

*Kristine Blumfelde-Rutka*\*

## **European Green Deal: The Transformation of Consumer Behaviour and Business Marketing Communication as Opportunities to Increase Consumer Involvement in the Sorting of Waste in Latvia**

### **Abstract**

The European Green Deal is the European Union's latest expression of its ambition to become a world leader in addressing climate change (Kleinberga, 2020). Adaptation to climate change (CCh) is a key priority of the European Union (EU), exemplified by the EU's efforts to become "the first climate-neutral continent" (European Union, 2019) in the world by 2050. This article aims to analyse opportunities to increase consumer involvement in the context of waste sorting and climate change in Latvia, based on theoretical knowledge about consumer behaviour and empirical data analysis, to develop recommendations for marketing communication and consumer behaviour in the context of climate change content for waste management companies. There is a necessity to understand how to increase consumer involvement in waste-sorting due to the increasing amount of waste both in Latvia and the rest of the world. The following research methods have been used: the monographic method, secondary data analysis, the discourse analysis/coding method, the graphical method, and the qualitative method – a focus group interview. The most significant barriers that discourage consumers from sorting waste are the lack of infrastructure, the lack of information on how to sort waste properly and waste's environmental impact, as well as the complex system that allows for differences in waste-sorting between municipalities and even neighbourhoods in the same city. Recommendations were developed

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\* **Kristine Blumfelde-Rutka** – Riga Stradins University, e-mail: kristine.blumfelde-rutka@rsu.lv, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4657-3790.

as a result of the research for waste management companies in terms of communication, NGOs on education, and information for consumers, businesses, and waste management companies.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Latvia, Consumer Behaviour, Waste Sorting, Marketing Communication

## **Introduction**

Consumer behaviour in the context of marketing is a topic that is constantly being researched because, by understanding consumer reactions, companies are able to improve their marketing campaigns, make them more successful and achieve their desired goals. The challenge today is to influence the consumer in such a way that the consumer's response is to purchase a specified product or perform a desired action (Stankevich, 2017). The more clearly the factors that influence the consumer and in what way are understood, the more precisely will marketers be able to apply communication for the appropriate purposes.

Climate change is a critical issue worldwide. The European Union (EU) implements extensive domestic policies aimed at reducing the potential threats of climate change. The goal of the EU is to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. This goal is part of the European Green Deal – a set of measures to ensure a fair, healthy, and prosperous society for future generations (European Union, N.D). The aim of the research was to analyse opportunities to increase consumer involvement in the context of waste-sorting and climate change in Latvia, based on theoretical knowledge about consumer behaviour and empirical data analysis, and to develop recommendations for marketing communication and consumer behaviour in the context of climate change content for waste management companies. There is a need to understand how to increase consumer involvement in waste-sorting due to the increasing amount of waste not only in Latvia, but the rest of the world also. The following research methods were used: the monographic method, secondary data analysis, the discourse analysis/coding method, the graphical method, and the qualitative method – a focus group interview. The circular economy is also implemented within the framework of the European Green Deal. The circular economy is defined as a development model promoting sustainability, the essence of which is to keep the value of products, materials, and resources in the economy for as long as possible, while reducing both the consumption of raw materials and the volume of waste, as well as the impact on the environment. Unsorted waste contains a significant amount of economically valuable materials – ferrous and

non-ferrous metals, glass, plastic, and paper – and their reuse in product production would reduce the costs of both product production *and* raw material transportation, as raw materials can be obtained locally due to waste sorting and processing. Therefore, the introduction of the circular economy is not only environmentally friendly, but also economically beneficial. The percentage of unsorted waste in Latvia is higher than in other European averages, or in other words – in 2020, the amount of sorted waste in relation to the total amount of waste was 39.6% (47.8% on average in Europe, respectively). Compared to 2019, the amount of sorted waste has decreased, not following the growing trend in other European countries (Eurostat, 2023). The rapid increase in profits in the waste management industry indicate both the size of the industry as well as its development. The first part of the research examines the factors influencing consumer behaviour as well as analyses of consumer behaviour and sustainable consumer behaviour. The second part contains a description of the waste management industry in Latvia, a more detailed description of the sampling waste management companies and an analysis of existing communication and a focus group discussion.

The initiatives and objectives of the European Green Deal cannot be achieved without consumer involvement. Consumers have a lot of power; they can change their daily consumption, and they can engage in activities related to the environment, climate change, and the green course. Informing consumers and, more importantly, educating them about the content of the European Green Course is the key to achieving the aforementioned objectives, since it is only education that can contribute to raising consumer awareness and engagement. Direct involvement is one of the main determinants in the area of waste sorting, and it is important to not only study consumers' motivation to sort waste, but also to educate consumers in order to raise awareness of the importance of waste-sorting in the context of sustainable development and the circular economy.

## **The Concept of Consumer Behaviour and the Process of the Formation of Consumer Habits**

Consumer behaviour is an important subject of research because it is the consumer who buys goods or services. The more companies and marketers understand consumer behaviour, the more potential there is of achieving higher sales and revenue by building marketing, sales, and brand development strategies based on one's knowledge of consumer behaviour. Consumer decisions are influenced by their behaviour and can be viewed from either a micro or macro perspective. The micro perspective includes

understanding the consumer with the goal of helping the company or organisation achieve its objectives. The macro perspective exploits the fact that consumers collectively influence ecological and social conditions in society, consumers significantly influence what will be produced, what resources will be used, and this affects the market situation and also standards of living (Khan, 2006). Therefore, in order to successfully achieve changes in the context of consumer behaviour, it is necessary to focus not only on the micro perspective, or the achievement of the sales goals of one's organisation, but moreover on the situation in society as one that is able to influence the market more significantly. However, this requires a longer period of time. Robert East states that consumer behaviour provides answers to questions such as "How do people buy and use goods and services?", "What are their reactions to prices, advertising, and layout?", and "How do these reactions come about and what are their causative factors?". Consumer behaviour is not only applicable in marketing in order to sell more successfully, but also, if legislative authorities have answers to these questions, then they can, for example, create better legal norms (East, Wright, Vanhuele, 2008). On the other hand, according to Philip Kotler's definition, consumer behaviour or "output" depends on the "input" that consumers have received and which have influenced their actions (Kotler, Keller, 2012). Marketing professor Rajeev Kumra, on the concept of consumer behaviour, argues that consumer behaviour includes the psychological processes that consumers go through in recognising needs, looking for ways to satisfy those needs, gathering and interpreting information, planning and implementing these plans (for example, purchasing a product), when making purchase decisions (for example, whether to buy a product, and, if so, which brand and where), and also the processes gone through after purchase. The professor defines consumer behaviour as the study of how people or organisations behave in acquiring, using, and disposing of products (and services) (Kumra, 2006). Researchers David L. Mothersbaugh and Delbert I. Hawkins define consumer behaviour as the science of individuals, groups, or organisations and the processes they use to select, use, and dispose of goods, services, experiences, or ideas to meet their needs, as well as the effects these processes have on the consumer and society as a whole (Del et al., 2009). It is possible to observe that the definitions put forward by the scientists are very similar, and with only minor nuances. One of the differences is whether the scientists view consumer behaviour primarily as a science that studies consumer behaviour and the factors that influence it, or whether consumer behaviour is the process and its effects that a consumer goes through when purchasing a product

or service or receiving other types of benefits. Most sources show that the scientists attribute consumer behaviour to buying something, but consumer behaviour can also be attributed to habits. In the context of waste-sorting, the definitions that also mention getting rid of the product directly refer to the consumer's actions, and how they get rid of what they no longer need.

Attempts to change the everyday habitual behaviour of consumers are attempts to change people's beliefs and intentions. It is often difficult or even impossible to change behaviour that has already become a habit (Prochaska, DiClemente, Norcross, 1992). Habits that have a factor that is based on another factor are easier and faster to implement than those that have no basis. Also, when motivation comes from the consumer, the introduction of the habit has a potentially greater chance of success than when the change of a habit is forced in some way. Each stage of behavioural change has a correspondingly different intervention or incentive strategies. In the pre-conception phase, it is education and information, setting rewards and creating cognitive dissonance, and/or internal dialogue and contradictions. In the design phase, education and awareness should continue, as should the setting of rewards and the promotion of cognitive dissonance, but it is possible to add an analysis of current behaviours (what and why is being done wrong, and why the current behaviour needs to change). Also, in the preparation stage, information and education, rewards, and cognitive dissonance are still important, adding insistent visual feedback to promote an understanding of existing behavioural habits. In the action stage, the provision of visual feedback is effective in order to motivate the maintenance of action and social influence from others. On the other hand, when the consumer has reached the maintenance stage, praise for the actions and results achieved are an effective form of social influence, as well as motivation by other means, which promote the continuation and non-discontinuation of the habit (Ferron, Massa, 2013). Using this proposed model of behaviour change, it is possible to influence the consumer more successfully, that is, in order to promote behavioural change for a wider group of society, it is necessary to act on all the above-mentioned stages in order to cover the consumers who are going through each of them, as well as to motivate those who have (temporarily) stopped a stage return to the behaviour-change process. From this research, it can be concluded that it is necessary not only to educate about the necessity of sorting waste, but also to emphasise the possibility of reuse and sorting, to reduce stereotypes in order to change the attitude of consumers towards sorting waste and, in the most successful case, their habits.

## **Sustainable Consumer Behaviour**

Solving sustainability issues is often thought to be linked to product innovation. If products and services became environmentally friendly, sustainability would no longer be an issue. However, there are several problems with this view. For example, environmentally friendly products often require large investments, political support, consumer acceptance, and a willingness to pay for them. Given the high number of product innovation failures, research on consumer behaviour seems crucial to guide various interventions aimed at promoting sustainable behaviour. Sustainable consumer behaviour can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, including those of policy makers, marketing, consumer interests, and ethics (Antonides, 2017). It follows that sustainable consumer behaviour is largely influenced by entrepreneurs, but entrepreneurs must also have an incentive to change their actions. At this point, it becomes natural that consumers are the ones who can influence the actions of entrepreneurs, but entrepreneurs, by the same token, can influence the actions of consumers. It is necessary to insert a factor that affects both sides, thus promoting action and fulfilling the regularity, resulting in more sustainable solutions. Researchers Marianna Gilli, Francesco Nicolli, and Paola Farinelli (Marianna Gilli, Francesco Nicolli, Paola Fainelli), by surveying 618 households in Italy, have studied the following regularities. There are three different types of motivation – intrinsic, extrinsic, and pressure. Internal motivation works in a situation when the consumer themselves experiences positive emotions about work and decides, for example, to change a habit. In the case of intrinsic motivation, the consumer rewards themselves only with the feeling of accomplishment. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is that wherein the stimulus comes from someone else – that is, receiving some kind of benefit in return. The benefit can be material, financial, or social. The motivation of pressure occurs when people around a consumer perform an action, which may be a socially (or otherwise) more responsible action, and this creates pressure for that particular individual to change their behaviour in order to fit in and not place themselves, in a social sense, in a lower position. A correlation was observed between the level of education and involvement in waste-sorting – in the group that sorted waste due to pressure-based motivation, the number of people who had completed basic education was lower, while in the groups where the motivation was formed by internal or external factors, the proportion of higher education among the respondents was higher (Gilli, Nicolli, Farinelli, 2018). There are several barriers (Euromonitor International, 2022) to sustainable consumption

which are listed in no particular order as follows. The level of education – society's understanding of sustainability, and the binding processes of the topic; actions, effects: the more knowledgeable the consumer, the more responsible purchases and actions are taken; consumer age (skepticism) – the younger generation is more open to more innovative solutions than older generations in that younger consumers follow trends more and are not afraid try a product obtained in a different way, for example from recycled materials; fast fashion – clothing collections on store shelves regularly change, and significantly reduced sustainable clothing consumption is possible; price – one of the most powerful factors that determine consumer actions – the lower the salary, the more advantageous/cheaper products the consumer will choose, and, in this variant, the impact of sustainability is not considered; the level of well-being – as the level of well-being in the country and the world improves, consumers will be able to do more to allocate funds for responsible purchases; information paucity – governmental and non-governmental organisations, as well as brands and companies themselves, must actively inform the public about sustainability, as well as about its positive benefits for the environment and the economy. Communication is the key to change. And, finally, the lack of motivation – there is no motivation to act responsibly, which is also facilitated by the previously-mentioned disinformation. By understanding these barriers, brands can inform consumers about a solution or a response to existing barriers by helping consumers understand the value and necessity of the industry. The correlation between education level and waste-sorting habits is a significant factor that prompts understanding as regards whether the weak link is the lack of information reaching consumers or other factors that influence it. In this case, pressure motivation is also potentially less likely to occur if the consumer's social circle includes consumers without a higher education, as well as those who do not sort waste.

### **Marketing Communication Analysis of Sample Waste Management Enterprises in the Context of Climate Change**

Marketing communication was analysed by monitoring the content of company websites, as well as the content of social networks such as Instagram and Facebook (provided that the company communicates using them). The following combination of digital channels has been chosen to look at, because content on social networks reaches a wider audience and

is easier to consume, but it is possible to place more informative, voluminous materials for educating and informing consumers on company websites. The content of the companies' websites has been analysed in the period from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 to November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021, accordingly, social network communication has also been examined within this time frame. To be able to evaluate the website-based communication, the discourse analysis/coding method was used, and the articles were analysed according to certain criteria. In total, 46 questions were answered per article, so that in the end it would be possible to compare, group, and analyse the articles in a structured way. The following are the criteria according to which the articles were selected and analysed: the use of key words; source language; title; author and narrator analysis; information channels and sources; sub-topics; sub-topics analysed in more detail; how the meaning of climate change is reflected; how climate change is evaluated and framed; on what scale climate change is addressed; who is the "hero", "villain", and "victim"; which narrative is created through the writing; what the 'hero's goal' is; what is at the heart of the conflict and what its solution is when action is required; the use of conceptual metaphors; and, finally, the analysis of multimedia tools. Evaluating the content of company websites, out of a total of 600 articles, 71 were selected as being valid for the study. Those 71 articles were written in the context of environmental change or were related thereto, while the rest are other types of posts on non-environmental topics. The most frequently used keywords in the articles of waste management companies related to the environmental topic were – environmental protection; environmental preservation; environmental pollution or environmental disaster, and which of those were used most regularly in the context of waste management, i.e., in 27 articles. Waste is called "environmental pollution", and the reduction of the amount of unprocessed waste is called "environmental conservation". The next most popular group of keywords is: green energy; green course; and green transition or green transformation, all of which are mentioned mostly to justify changes in waste management processes or tariffs. Also used repeatedly, but not significantly, are keyword groups such as climate change; climate neutrality; emissions; greenhouse gas emissions; CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; emissions; nature protection; nature conservation; natural pollution or natural disaster; circular economy; environmental sustainability and waste reduction. "Circular economy" is a term that is particularly characteristic of the waste management industry, as the result involves the reduction of waste through various techniques, including recycling. From the sub-topics, it can be seen that waste-sorting and replanting are the most talked about, followed by infrastructure,



prevention, and reuse. In the context of this issue, it can be concluded that although most of the communication related to the environment is made directly about sorting and recycling, the amount is either insufficient or there are other factors regarding why residents indicated in the conducted studies that they do not sort because they do not know how to do it. In the context of sorting, waste-sorting guides are created. However, most of the sources contain statistical data, as well as tariff changes. Emphasis is placed on the sorting of compostable waste and the sorting of electronics, but none of the analysed articles contain a universal guide or tips that could make the sorting process easier for consumers. It is a positive thing that more than 20 articles address how or why waste should be prevented, which include sections on not creating packaging waste during the production and marketing processes, as well as on how the consumer can influence their own waste generation and reduce it. In more than 30 articles, the sub-topic is infrastructure, which include information on landfills, landfill gas recovery and use in cogeneration plants, waste incineration with or without energy recovery, waste processing plants in Latvia, and the availability of separate sorting for households (waste bins, squares). Mostly, the infrastructure aspect addresses the availability of separate sorting for households. The subtopic of waste sorting and recycling is dominated by biological waste sorting or composting, packaging waste sorting and recycling, as well as other waste (bulky waste, construction waste, electrical engineering, tires, etc.). In the context of reuse, there is communication about the transition from single to reusable goods, the repair of goods, processing into other materials, as well as the secondary market of goods. In addition to the recommendations on waste prevention, the main action scenarios are described as the non-generation of waste, sharing and rental options, as well as considering purchases both due to the necessity of the product, as well as evaluating which of the similar products generates more waste. Wastewater management is discussed very little; only in 3 articles are wastewater treatment and infiltrates mentioned. 10 articles mention State or EU financial support for the development of waste management infrastructure. In order to analyse how climate change is integrated into the content of company websites, the articles were also evaluated according to the criterion. 58 articles were selected due to their validity, but climate change is not mentioned in those articles. Activities are seen in their context, but this may not be understood by the consumer. In a small number of articles, climate change and related measures are secondary topics or that of minor topics. None of the articles emphasise the impact of waste-sorting on climate change. The current consumer behaviour trends for 2022 were

clarified, one of which was climate change specifically. Consumers are said to be interested in how they can affect climate change. If the results of the analysis are viewed in the direction of trends, then it can be concluded that communication should be structured in a different content, emphasising the actualities of climate change. Companies have established financial benefits as the main driver of sorting waste, for example, in the case of compostable waste, it is possible to reduce waste disposal costs, and they have also conveyed the message that sorting waste is necessary, but without explaining exactly why and what the impact of not sorting waste is. It can be concluded that climate change is mostly not evaluated in the articles at all or is evaluated rather negatively. On the other hand, if you look at how climate change is framed, there are articles where climate change is described as an opportunity for the economy/entrepreneurs/innovation, as an issue of sustainability and corporate social responsibility, but also as a threat or risk to humanity, nature, etc. In 12 of the articles, climate change is framed as an inevitable reality, or a phenomenon that is happening and which has little chance of being affected. The climate change assessment is analysed to determine the overall attitude in which companies are currently communicating about climate change and then to find out whether the attitude towards climate change is important in the eyes of the consumer, or whether it is being paid attention to. In order to classify which scenarios are most often reflected in articles on home pages, a separate criterion on narratives was also examined, which allows for an analysis of how content-based companies communicate in the environmental aspect. Next follows the narrative where the Latvian business environment is changing; entrepreneurs are now striving to be corporately responsible. Regarding the corporate responsibility of companies, the scenario was formed mostly in articles announcing the beginning or end of a campaign. As an example, there was an initiative in which textile waste-sorting containers were placed in the stores of a certain supermarket chain for a month. The next largest group of narratives, which included more than 10 articles, are supposedly about the fact that Latvia must fulfil the requirements set by the European Union – this narrative was reflected both positively and negatively. In the positive sense, they talk about the way that the European Union aims to create a greener environment and reduce the impact of climate change on the world with changes in regulations, and that companies have to make changes in their work, but in the name of good goals, on the other hand and in the negative sense, that European Union regulations force companies to raise prices or otherwise change their actions, portraying the initiatives as an unnecessary burden on society. Looking at the results

of the analysis in the context of climate change, it can be seen that climate change and its potential impact on society is rarely mentioned.

## Conclusions

Entrepreneur-oriented recommendations can be used both for the transformation of an existing company into an enterprise with the principles of sustainability, and for the creation of a new business focused on sustainability. For the sustainable development of a company, it is necessary to draw consumers' attention to the impact and consequences of choosing sustainable products, thus emotionally creating consumer awareness and the desire to reduce any negative environmental and social impact, and provide consumers with information about the impact of such a purchase decision (Blumfelde-Rutka, 2021). In marketing communications, mention is made of climate change and the impact of sorting or not sorting waste on the environment. Consumers in the focus group indicated that they were not aware of the possible impact, and if a direct link to climate change and a potential threat to society with waste management was made, it could encourage consumers to consider partaking in waste-sorting. Also, based on the consumer behaviour trends of 2022, which include care for the environment and climate, such communication would have the potential to be effective. Analysing the current communication of waste management companies, a lack of such content was observed, and this was also mentioned by consumers during the focus group discussion. This type of information could also be stored by the consumer on their mobile devices for reference when needed. A unified sorting system for Latvia should be created. In the context of waste management, companies have different rules, containers of different colours, all of which unnecessarily confuses the consumer. Waste sorting would be significantly better facilitated by a set of regulations or guidelines that would create the same sorting measures throughout Latvia, so that waste containers do not differ, as well as information on what can and cannot be placed in those containers. Marketing communication should be based on the cycle of consumption-habit formation in order to understand the consumers who are in each of the stages and thereby reach out to them more successfully. At the same time, content and marketing efforts must be planned in such a way that consumers are educated, praised, an internal dialogue is formed about existing and desired habits, and feedback is formed about progress or regression in the context of waste-sorting. Since one of the nuances in the context of consumer behaviour trends 2022 is green thinking and building relationships with brands,

it is recommended for companies to create engaging communication so that the consumer feels important and valued. Engaging communication is also a way to better understand social-network followers, which would allow for more accurate targeting and more appropriate content creation. Sustainable consumer behaviour can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, including policy makers, marketing, consumer interests, and ethics (Antonides, 2017). Engagement that predicts comments and likes or other reactions also works well for the social networks' rotation algorithms which predict that the more people engage with the content you create, the more people it will be shown to. Environmental non-governmental organisations need to evaluate their opportunities not only in educating consumers and entrepreneurs, but also in providing waste management companies with the most up-to-date facts and statistical data on waste sorting, which companies could use in their communication, adapting to their own style. By doing this, waste management companies would include current environmental issues in their communication. In addition, the facts and statistical data used would not differ, which would reduce consumer confusion.

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