-labels and appealing to consumers' emotions (Turunen and Halme, 2021). Raising awareness about sustainability requires support from external actors. These actors' role in improving knowledge dissemination is well-recognized in academia (Pizzutilo and Venezia, 2021). Understanding and leveraging consumer emotions can influence sustainable behavior changes (Brosch and Steg, 2021).

Technological innovation is a key factor that promotes sustainable urban interventions by linking knowledge, power, and productivity. Developing a more sustainable consciousness is related to urban growth, social relations, and technological progress (Bibri and Krogstie, 2016). In addition, social innovation is essential. It involves changes in behavior, norms, values, efforts, and outcomes, often initiated by collaborative actions to face local challenges (Jungsberg et al., 2021).

In this context, the research is justified by identifying the factors for society that influence decision-making supporting local and global sustainability. Transdisciplinary scientific research on sustainability aims to generate knowledge through science-practice interactions. This research involves complexities with multiple actors, requiring the integration of diverse expertise to understand the problems comprehensively and find solutions (Karrasch et al., 2022). It also assesses the level of knowledge about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Consumerism and its Causes

Modern consumerism is rooted in the economic and social transformations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. According to Baudrillard (1970), consumption is not limited to satisfying basic needs but has become a system of meaning where individuals acquire goods to express status and social identity. This logic was intensified with the rise of consumer society, in which products are consumed not for their utility but for what they symbolically represent.

Bauman (2007) argues that ephemerality and disposability have become central to the consumption experience in liquid modernity. People are encouraged to constantly seek new goods because planned and perceived obsolescence drives the economy by stimulating frequent purchases. Ewen (1976) complements this view by analyzing the role of advertising in creating artificial needs, emphasizing that modern marketing builds desires and promotes consumerism as an essential lifestyle.

In addition to corporate strategies, cultural and psychological factors contribute to excessive consumerism. Rocha (1985) highlights that advertising uses symbolic narratives to transform goods into promises of happiness and personal fulfillment, reinforcing the illusion that consumption is a means of social ascension and belonging. In this way, consumerism becomes a social and behavioral phenomenon sustained by values of status and recognition.

The impact of consumerism goes beyond the individual, directly affecting global sustainability. According to Klein (2000), the advancement of large corporations and brand culture has intensified the exploitation of natural resources and rampant production, creating an unsustainable economic model based on accelerated extraction, production, and disposal. This dynamic compromises both the environment and working conditions in global production chains.

2.2 Perception of Sustainability and Responsible Consumption

While the perception of sustainability and implementing practices by businesses, schools, universities, and civil society is crucial, individuals must recognize their role in daily life. Individual actions can evolve into organizational initiatives through collective efforts (Thoradeniya et al., 2021).

Since the 1990s, UNESCO has promoted education for sustainability to assist in critical decision-making, foster responsible awareness, and encourage the adoption of responsible attitudes and behaviors. Society must adapt to new ways of thinking and acting, developing skills and attitudes. Additionally, the perspectives of current students, who will become prominent influencers in the future, are vital. However, their behaviors and attitudes remain moderate (Aleixo et al., 2021).

Behavioral research traditionally focuses on perceptions of risk, beliefs, values, attitudes, and consumer perceptions. Communication strategies aim to stimulate behavior changes in the population by highlighting problems, offering solutions to mitigate them, showcasing individual benefits through sustainable actions, and presenting options that promote sustainable choices (Brosch & Steg, 2021).

With the increasing demand for natural resources and the expansion of environmental degradation, the population must adopt disciplined behavior for more sustainable consumption. A European study indicates that sustainable consumption behavior is associated with ecological concerns influenced by increased knowledge and perceptions of environmental risks (Saari, 2021).

Behavioral approaches to promoting sustainable activities focus on cognitive processes, but emotions play a significant role and require further exploration. Affective reactions are essential for sustainable behavior change and present substantial opportunities (Brosch & Steg, 2021). Consumers are becoming more aware of the need to change habits and adopt sustainable practices, and businesses recognize the impact of sustainability on their competitive positions (Turunen & Halme, 2021).

2.3 Sustainable Actions and Conduct

It is essential to consider that involving society in various ways is a common practice in the social sciences. This approach facilitates discussions about problems, roles, and actors' positions while emphasizing the recognition of different voices and values in decision-making. Moreover, easily accessible information can help consumers purchase sustainable products and services and encourage organizations to communicate effectively (Turunen & Halme, 2021).

Despite widespread awareness that waste pollutes water, air, and soil, leading to extinctions, loss of biodiversity, and greenhouse gas emissions that cause extreme weather events, few concrete actions are taken to translate this knowledge into sustainable initiatives. Research investigates decision-making processes to develop informational tools and intervention strategies to promote behavioral changes (Brosch & Steg, 2021).

In addition to the growing demand for sustainability information, progress is being made in raising consumer awareness, which needs to be translated into action. Some investigations suggest two approaches to influence consumption decisions based on sustainability knowledge. First, providing more information and knowledge on the topic can trigger cognitive responses in consumers and later appeal to emotions, which can activate affective components for sustainable behaviors (Turunen & Halme, 2021).

Sustainability labels provide reliable information, while unregulated communication advances environmental advertising, appealing to consumers' emotional sides (Turunen & Halme, 2021).

The need to share information and integrate knowledge is growing and can generate benefits in managing human and social capital. When information sharing occurs through personal contacts, it fosters a sense of reciprocity through interactions. Coordinating policies and programs and creating a collaborative culture are essential. For this reason, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should assist humanity in transitioning to sustainability, reducing environmental impact, and promoting diverse life on the planet (Bonnedahl et al., 2022).

3 METHOD

This study employs a quantitative research design incorporating descriptive and inferential analysis (ANOVA) to examine Brazilian consumers' perceptions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The data collection instrument, adapted from Akatu (2021), follows a theoretical framework designed to assess sustainability awareness. The questionnaire used Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions to capture respondents' knowledge and behaviors regarding sustainability practices.

Data were collected using stratified random sampling to ensure a diverse representation of Brazilian consumers across various socio-economic backgrounds and geographic regions. This approach was intended to reduce sampling bias and improve the generalizability of the findings. The final sample included 312 respondents.

The survey was administered online via digital platforms to facilitate broad accessibility. Before its launch, a pilot test with 30 participants was conducted to refine the questionnaire based on preliminary feedback. Adjustments were made to improve the clarity of the questions and response scales to ensure they accurately measured SDG awareness.

To assess the instrument's reliability, Cronbach's alpha was calculated at 0.95, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the items. The margin of error was estimated at 5.55%, which is within an acceptable range for statistical analysis in social science research.

Although preliminary analysis suggested some deviations from normality, ANOVA was applied, assuming it remains robust in large samples. However, no homogeneity of variance test (e.g., Levene's test) was performed, which should be considered a study limitation.

The predictor variable in this study was respondents' self-reported knowledge of the SDGs, measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("I do not know") to 5 ("I know very well"). The impact of each variable was analyzed, and the effect size (ω^2) was reported to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how SDG awareness influences sustainable behaviors among Brazilian consumers.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The descriptive statistical method was applied to generate Table 1, which includes data on the mean, median, standard deviation, minimum and maximum values, skewness, and kurtosis. The data indicate that responses were concentrated around the mean age, with marital status predominantly falling into the single or married.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of profile variables and participation in sustainability promotion actions

	Mean	Median	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis
1- Age	33.359	32,00	12.332	15	74	0,599	0,00104
2- Marital status	1.532	1,00	0,636	1	4	1.013	0,99379
3- Gender	0,369	0,00	0,483	0	1	0,547	-171.133
4- Have you participated in any awareness campaigns for sustainable actions in your municipality	0,369	0,00	0,483	0	1	0,547	-171.133

The variable assessing participation in sustainability initiatives had a mean higher than its median, suggesting positive skewness. These results indicate that the responses were concentrated at the lowest level, with many individuals not participating in these actions.

The ANOVA results suggest a potential relationship between knowledge of the SDGs and the perception of individual responsibility for sustainable actions ($p = 0.046$). However, although statistically significant, the effect size (ω^2) should be evaluated to determine its practical significance (Table 2).

Table 2

ANOVA results

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P
1) Small and medium-sized enterprises and large companies should be concerned with sustainability actions.	5.30	4	1.324	1,49	0,204
2) It is preferable to choose a job at a company that implements sustainable actions, even if the salary is lower.	5.34	4	1.334	1,51	0,201
3) Seasonal fruits and vegetables are, in most cases, healthier for you and the environment because they require less use of pesticides and fertilizers.	3,72	4	0,930	1,05	0,382
4) Having things at home but not using them wastes natural resources such as water, energy, and raw materials used in manufacturing.	5,51	4	1.379	1,56	0,187
5) I prefer to buy cheap products that are easy to replace when they break or become obsolete rather than more expensive products that last longer and can be upgraded or repaired.	7,47	4	1.868	2.11	0,080
6) Labels and packaging should provide more detailed information about products, such as composition, origin, usage, disposal instructions, and even	8.23	3	2.744	3.10	0,028

details about the companies that manufacture them.

7) Knowing what we consume and how it affects the environment and society allows us to make better purchasing choices.	3,61	3	1.204	1,36	0,256
8) When I choose products produced closer to where I am, I help reduce the release of gases that pollute the environment and harm my health.	3,99	4	0,998	1.13	0,345
9) The most reliable information about the development of sustainable actions is obtained on the internet.	6.45	4	1.612	1,82	0,126
10) The most reliable information about the development of sustainable actions is obtained from the media.	12,85	4	3.212	3,63	0,007
11) The most reliable information about the development of sustainable actions is obtained from friends.	4.41	4	1.102	1.24	0,293
12) Schools have the most significant responsibility for implementing sustainable actions.	4.26	4	1.064	1.20	0,311
13) The media has the most significant responsibility for implementing sustainable actions.	3,76	4	0,940	1.06	0,377
14) Federal government ministries have the greatest responsibility for implementing sustainable actions.	5.21	3	1.736	1,96	0,121
15) Municipal governments have the greatest responsibility for implementing sustainable actions.	3.31	3	1.103	1.24	0,294
16) Higher education institutions have the greatest responsibility for implementing sustainable actions.	5,99	4	1.497	1,69	0,153
17) I have the greatest responsibility for implementing sustainable actions.	7.18	3	2.395	2,70	0,046

There is a relationship between the respondents' perception of the SDGs and their perception of the importance of information on labels and packaging, receiving information about sustainable actions through the media, and individual responsibility for implementing actions. Among these three significant variables, the role of the media in disseminating information about sustainability had the most critical effect (ω^2) on the predictor variable, highlighting the media's influence on shaping sustainable behavior. The analysis of the variables regarding responses to SDG knowledge is presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

Table 3

Variable in detailed product labels and packaging

	How much do you know about the SDGs?	Mean	95% Confidence interval		SD
			Lowest	Highest	
6) Labels and packaging should provide more detailed information about products, such as	1	4.13	3,98	4.29	0,623
	2	4.40	4.30	4,50	0,510

composition, origin, usage and disposal	3	4.33	4.17	4.49	0,715
instructions, and even characteristics of the companies that manufacture them.	4	4.42	4.18	4,66	0,896
	5	4,56	3,89	5.22	1.014

For the first variable, the differences between the means indicate that individuals who consider themselves more knowledgeable about the SDGs show higher levels of agreement with needing more detailed information on labels and packaging. The consumer citizen is a crucial factor in addressing this issue. However, two assumptions are necessary for this role to be exercised consciously: education and environmental awareness (Aleixo et al., 2021) and access to environmentally qualified information (Thoradeniya et al., 2021).

Conscious consumers expect ethical behavior from companies that offer them products and services. Making an informed choice requires access to information about business practices related to socio-environmental responsibility (Bonnedahl et al., 2022). This behavior involves rejecting offers from companies that use misleading or abusive advertising or fail to maintain environmental preservation standards while supporting companies that adopt serious environmental preservation policies that respect consumers, their communities, and the environment (Roos, 2015).

Table 4

Variable about qualified information on sustainable actions obtained from the media

	How much do you know about the SDGs?	Mean	95% Confidence interval		SD
			Lowest	Highest	
10) The most reliable information about the development of sustainable actions is obtained from the media.	1	3.15	2.90	3.40	0.971
	2	3.27	3.09	3.45	0.966
	3	3.28	3.05	3.51	1.043
	4	3.04	2.78	3.30	0.981
	5	3.22	2.37	4.07	1.302

Regarding the perception of obtaining information through the media, the results indicate that respondents with lower knowledge about the SDGs show the lowest levels of agreement with the statement. The media plays an important role in communication, information, persuasion, and shaping the identity of the consumer-citizen. To encourage sustainable behavior, marketing scholars must engage in responsible research (Bolton, 2021). The media shapes the cultural and social contexts of individuals and has the power to stimulate consumers.

Understanding the relationship between consumer society and social issues is essential, as consumption is linked to social prestige and the predisposition to sustainable behavior (Jäger and Weber, 2020). It is worth questioning the orientation and purpose of media companies regarding sustainability. New approaches to address environmental and social challenges should be on companies' agendas and cannot be neglected in their communication and marketing strategies. When citizens have access to quality information

about the production process of goods, they evaluate their cost/benefit more consciously (Bolton, 2021).

Table 5

Variable about qualified information on sustainable actions obtained from the media

	How much do you know about the SDGs?	Mean	95% Confidence interval		SD
			Lowest	Highest	
	1	4.12	3.90	4.34	0.865
17) I have the most significant responsibility for implementing sustainable actions.	2	4.24	4.10	4.37	0.716
	3	4,45	4.33	4.57	0.526
	4	4,53	4.39	4.66	0.504
	5	4,67	4.34	4.99	0.500

The results showed that the greater the knowledge about the SDGs, the greater the agreement with this statement regarding individual responsibility for implementing sustainable actions. Conscious choice demands the intellectual preparation of a consumer citizen. This preparation should begin with primary environmental education through a new approach to traditional subjects beyond the inclusion of sustainable education in the school curriculum.

Education is key in shaping socially and environmentally responsible consumers, potentially fostering broader societal changes. This process fosters social values such as ethics, a sense of integration with nature, quality of life, social justice, solidarity, and human dignity (Pizzutilo and Venezia, 2021).

5 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze differences in perceptions of responsible consumption, sources of information on sustainable actions, the entities responsible for sustainability initiatives, and citizens' knowledge of the SDGs. The findings suggest that consumers with greater awareness of the SDGs tend to demand more detailed information on product labels and packaging, including details on origin, composition, usage, and disposal instructions.

This underscores the importance of environmental education aligned with the SDGs, as greater awareness may encourage consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions based on label information. Future research could further explore how sustainability-related communication on labels influences consumer trust and decision-making and the accuracy of the information provided.

The study highlights an essential aspect of sustainable actions: the relationship between knowledge of the SDGs and individual responsibility for implementing actions. However, it observes the lack of accountability among social institutions, such as the media, universities, and public authorities. These findings suggest a significant research gap in explaining the transfer of responsibility to individuals while other actors are not held accountable. Investigating the risk of atomizing actions and losing the collective sense

of the need for sustainability initiatives is essential, which institutions must ensure.

Respondents perceive the media as a key source of reliable information on sustainable actions. This result reinforces the expectation that the media should provide access to information about sustainability, empowering consumers to make more informed decisions. However, this research did not differentiate between media types or compare advertisements with journalistic articles. Future studies may explore the differences between media types and trust in advertisement information. Another research opportunity could be considering access to social media information and online content.

While the research reinforces the influence of consumption on environmental preservation, it also questions the role of companies and social institutions (government and media) in proactively defending the environment and guiding consumers in their purchasing habits. Education for sustainability aims to develop critical thinking that increases the responsibility of individuals, institutions, and companies. One limitation of this study is the assumption of normality in applying ANOVA, as no homogeneity of variance test (e.g., Levene's test) was conducted. While ANOVA is generally robust to violations of normality in large samples, future research could explore non-parametric alternatives to validate these findings.

The mission of the 2030 Agenda is to engage and coordinate different social actors in creating practical actions to promote the planet's sustainability. The role of research is to critically examine this mission, identifying greenwashing practices and the lack of information for consumer decision-making. The role of science is fundamental in exposing harmful practices that prevent discernment and the formation of a well-informed consumer citizen. The importance of the SDG agenda is emphasized as a means of focusing systemic efforts through detailing each of the 17 SDGs. It is necessary to understand how consumers from different sectors and economic contexts receive, understand, and make decisions based on this information.

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