

## ECO-ANXIETY AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR: MUTUAL INFLUENCES

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### Abstract

The economic and social problems facing today's global society are increasingly varied. One of these is the concern about the environment status, which has as main directions, in the future, especially the following: the depletion of resources, the decrease of their quality, the increase in the level of pollution and in the prices of basic resources, the negative impact on human health, etc. All these forms of concern are found in a new concept: eco-anxiety, considered an emotional disorder. Specific studies and research show that the most affected segment is that of young people, especially from developed or developing countries. Paradoxically, regarding the presence of this disorder, an inverse relationship proportional to well-being and progress is identified: the higher the level of development of a country, the more present this state of eco-anxiety is. From another perspective, today's society has predominantly become a consumer society, and the interest of individuals to buy more and more has almost become normality. This phenomenon also prevails in developed and developing countries. In addition, in the last 3 years or so, the orientation of purchase and consumption, towards ecological or at least more environment-friendly products and services has been observed. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the mutual influence between two issues of major interest for today's society: eco-anxiety and consumer behavior. It starts from the hypothesis that these two concepts influence each other. The research methods are: observation, literature review, synthesis and interpretation. Thus, it follows that the manifestation of eco-anxiety stimulates interest in the purchase of environmentally friendly products, and the compulsive buying style - a so-called emotional remedy - generates hyper consumption and, implicitly, has negative consequences on the environment, such as: pollution, resource depletion and impressive amounts of waste difficult to manage.

**Key words:** hyper consumption, ecology, behavior

Approaching a topic of study that brings together concepts from apparently disparate fields can be considered daring or challenging. The present paper focuses on the concepts of eco-anxiety and consumer behavior and it aims to analyze them in a common perspective. Encouraging interdisciplinary research proves to be a support in approaching the theme of this paper. The concept of anxiety belongs to the field of psychology, whereas of consumer behavior belongs to marketing, and the suffix "eco" belongs to the field of life sciences (ecology). Although at first glance the fields are very different, psychological science is the one that brings them together, for the simple reason that in the center of all actions is man.

The concept of eco-anxiety, of maximum novelty in the profile literature and - to a large extent - controversial, seems not to be a direct component of the field of life sciences. For these reasons, the present work aims to present the ways that support the inclusion of the concept in the sphere of analysis of the life sciences and to

introduce it into the relevant, theoretical and practical literature.

The consumer behavior concept, which is not new, but has even become a central element in current and modern marketing research, has as foreground the individual, the man, through who's needs and actions determines the dynamics of the market and has a direct and significant impact on the environment.

The main purpose of the paper is to highlight the importance of considering the connection between these three fields: psychology, marketing and ecology. The reason behind the consideration of such a subject is the observation of changes, in a very accelerated dynamic, of the general needs that people have, along with the global need to consider the sustainability of resources and the environment in which people currently live their lives.

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper, predominantly empirical and theoretical, focuses on the analysis of the specific literature together with practical demonstration.

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At the core of the methodological path of the work is the specialized literature from abroad which, in the last 2 years (2020-2022), has addressed the new topic of eco-anxiety in the form of conceptual clarification and that of practical analyses. Moreover, consumption behavior was considered from the point of view of market dynamics, which indicate a considerable increase in global consumption for almost all categories of goods, products and services. From another point of view, we considered the climate changes for which we cannot issue value judgments, i.e., if they are "good" or "bad" but we can observe and point out the concern of individuals, governments or international organizations for the way of these climate changes, along with concern for the management and consumption of natural resources. In the methodological organization of the paper, authors used arguments that support the correlational or joint analysis of these study sub-themes.

The objectives of the paper are: **O1.** Arguing the importance of the concept of eco-anxiety through the foray into the specific literature; **O2.** Highlighting the link between eco-anxiety and consumption behavior; **O3.** As a practical objective, with long-term impact, the authors propose the creation of sustainable values and the introduction of new forms of approach in consumer behavior researching, along with the diversification and completion of local literature, with this approach.

To achieve the objectives of the paper, we proceeded to identify, accumulate and mention a rich set of information about eco-anxiety and how it correlates with the research on consumer behavior. The questions that constitute the methodological support of the research are: in what context does eco-anxiety appear and in which consumer profile, is there a specific of the countries where this disorder is predominant, are there age categories more affected by this problem, what are the reasons why the concept is almost unknown in Romania, what causes a contradiction between the policies supported to encourage consumption and those to protect emotional health, why excessive consumption remains promoted as a stress reduction option, why there aren't such subjects taught or discussed in schools?

The research methods used are literature incursion and analysis, selection and synthesis, interpretation. In all, the paper is based on the concepts analysis and their practical connection.

The hypotheses of the paper are: eco-anxiety and consumption behavior are in an interdependent relationship, consumption behavior which is not based on real needs leads indirectly to eco-anxious manifestations, and the lack of rational consumption management policies maintains and accentuates this vicious circle.

**Eco-anxiety** has several definitions and is present as a practical and conceptual study interest in international specialized papers and reports. In the Green Report (2022) the concept is presented as the set of heightened concerns about the future of the Earth, alongside climate change stress or even ecological trauma with mental health consequences. Among the most suggestive definitions the authors mention: (1) "The term eco-anxiety is used as a general term for anxiety in relation to the ecological crisis" (Pihkala, 2020); (2) "Eco-anxiety is a chronic fear of environmental doom" (Clayton S. *et al*, 2017, cited in Pihkala); (3) "Eco-anxiety is a specific form of anxiety relating to stress or distress caused by environmental changes and our knowledge of them" (Castelloe M., 2018).

Derivative concepts have also emerged, such as "solastalgia" which describes the disappointment and sadness of individuals who, although living in the same living environment, are desolate by its current state, given that it is polluted, unfavorably transformed, or less green or friendly (Albrecht, 2017).

Some researchers (Heeren *et al.*) explored the causes and effects of climate change anxiety through a network model, a directed acyclic graphical Gaussian model, on a database of 778 European subjects. The variables considered in the study were: cognitive, emotional and functional impairment, personal experience of climate change, pro-environmental behavior and general concern (Wake, 2022).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Numerous and varied international studies have addressed these topics in the last 2-3 years, which is why we present a set of results, in accordance with the aim and objectives of the paper.

A study (Hickman C. *et al*, 2021) conducted on a population of 10,000 young subjects (16-25 y.o.) from the UK, Australia, USA, India, Philippines, Nigeria, France, Finland, Portugal, Brazil indicates not only the interest in subject, but also confirming the concerns that young people express about the state of the environment. The basic question that allowed obtaining the results presented synthetically in Table 1 was: "Does climate change make you feel any of the following?"

Regarding the emotions expressed among the analyzed population, as a result of the observation and awareness of climate change and the impact produced on individuals, *Table 1* shows the percentage level of concern.

Table 1

**Categories of emotions manifested as a consequence of the climate change**

<b>Afraid</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Angry</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Guilty</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	<b>67.3</b>	Yes	<b>56.8</b>	Yes	<b>50.2</b>
No	31.1	No	41.3	No	47.9
Prefer not to say	1.6	Prefer not to say	1.9	Prefer not to say	1.9
<b>Sad</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Powerless</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Optimistic</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	<b>66.7</b>	Yes	<b>56</b>	Yes	<b>30.9</b>
No	31.5	No	42.1	No	66.6
Prefer not to say	1.8	Prefer not to say	1.9	Prefer not to say	2.5
<b>Anxious</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Helpless</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Indifferent</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	<b>61.8</b>	Yes	<b>50.9</b>	Yes	<b>29</b>
No	36.4	No	47.2	No	68.3
Prefer not to say	1.8	Prefer not to say	1.9	Prefer not to say	2.7

Source: Hickman C. et al, 2021. *Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey*. DOI:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3)

As can be seen from the data in Table 1, most individuals report fear (67.3%), sadness (66.7%), anxiety (61.8%), powerlessness (56%), helplessness (50.9%) and guilt (50.2%) for climate change. Optimism and indifference are poorly represented (30.9% and 29%, respectively). Some international studies show that over 1/3 of young Finns have experienced a state of ecological anxiety during a year and that "there is a clear correlation between experiencing eco-anxiety and changing one's consumption habits to more sustainable ones; the correlation was strongest with regards to the consumption of general consumer goods" (Kohl A., 2022). Young people who experienced episodes of eco-anxiety became more active in taking steps to transition to a lifestyle less based on hyper consumption.

Other surveys indicate that over 90% of survey respondents feel concerned about the problems facing the environment (WGSN, 2022).

Another important question of the study concerned how young people relate their emotional, cognitive and functional states to climate change. *Figure 1* shows the signs of concern, as about 60% of respondents said they feel "very" or "extremely" worried about climate change, and 45% said anxious concerns about climate change have negatively affected their current life.

Based on these results and our own previous research, we believe that there are solutions to these problems, even if they are not yet practically demonstrated. Thus, the solutions to the problem of eco-anxiety correlate with concerns for the management of sustainable consumption and with the orientation of greater attention to the consumption behavior specifics and manifestation. In fact, a compulsive consumption behavior leads to eco-anxious manifestations in the same individual, transversely and longitudinally, through propagation between individuals, between communities and even between generations. The solutions we consider are:

- acceptance of the normality of climate change, along with resilience to sources of harmful information that affect, in the form of an immediate reaction, consumption behavior;
- widespread adoption of sustainable and responsible consumption behavior;
- practicing environmentally friendly activities and limiting unnecessary consumption;
- orientation towards the consumption of products, goods and services generating limited waste (example: sustainable food products)

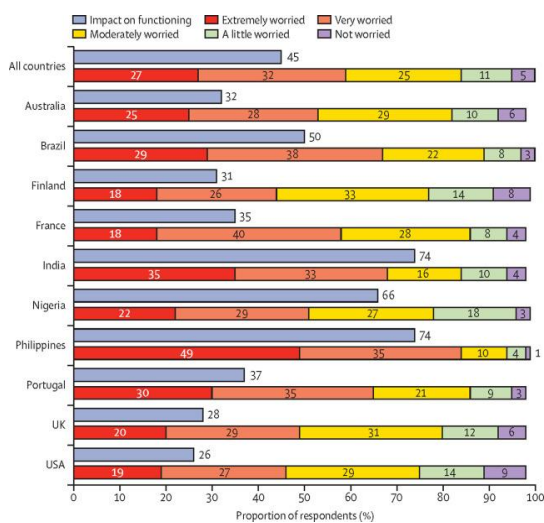


Figure 1 **Level of concern about climate change and impact on current life**

(Source: Hickman C. et al., 2021)

- avoiding actions and consumption habits that generate polluting factors
- the overall reconsideration of the education system in two essential directions: education for the environment and education for consumption.

The authors argue the importance and relevance of the chosen subject by identifying very recent studies developed by specialists and researchers concerned with the same subject. Moreover, the interest in this topic is growing and demonstrates an interdisciplinary approach highly suitable for the analysis of the problems involved in the field of life sciences. For now, the research is predominantly conducted among young people, which reinforces the statement that ecological education and the reconsideration of consumption behavior are becoming a priority of the current generation.

The results of surveys carried out at the international level are varied from one community to another or from one society to another, especially depending on the level of development. There are direct links between the level of economic development, the dynamics in consumption behavior and the extent of the presence of eco-anxiety among the population. The higher the level of economic development, based on previously high consumption, the higher the environmental concerns and associated problems such as eco-anxiety, irrational consumption and hype consumption.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the purpose, objectives and results of the work, the authors issue a set of conclusions that also include some proposals on improving the relationship between consumption behavior and eco-anxiety.

Undoubtedly, in today's society, the impact of environmental problems is directly felt on the mental state of individuals. Paradoxically, they find even impulsive consumption behaviors, hyper consumption or shopping fever as ameliorative solutions to these problems. It is at least interesting to note the disharmony between policies and institutional strategies that advocate for opposing interests: on the one hand, there are public organizations and institutions that support the reduction of polluting actions or that produce pressure on the environment, and on the other hand, it is about the economic units that encourages consumption through many and varied events, techniques or actions.

Although most of the studies aimed at the topic of eco-anxiety are still just theoretical, this fact indicates the appearance and manifestation of

interest in the subject, thus also the approach of a practical nature. Most of the results of the studies so far indicate the high rate of concern, especially among young people, for the problems facing the environment, which are perceived as having potential negative effects or real dangers to their life and health. In developed countries, both excessive consumption and eco-anxiety are a current reality, but for Romania such studies still do not exist. For these reasons, we propose that for our future studies we analyze the triggering factors of eco-anxiety among Romanians, respectively whether the environmental problems themselves or the way they are perceived are determinants of eco-anxious manifestations. We also aim to conduct an analysis to measure the influence and interdependence link between the two concepts.

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