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ASSESSMENT OF AWARENESS OF CONSUMER RIGHTS ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE KARKONOSZE REGION

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Abstract

The aim of the article was to assess the awareness of consumer rights on the example of the residents of the Karkonosze district. The main goal was deagglomerated into specific goals, which are assessment of consumers' knowledge of the law and their skillful use, assessment of sellers' knowledge of the law, determining the frequency and specificity of problems with which consumers contact the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region.

The main research hypothesis was that consumerism is one of the newest trends in consumption, and in the Karkonosze region, awareness of consumer rights is at a subjectively average level.

The analysis of research, which included a survey among the residents of the Karkonosze district, interviews with sellers and the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region, and an analysis of secondary research, confirmed the hypothesis. The research also showed that the majority of respondents maintain a neutral attitude towards legal regulations, but they know how to use them correctly and are able to propose necessary changes.

Keywords

Consumer behavior; Consumer protection; Consumer rights.

Introduction

The aim of the article was to assess the awareness of consumer rights in the example of residents of the Karkonosze district. To confirm the article's main hypothesis, it is first necessary to analyze the source literature and explain basic phrases. The most important concept is the definition of the consumer. That is because we, as consumers, are influenced by numerous stimuli that can cause, among others: addiction to the latest consumption trends. It is, therefore, not surprising that it is becoming more and more important for producers to understand the reasoning behind consumers' behavior when shopping. Purchasing decisions affect the level of profits generated for entrepreneurs. In turn, from the consumer's point of view, it becomes important to make conscious and rational purchasing decisions and know one's rights.

The consumer is the subject of many economic studies because their behavior and mutual relationships with sellers contribute significantly to shaping the market. From an economic perspective, a consumer is a natural person who buys a service to meet personal needs. This also includes someone who makes a business investment and an entrepreneur who purchases a service from another entrepreneur for purposes related to the operation of their own business, as long as they are not professional in terms of the goods they purchase (Rosa et al., 2015). In the Cambridge Dictionary, a consumer is defined as "*a person or organization that buys things or services from a shop or business*" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). This concept, however, is not universally accepted in the field of economics, which also defines the consumer as a user and buyer.

When a consumer makes a purchasing decision, when they become a buyer, it is worth taking into account the role of the seller. Their knowledge and knowledge of sales tactics can go a long way in helping a consumer make a purchase. This situation occurs mainly when the consumer is undecided about the choice of product/service and, therefore, is not a specialist in a given field but reports a demand resulting from a specific need. Currently, the role of a sales specialist is highly valued (Richardson, 2024), especially considering the increasing market competition and the variety of available services for potential consumers.

From an economic point of view, the consumer can also be defined as a value creator for the enterprise itself. This happens, for example, when purchasing a service. The consumer becomes a co-creator because, in most cases, they need to be present in the same location as the producer to obtain the product or service. In the case of cosmetic services, the client is the recipient of the service and contributes to the creation of the companies' marketing activities through their reactions. The consumer assesses the quality of the services and ultimately adds economic value to the companies by engaging in transactions (Markiewicz, 2015). Therefore, it plays a key role for the company.

In order to create value for the consumer at the highest possible level, it is important to act in accordance with consumer orientation. It manifests itself mainly as the company's willingness to meet its needs (Widelska, 2020). Therefore, the consumer becomes the main object of interest of companies, which is why it is necessary to properly manage relationships with them and, above all, create appropriate consumer profiles and act in a dignified manner with them. Consumer relationship management (CRM) itself is understood as a focused marketing strategy on understanding customers and their needs, which contributes to gaining them and their loyalty in order to achieve increased profits (Moczydłowska & Bitkowska, 2020).

In turn, Polish law contained in the Civil Code defines a consumer as "*a natural person who enters into a legal transaction with an entrepreneur that is not directly related to his or her business or professional activity*" (ISAP, 2022). Additionally, the Constitution of the Republic of Poland includes a reference to the protection of consumer rights, specifying that "*public authorities protect consumers, users, and tenants against activities that threaten their health, privacy, and safety and against unfair market practices*" (ARSLEGE, 2024).

Polish law always puts the consumer first, considering them the weaker party in the event of a possible dispute with the seller. It guarantees him special legal protection through the activities of an institution called the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection (UOKiK) (bisnes.gov, 2023). Consumer rights guaranteed by Polish law include:

- warranty (possibility of complaint about a defective product/service),
- seller's liability (a form of complaint in which the seller is responsible for the defects of the product/service; the consumer may support it with a disclosed physical or legal defect of the purchased goods),
- the right to return the goods (in the case of returns in stationary stores, it is specified in the company's sales policy) (bisnes.gov, 2023).

Due to globalization and increased consumption, it becomes important for companies to analyze consumer behavior, which, in the simplest sense, can be defined as the process of making purchasing and consumption decisions. Various scientific fields analyze these behaviors because they affect the development of relationships with sellers, their marketing and sales activities, and the market in general.

Each consumer is unique and has an individual impact on the previously mentioned phenomena due to their diverse psychological, social, cultural, and economic features. Therefore, an important issue is the use of an appropriate typology of consumers to better understand and predict their behavior and apply appropriate measures and actions toward them (Rosa et al., 2015).

From the perspective of economics, consumer behavior is analyzed in terms of the purchasing and consumption process and the rationality of the choices made. From the point of view of providing services, they can be defined as "*any observable reaction of consumers, i.e. service recipients (both natural persons and entrepreneurs representing various organizations), to stimuli from the environment*" (Rosa et al., 2015). Consumer behavior refers primarily to the "*study of how customers, both individuals and organizations, satisfy their needs and desires by selecting, buying, using, and disposing of goods, ideas, and services*" (AMA, 2024).

Consumer behavior is closely related to the purchasing process, which is commonly divided into five basic phases, including:

- sense of need,
- searching for information (using the experience of family/friends, reading reviews, watching advertisements),
- judgment of alternative options (comparing goods/services in terms of price, functionality, or taking into account criteria related to the rank of the brand),
- making a decision to make a purchase,
- post-purchase feelings (feeling of satisfaction or post-purchase dissonance- the appearance of a negative feeling towards the purchase) (Rosa et al., 2015).

Consumers' shopping is related to the rationality of their behavior and their economic knowledge. The existence of an information gap or uncertainty caused, for example, by an economic crisis, may contribute to the consumer refraining from making a purchase. At this point, the company itself can play an important role in shaping consumer behavior by disseminating reliable information about its services/products, or by having an efficiently functioning customer service department (Kieżel & Burgiel, 2017).

1 New Trends in Consumption

Increasing consumer awareness and new sales techniques contribute to the emergence of new trends in consumption. Currently, with the development of modern technologies, the concept of an e-consumer as a person making a purchase is becoming popular via the Internet (Gajdzik et. al., 2023). The prefix e comes from the word electronic, so it refers to the need to use the latest generation of devices, such as a telephone or laptop, which are involved in each phase of the purchase. The needs of such a consumer are therefore met thanks to services and products purchased on the Internet. Using websites to make purchases can provide many benefits to consumers. There are popular functions on sales portals that allow, for example, setting notifications about a change in the price of the observed offer or its return to the website. In turn, for the owners of such websites, the Internet is a source of a lot of information about consumers, which allows them to analyze their activities, draw appropriate conclusions, and make changes necessary to improve the site. Thereby, some elements of business owners can be changed to virtual ones. For example, e-invoices and specially generated gift cards are becoming popular. You may also encounter the fact that loyalty points earned during online purchases are valued higher than those made in stationery stores, and the offer presented in stationery stores is often poorer than that on the website. Many aspects of running businesses and activities undertaken by consumers are slowly being redirected entirely to the Internet - this phenomenon is called virtualization (Wolny, 2015).

Another trend referring to the changing role of the consumer when shopping is the term “prosumer”. As the name suggests, it is a combination of two words: “consumption” and “production”. A prosumer is an individual who produces certain goods and then consumes them herself/himself – uses them for her/his own use. Presumption may also consist of partnership cooperation with a production company, during which the consumer is involved in the process of creating the good and has the opportunity to personalize it and directly intervene (Szul, 2013). Therefore, it is a unique phenomenon taking into account globalization when manufactured goods are mass-produced and have a uniform character. Prosumers, therefore, care about standing out and cooperating with companies to which they become, in a sense, external employees. However, this constitutes a significant challenge for companies that must constantly adapt to the constantly changing environment and consumer requirements because a prosumer is a consumer who consciously makes purchasing decisions. The prefix e can also be added to the term prosumer because they also most often use the Internet in their activities (Szul, 2013).

Globalization related to consumption also contributes to an increase in the number of purchases made by consumers. This is related to the desire to catch up with Western countries in this respect, which are identified with wealth and abundance, understood as unlimited shopping offers. “*Consumers who wish to associate themselves with Western culture will consequently purchase more.*” (Śleszyńska-Świderska, 2017).

This phenomenon is also manifested in newer products/companies penetrating Eastern and European countries - so-called global products appear, i.e. those available practically all over the world. This may cause, among others, change in the hierarchy of purchases and perception of needs (Śleszyńska-Świderska, 2017). In this case, globalization has the opposite effect than it does for prosumers, who equate its effects with the need to stand out.

Consumerism is also related to the concept of globalization. Consumers make purchases not only to satisfy their needs – excessive consumption has come to be identified with a sense of happiness and fulfilment. Consumerism can be:

- public consumption,
- the result of a greedy lifestyle,
- the result of an uncontrolled need to buy (Kacprzak-Choińska, 2007).

The negative impact of mass consumption on the natural environment has also caused a trend called the greening of consumption. It may result from the availability of all kinds of information not only about the products/services themselves but also about their production process. This encourages producers to provide reliable information about their products and to conduct more eco-friendly activities. Consumers interested in such aspects are called conscious consumers. They are interested in the negative impact that companies can have on their environment, which may manifest itself, for example, in protests or actions promoting consumer awareness. Such consumer movement may contribute to deconsumption – consumers buying only necessary products, in sufficient quantities to meet needs (rational shopping) (Kacprzak-Choińska, 2007). Among operating enterprises, the option of paying an additional fee (a small amount) for removing the negative impact of the carbon footprint (related to greenhouse gas emissions) generated during the production and delivery of the ordered goods is also becoming popular on the Internet (Vohs, 2023). In turn, in stationary stores, the practice of rewarding people who make purchases with their own bags is becoming popular – the goal is to reduce the consumption of environmentally harmful plastic (this is included, for example, in the compensation plan of H&M store club members).

A similar phenomenon is eco-Buddhism, which also focuses on the ecological aspects of consumption. It is mainly related to the consumption of organic food and saving electricity or fuel (Zalega, 2019).

Another trend related to consumption is the so-called smart shopping. Consumers, during the crisis or even when their financial situation changes for the worse, try to make purchases in a smarter way – looking for cheaper offers (mainly on the Internet) and analyzing which services/goods they are willing to give up. Smart shopping, therefore, involves creating a rational budget for essential expenses (Sobczyk, 2014).

Another interesting phenomenon that is gaining popularity is the sharing economy (SE). This economic model involves using the full potential of existing resources by renting or lending them, for free or for a fee. Thus, an entity that owns a given good, e.g. an apartment, can reduce its maintenance costs or achieve additional profits by renting it to a person called a user. An agent acting as a leasing agent may also participate in this process. SE entities often communicate with each other via the Internet, where many offers from various categories can be found on special platforms. In addition to housing, SE may concern, for example, car rental, sharing a specific means of transport (Uber) or an account on streaming platforms (Netflix). The sharing economy operates in accordance with the principles of rationalization of purchases, as this trend does not promote excessive consumerism and only benefits each side of supply and demand (P2P), creating micro-businesses and new jobs (Bednarikova & Kostalova, 2021).

2 Origin of the Idea of Customer Protection- Development of Consumerism

After analyzing consumer behavior, it is necessary to examine the term “consumer protection”. It is worth recalling that the consumer is considered the weaker party when making market transactions, and therefore, she/he should be protected in some way.

The term “consumer protection” has developed over the years. Already in the 1920s, Americans conducted numerous studies on, for example, the negative effects of products on consumers' health, which were then published in brochures. All this was aimed at improving the consumer's position on the market and increasing consumer awareness (Światowy, 2006). However, consumer protection evolved most in the 1960s. The turning point occurred on March 15, 1962 (now World Consumer Rights Day), when the then President of the United States (John F. Kennedy) gave a speech. In his speech in front of Congress, the president described consumers as the most harmed group, unable to defend their rights and, therefore, the most helpless. Consumer protection in the USA has gained interest by considering this aspect as a constitutional and political problem, which resulted in the creation of laws on this subject (Samson, 2013). They included, among others, four basic consumer rights – the right to:

- being heard,
- safety,
- being informed,
- having a choice (out of goods and services) (Smyczek, S. 2019).

The most important consumer protection agencies in the United States include the FTC (Federal Trade Commission), which is mainly concerned with antitrust law compliance; CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission), which protects consumers from risks associated with products and services; NHTSC (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration), which deals with road safety by, for example, determining the acceptable condition of cars; FDA (Food and Drug Administration), which sets standards for the safety of food and drugs on the market; and EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), which focuses on eliminating the negative impact on the environment and enforcement of environmental protection laws (Światowy, 2006). The United States has undoubtedly become an example for the countries belonging to the European Economic Community. Thereby, there are three stages in the history of shaping consumer rights in the European Economic Community:

- the period until the 1980s (at that time, socially unfavorable transactions were concluded due to the lack of competition protection regulations, while an attractive aspect for consumers was the free flow of goods, people, and capital between Community countries; a common program was also created educate consumers about their rights, some of them are still in force today, but have, for example, been developed),
- the period covering the 1980s (consumers did not know the market at that time and did not have access to information, which resulted in their passive attitude toward the market; work on various types of standards was increased, which were aimed at improving the situation at that time, thereby the consumer gained, among others, the right to information about the origin of the purchased product),
- a period lasting to this day (Europe focused on creating laws ensuring consumer protection and on its absolute compliance by members of the Community, thereby consumer protection began to be recognized as an important aspect of the proper functioning of the market) (Samson, 2013).

The opening of the Community's state borders is considered a key moment for creating a common policy of the Member States in the field of consumer law. They were closed in the 1970s, which was the result of, among others, recession. Nevertheless, Member States have realized the need to harmonize the rules in this area.

The development of consumer rights protection in the European Economic Community has resulted in the fact that its countries are now considered to have the best consumer protection. They gain it, among others, thanks to state authorities such as:

- Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST),
- Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency (CHAFEA),
- European Consumer Centre (ECC) (Smyczek, 2019).

The actions presented above are called consumerism. This movement involves the functioning of numerous offices, agencies, and non-governmental organizations whose common goal is to improve the position of consumers in the market. It is, therefore, a kind of protest against unfair practices of producers, suppliers, and sellers. These organizations strive to protect consumers and their needs through, among others: proposing and introducing changes to legal provisions (Światowy, 2006).

3 Research Methodology

The aim of this article is to investigate, as best as possible, the awareness of consumer rights and their violations in the analyzed region. To achieve this goal, research was carried out in the form of a survey (quantitative research), interviews (qualitative research), and secondary research. Therefore, research triangulation took place, which involved the use of three research methods to achieve the highest possible quality of results.

The collected surveys enabled the analysis of the level of consumer awareness in the Karkonosze district (this region was chosen due to its location close to the border with the Czech Republic and the possibility of contacting the Consumer Rights Adviser of this region), for which an online survey questionnaire presented in Table 1 was used.

Tab. 1: *Survey among the residents of the Karkonosze district*

1. Gender	Female
	Male
2. Age	18-27
	28-35
	36-43
	44-60
	over 60
3. Professional status	Pupil
	Student
	Public sector employee
	Full-time employee
	Employee employed under a civil law contract
	Entrepreneur
	Farmer
	Unemployed
	Pensioner
4. Education	Primary
	Vocational
	Secondary
	Higher education
5. How do you rate your knowledge of consumer rights?	(on a scale from 1 to 5)
6. Please mark the statement with which you agree the most.	I pay less attention to advertisements and promotions, I am more critical of them
	It would be better for everyone if we consumed less
	I am interested in the consumer rights that I am entitled to
	I try to draw the attention of the staff if consumer rights are not respected
7. Within what time frame can a consumer withdraw from a distance contract without giving a reason?	Within seven days
	Within two weeks
	Within a month
8. What happens if the seller does not respond to the complaint within the time specified by law?	The consumer should re-submit the complaint
	The complaint is deemed to have been accepted
	The complaint is deemed to have been rejected
9. How long can a consumer withdraw from a contract concluded in a traditional store (stationary store) without giving a reason?	Within a week from the date of purchase
	Within two weeks from the date of purchase
	Within a month from the date of purchase
	Depends on the store/seller

10. Please mark the statement that you believe is false.	The seller's liability is mandatory, and the guarantee is voluntary
	The period of both the seller's liability and the guarantee is always two years
	In the seller's liability, the entity responsible for the non-conformity of the goods with the contract is the seller, in the guarantee the guarantor (usually the manufacturer)
	The seller's liability does not exclude the guarantee
11. Have you ever tried to abuse your consumer rights (e.g. return a product to an online store after using it when you no longer needed it)?	Yes, 1-2 times
	Yes, several times
	No, never
12. What product do you most often complain about?	Footwear
	Clothing
	Electronics and household appliances
	Food
	I have never complained
13. What other form of proof of purchase besides a receipt have you ever used, for example, when returning a product?	Confirmation of payment by card
	Invoice
	Purchase agreement
	Bank statement
	I have never used another form of proof of purchase
	Other form of proof including a shopping app and a loyalty card
14. How do you assess the change in the legal provision concerning the obligation to display, in addition to the price and the unit price, information about the last reduced price of goods and services in the last 30 days?	(Omnibus directive)
15. Have you ever purchased a faulty product?	Yes
	No
16. Have you ever filed a complaint about a defective product?	Yes
	No
17. What were the usual results of filing a complaint about a defective product?	Most complaints were accepted
	Most complaints were not accepted
18. Why have you never filed a complaint regarding the purchase of a defective product?	I believe that the product has already fulfilled its role properly
	The benefit resulting from a recognized complaint would be relatively low compared, for example, to the commitment necessary to file it
19. Have you reported to the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region?	Yes, in what matter did you happen to report to the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region?
	No, why not?

20. What new legal regulations regarding consumer rights do you think should be introduced in Poland?	(Open question)

Source: Own

The group of respondents consisted of people living in the studied district, and the surveys were completed voluntarily (the sampling method was contingent). This form allowed for obtaining 100 responses quickly and reliably. The survey was sent to the potential respondents on January 21st, 2024, and was closed on March 18th, 2024 (the author of the study received a sufficient number of responses). The respondents were asked about their knowledge of consumer rights, their skillful application in reality, and possible legal aspects that, in their opinion, should be improved.

To assess the violation of consumer rights in the examined region, an in-depth interview was used, conducted with the current (for the year 2024) Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region, Mr. Michał Słomski. The questions asked during the interview included problems that consumers most often address and legal aspects that, according to the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region, require improvement. The chosen interview format allowed for asking a wide range of questions and adapting each subsequent question to the answer obtained to collect as much information as possible.

The conversation with the region's Consumer Rights Adviser also allowed us to obtain district data regarding legal advice and information provided (in person, by phone, and in writing) between 2021 and 2023. The article analyses the problems with which consumers most often contacted the Consumer Rights Adviser during the period under study.

The next stage of research in the article was interviews with five salespeople (4 women, 1 man) aged 24-38. The sellers represented the following industries:

- construction (1 person),
- food (1 person),
- clothing (3 people).

The purpose of these interviews was, among others, to determine unethical behavior of consumers, their abuse of their rights, as well as proposals to introduce new legal regulations regulating consumer-seller relations.

4 Aim of the Research

As said before, the article aimed to assess consumer rights awareness among residents of the Karkonosze district. The fundamental research goal was to obtain answers to the following research questions:

- What is the level of knowledge of the law among consumers and sellers?
- What problems do consumers most often contact the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region with?
- How often and in what way are consumer rights violated?

The research presented in the methodology allowed the achievement of the research goal.

5 Research Results

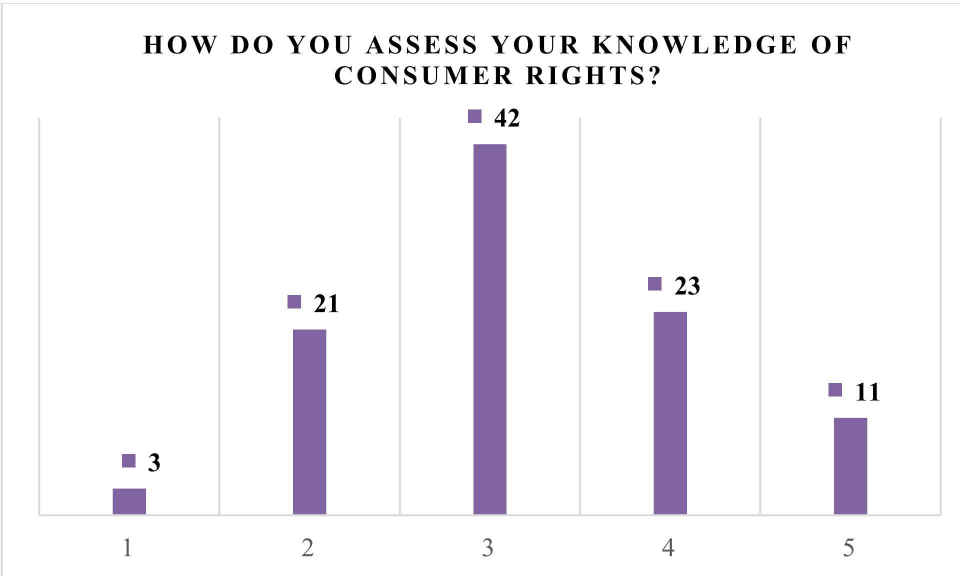
The research results are presented in the following subsections:

- investigating violations of consumer rights, where the data from the survey was analyzed,

- violations of consumer rights in the Karkonosze region, where data from the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region was analyzed,
- unethical consumer behavior in the Karkonosze region, where data from salespeople was analyzed.

5.1 Investigating Violations of Customer Rights

In a study to assess consumer awareness, 100 participants were involved, with the majority being women (75%). This could be attributed to the likelihood of women participating in research surveys. The participants were categorized into five age groups, with the largest group being 18-27 years old (41 people), and the smallest group being those over 60 (only 4 people). The participants were also questioned about their current employment status and educational background. Most of them were full-time employees (28 people) or students (26 people). None of the participants were farmers or unemployed. The majority of the respondents had either a university education (55 people) or secondary education (38 people), while no one reported having a primary education. The first question, which was intended to directly assess the level of consumer awareness of the respondents, was: How do you assess your knowledge of consumer rights? The scale of the response was from 1 to 5, meaning 1-respondent thinks that he knows his/her rights at a very low level; 5- respondent thinks that he knows his/her rights at a very good level. The majority of respondents (42 people) rated this level as 3. Only 11 people stated that they knew their consumer rights at a very good level, and 3 people indicated that they knew them at a level of 1. These results are illustrated by Figure 1.



Source: Own

Fig. 1: *Assessment of knowledge of consumer rights among respondents*

The respondents were then asked to choose the statement with which they most agreed. The majority of respondents (51 people) said that they pay less attention to advertisements and promotions and that they are more critical of them. The fewest people said that they try to draw the staff's attention if consumer rights are not respected (13 people) and that they are interested in the consumer rights they are entitled to (16 people). These results are illustrated by Figure 2.

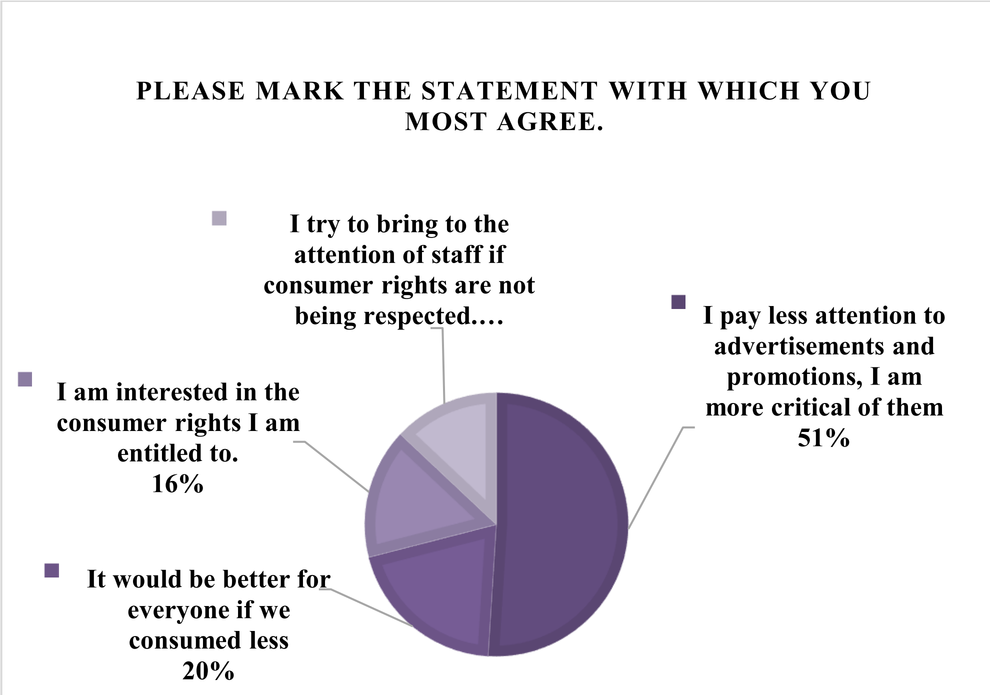


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Fig. 2: *Statements with which respondents agree most*

The next section of questions was strictly aimed at assessing the respondents' knowledge of consumer rights. They were asked to choose the correct answers regarding the applicable legal provisions. Therefore, the first question concerned the time within which the consumer may withdraw from a distance contract without giving a reason. Most respondents marked the correct answer "within two weeks". However, a total of 39 people incorrectly believed that it was 7 days or a month. These results are illustrated by Figure 3.

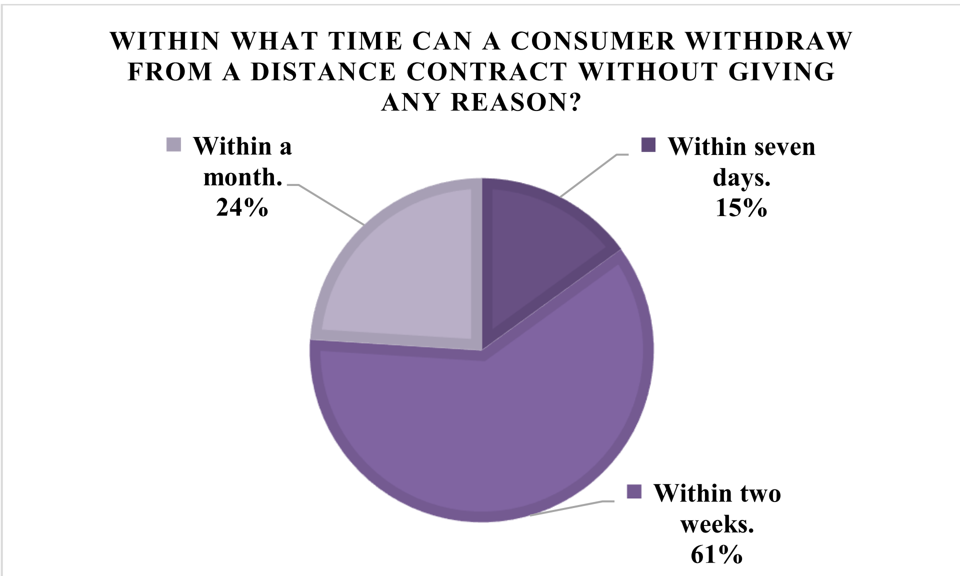

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Fig. 3: *The time within which a consumer may withdraw from a distance contract without giving any reason*

The next question concerned the seller's failure to respond to the reported complaint within the time prescribed by law. The vast majority marked correctly that complaints are considered accepted. The answer "The consumer should submit the complaint again" was marked by

20 people, and "The complaint is considered rejected" by 11 people. These results are illustrated by Figure 4.

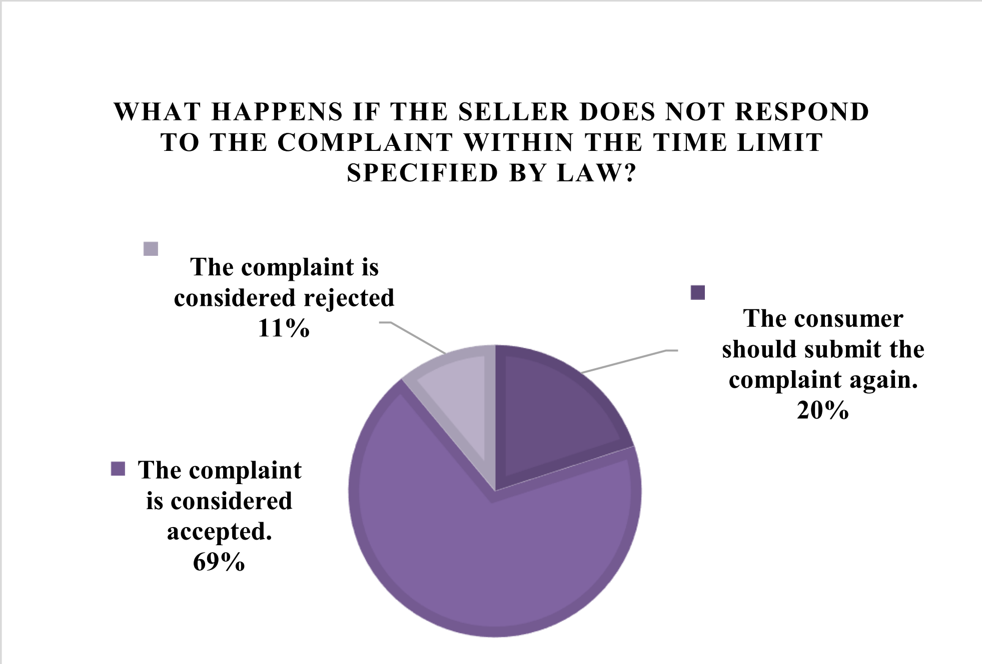

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Fig. 4: *Consequences of the seller's failure to respond to the complaint within the time limit set by law*

The respondents were also asked about the time they had to withdraw from the concluded contract in a stationary store without giving a reason. Only 46 people marked the correct answer "It depends on the store/seller". The remaining people stated that it is a period of one week (9 people), it is two weeks (30 people) or it is a month (15 people). These results are illustrated by Figure 5.

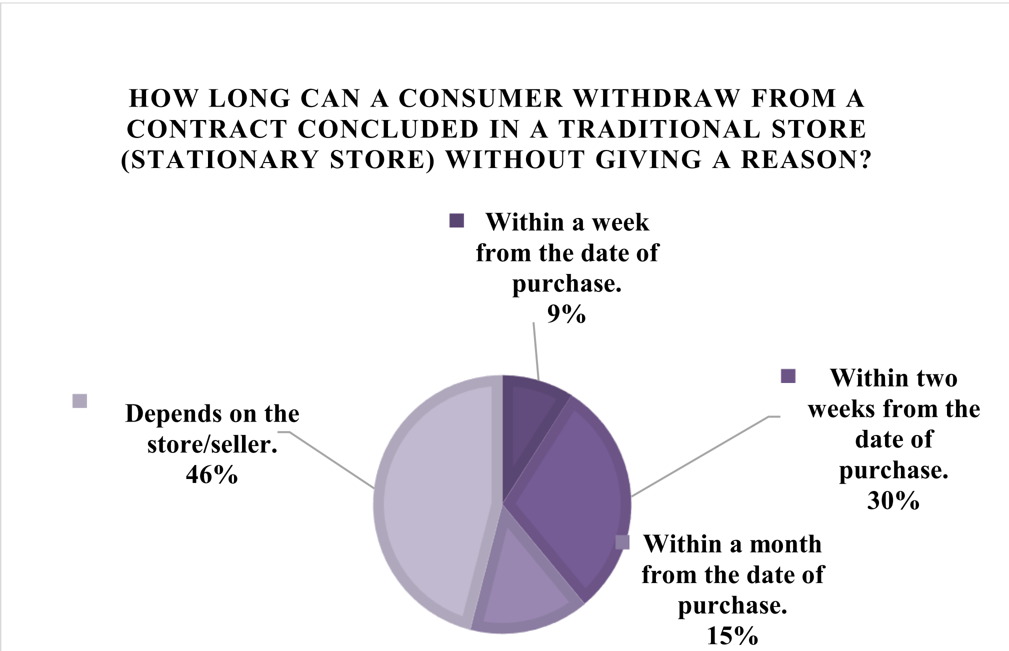

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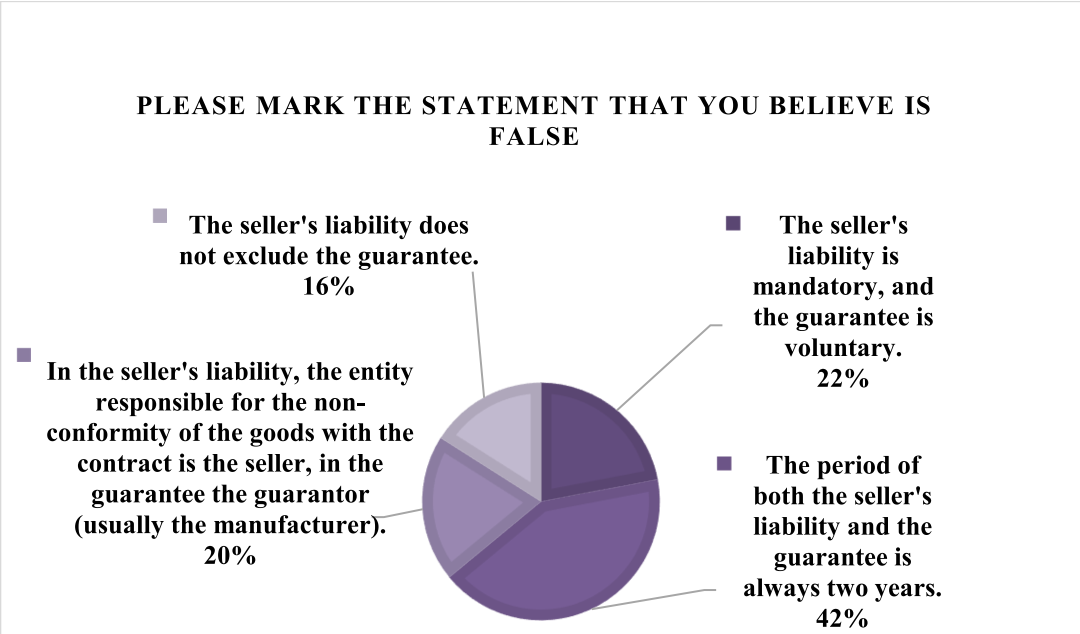
Fig. 5: *The time within which a consumer may withdraw from a contract concluded in a stationary (traditional) store without giving a reason*

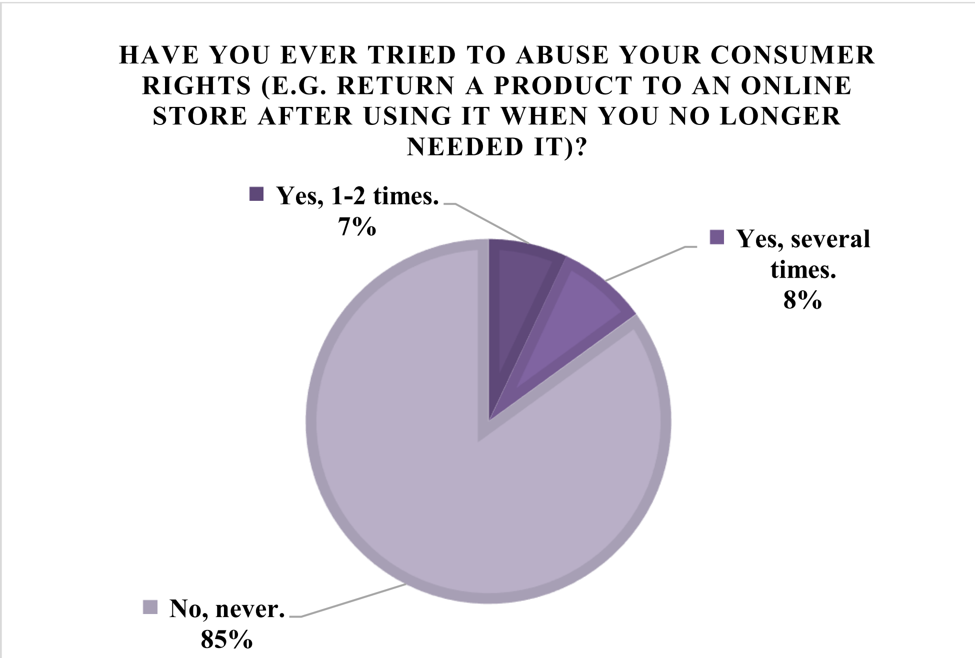
The last question in this section concerned the concept of seller's liability and guarantee. The respondents' task was to mark the statement they considered false. Only 42 people marked the correct answer "The period of both the seller's liability and the warranty is always two years." These results are illustrated by Figure 6.



Source: Own

Fig. 6: *False statement according to respondents*

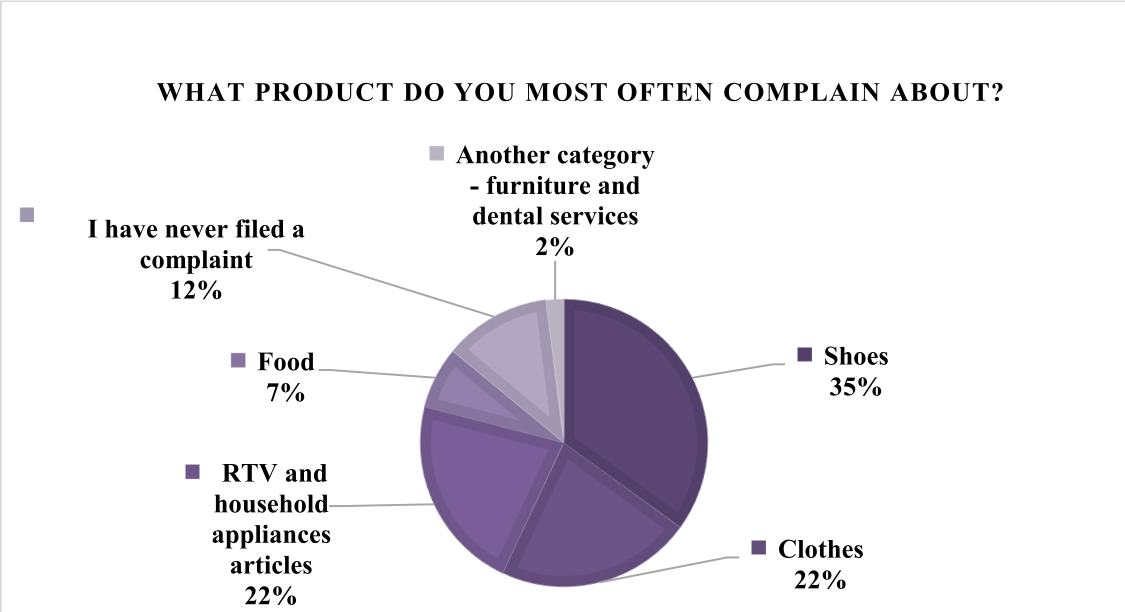
The next part of the survey concerned respondents' shopping behavior. The respondents were asked whether they had ever tried to abuse their consumer rights. The vast majority responded that such a situation had never occurred. However, 7 people answered that it happened to them 1-2 times, and 8 people declared that they did it several times. These results are illustrated by Figure 7.



Source: Own

Fig. 7: *Respondents who have abused their consumer rights (e.g. returned a product to an online store after using it and no longer needed it)*

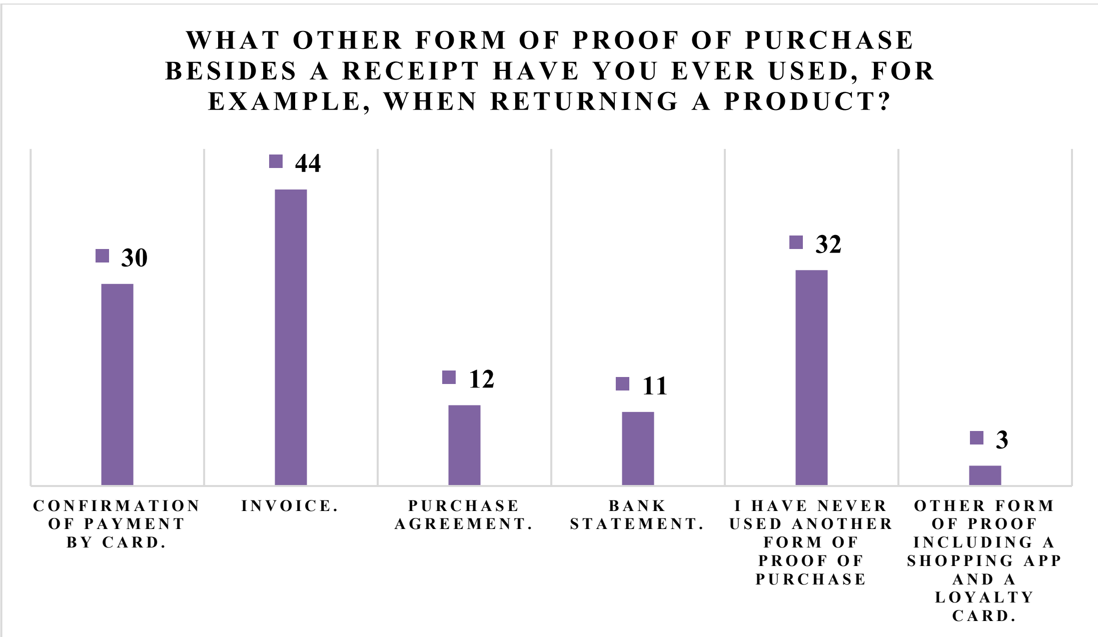
The next question concerned the products about which respondents most often complained. Therefore, among the proposed answers, footwear was chosen most often (35 people), and food was chosen least often (7 people). In turn, 12 people marked the answer "I have never filed a complaint". Moreover, 2 people decided to add another category "furniture and dental services". These results are illustrated by Figure 8.



Source: Own

Fig. 8: *Products about which respondents most often file complaints*

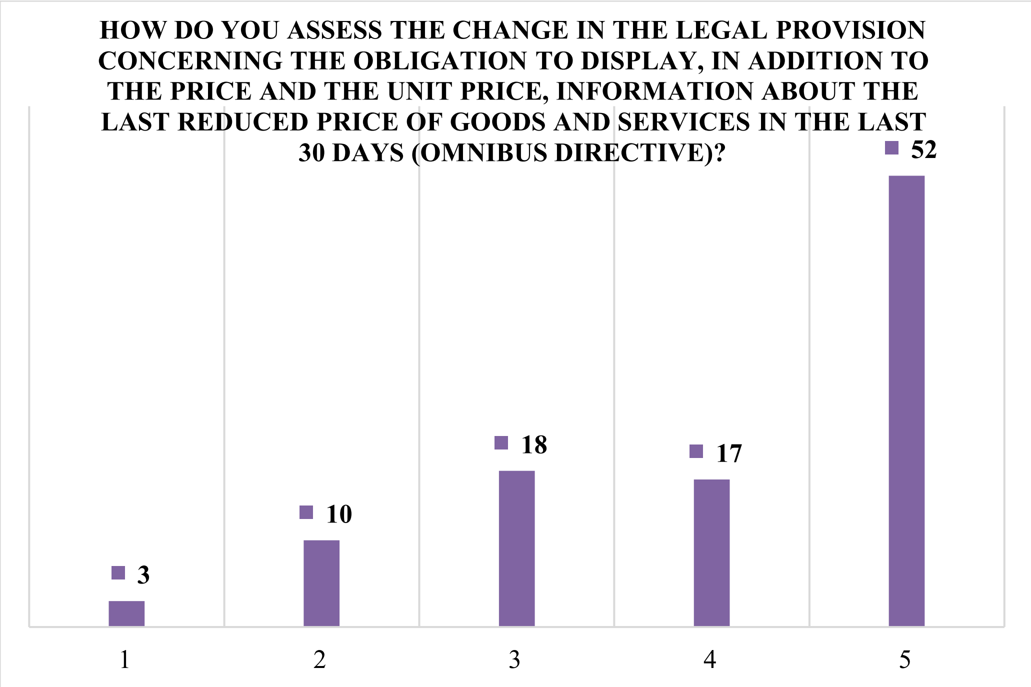
Respondents were also asked what form of proof of purchase they had used other than the receipt. Most people used an invoice (44 people) or card payment confirmation (30 people). However, as many as 32 people stated that they had never used any form of proof of purchase other than a receipt. Moreover, 3 people indicated the application as another answer they proposed. These results are illustrated by Figure 9.



Source: Own

Fig. 9: *Other forms of proof of purchase (apart from the receipt) used by respondents*

The next question concerned the assessment of the change in the legal provision (Omnibus Directive) among the respondents. The scale of the response was from 1 to 5, meaning 1- respondent think that the change in the law was definitely negative; 5- respondent think the change in the law was very good. Most people rated this change as very good (53 people). Only 3 people rated it as definitely negative, and 18 people maintained a neutral position, marking 3. These results are illustrated by Figure 10.



Source: Own

Fig. 10: *Evaluation of the Omnibus Directive among respondents*

The next section of the survey concerned the purchase of a defective product by respondents and its possible complaint. Thereby, purchasing a defective product happened to 89 respondents, and only 11 people had never experienced it. 87 people who purchased the defective product complained about it. People who did not submit such a complaint mainly believed that the benefit resulting from a recognized complaint would be relatively low compared, for example, to the commitment necessary to submit it. In turn, people who filed complaints about a defective product stated that the complaints were mostly resolved in their favor. Only in the case of 16 people, most of the complaints were not accepted.

Respondents were also asked whether they had ever contacted the Consumer Rights Adviser of Region. Only 13 people declared that they had used such assistance. These people were, therefore, asked to write the reason for such a need in the form of an open question. They replied that it was a matter of:

- complaints about a tourist trip,
- rejected complaint (mentioned by 4 people),
- failure to receive the purchased shoes (the store claimed otherwise),
- complaints about telecommunications services,
- poorly performed carpentry service,
- delivery of defective TVs and its long complaint process,
- damaged glasses after glass insertion service,
- complaints about football/sports shoes (2 people),
- product purchase.

The last question for respondents concerned their proposals to introduce new legal regulations regarding the protection of consumer rights. This question was voluntary and took the form of an open question. The respondents replied that the changes introduced would concern:

- price lists for multiple pieces, as they may feel they are misleading because they are often illegible and at first, one may think that the price is for a set, but it turns out that the price is for one piece when purchasing several pieces (2 people pointed out this problem),
- categorization of return conditions depending on the reason,
- immediate replacement with a new product in the event of another complaint about the product due to the same failure,
- giving money back when making a return, without the possibility of refunding the funds for a voucher to be used in the store, unless the consumer agrees to it (this problem was mentioned by 3 people),
- greater responsibility of the manufacturer for the sold goods,
- high penalties for goods prices marked incorrectly,
- the obligation to inform the consumer about his rights when submitting e.g. complaints, including the need to be aware of the difference between a regular warranty and a statutory warranty,
- extension of the basic warranty to 5 years for electronics and household appliances and solving the problem of equipment breaking down literally after its expiry (2 people mentioned this problem).

5.2 Violations of Consumer Rights in the Karkonosze Region

As part of the first question aimed at assessing the violation of consumer rights in the Karkonosze district, the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region was asked to assess the level of awareness of their rights among consumers. The Adviser said it was very diverse. Some people contact the Adviser only when they cannot cope on their own with the situation and they have already made some attempts. These are mostly new issues that they haven't encountered before. For example, they have not had trouble returning an online purchase before. These individuals were unprepared for this and became more interested in their rights and regulations in general when they had to deal with these issues. In the case of assessing the level of knowledge of consumer rights among entrepreneurs, the Adviser pointed out that it depends on the size of the enterprise. People running smaller companies, e.g. as sole proprietors, know these rights at a lower level and often base their views on acts that are no longer in force. It is quite the opposite for larger enterprises. This might be because such companies have greater financial resources, allowing them to seek legal advice.

The next question touched on the scope of problems with which consumers most often approach the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region. The data collected by the Adviser in cooperation with the Office of Competition and Consumer Protection was used to answer this question. These documents concerned the nature of legal advice and information provided in the field of consumer protection and interests (provided in person, by telephone, and in writing) in the years 2021-2023. It can be concluded that most consumers contacted the Adviser in matters related to household appliances, electronic devices, and computer equipment (114 contacts in this category). The second largest category was furniture, interior design, and home maintenance products (82 contacts from this category). Consumers were definitely the least likely to contact the Adviser regarding cosmetics, cleaning and preservatives (2 contacts from this category) and food products (4 contacts from this category). Consumers contacting the Adviser in 2021 in the sales category mainly paid attention to the problem related to defects in goods.

According to data on in-person and telephone advice on consumer protection and interests for sales in 2022, consumers continued to turn to the Adviser most frequently on matters relating to household appliances, electronic devices and computer equipment (109 contacts from this category) and furniture, interior design and home maintenance articles (56 contacts from this category). In 2022, no one reported a related matter with cosmetics, cleaning and preservatives. The overall number of contacts with the Adviser decreased (from 390 to 313 advice provided in person and by telephone). The most common sales problem remained the issue of defects in goods.

However, the last analyzed year showed a minimal increase in these contacts (from 313 to 347). The category of the most common subject of telephone and in-person advice has not changed either. However, the second place has changed to clothing and footwear (72 contacts in this category). The number of advice on furniture, home furnishings, and home maintenance decreased by only 5 contacts. It is also worth noting that defects in goods were still the main problem of those reporting to the Adviser.

Advice provided by the Adviser may concern not only sales but also services. Data on services in 2021 showed that most of the Adviser's contacts with consumers concerned the energy and water sectors (35 contacts from this category), and the problem with services in this area was mainly related to their improper performance. In second place were telecommunications services (32 contacts from this category), which also mainly performed poorly. In the case of cleaning and repair of clothes and shoes, no one reported to the Adviser, and the fewest people reported in the following categories: ongoing maintenance, home maintenance, minor repairs and care, and maintenance and repair of vehicles and other means of transport (one contact from these categories).

In 2022, there was a decrease in the number of consumer contacts (concerning services) with the Adviser (from 154 contacts to 117). However, the topics of the most frequently given advice have not changed; only their number has changed. However, the number of advice regarding the real estate market increased (by 5 contacts).

In the last period under review, the number of consumers seeking advice on services related to the energy and water sectors increased dramatically (56 contacts in this category, an increase of 30). The increase also concerned the telecommunications category (by 11 contacts from this category), tourism and recreation (by 13 contacts from this category), and the other category (by 10 contacts from this category).

In addition to telephone and personal contact, consumers can also contact the Adviser in writing. However, such contacts occur much less frequently. There were 9 of them in 2021, and they mainly concerned sales (4 contacts in the other category). In 2022, there were only 2 of them (one contact concerned the sale of household appliances, electronic devices, and computer equipment, and the other concerned a financial service). However, in 2023, 4 such contacts took place, and they concerned only services, including as many as 3 belonging to the category of insurance services, and 1 included a telecommunications service.

Additionally, the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region has the ability to represent consumers in court, which never happened to Mr. Michał Słomski. The Adviser tries to solve consumer problems in such a way as to avoid the need to take consumers' cases to court.

The next question the Adviser was asked during the interview concerned consumers abusing their rights and submitting unjustified complaints. According to the Adviser, most people who come to him with unjustified complaints contact him by phone or e-mail. People are aware that they are not right, and it often happens that they break off contact after the Adviser's answer. In a situation where such contact does not cease, the Adviser always tries to find a solution that satisfies consumers, supporting it with appropriate provisions. The Adviser also pointed out that both consumers and entrepreneurs violate and abuse their rights. He also pointed out that sometimes the reluctance to solve a consumer's problem amicably may result from the entrepreneur not having good relations with his consumers or having had bad experiences with similar situations in the past.

The next question concerned consumers' awareness of their obligations. In most cases, the Adviser stated that the issue concerned the return of goods as part of the withdrawal from the contract or the complaint process. People are not aware of their obligation, e.g. to return the goods. The seller has the right to see the goods, e.g. if the consumer reports withdrawal from the contract due to defects. The consumer is also obliged to submit such a withdrawal in writing; simply sending the product back is not sufficient, although sometimes the seller may accept such a solution.

The Adviser was also asked about which rights consumers are most often unaware of. He pointed out that the problem is mainly with stationary returns. It should be recalled that not every stationary store is obliged to accept returns without giving a reason. The situation is different when we want to return the goods and provide a reason for the return, e.g. significant defects of the product.

The last question asked concerned legal regulations regarding consumer rights that should be introduced in Poland. According to the Adviser, the rules for returns in stationary stores should be unified - returns should be allowed in all stores. However, this could be quite risky, considering that consumers can buy goods, use them for their own purposes, and then return them. The Adviser also drew attention to a market area in which, in his opinion, consumers are too poorly protected. Such an area are telecommunications services and related to them contractual penalties for terminating contracts, that consumers are unaware of. It may happen that a person changes their place of residence, and the contract was initially made for specific premises. Transferring to another location is possible, but it could have different conditions.

5.3 Unethical Customer Behavior in the Karkonosze Region

The first question asked five sellers as part of the analysis of unethical consumer behavior concerned their personal assessment of their knowledge of the law as a seller. All of them indicated that they believed they had the necessary knowledge about consumer rights from the perspective of both the seller and the consumer. They consider the internal regulations in force in the companies where they work to be the most important. They regulate deadlines for the exchange/return of products that are important for consumers or indicate products that are not subject to such procedures (e.g., in the case of clothing stores, it is usually underwear). The provisions of law generally applicable in Poland concern, among other things, the right to make complaints or guarantees and warranties, which, according to the surveyed sellers, requires skillful differentiation to work in their positions.

When asked about possible abuse of their rights by consumers, sellers indicated that this is quite a common phenomenon. Consumers sometimes buy goods, use them, and then return them, believing that the goods are unused. The only conditions for returns in stationery stores are payment confirmation and undamaged packaging or the original tag. Sellers in clothing stores often encounter returns of worn clothes whose labels are questionably attached to the clothes. However, it sometimes happens that the goods do not have a tag when purchased. In such a case, sellers indicate the need to note its possible absence on the receipt when the consumer makes a purchase, so that he or she can return the goods. Additionally, sellers mainly pointed to the submission of unjustified complaints by consumers as an example of consumers violating their rights. This situation mainly occurs when the good is naturally worn out or it was treated improperly by the consumer, e.g., contrary to the instructions, which led to its destruction. According to one of the surveyed sellers, consumers, in addition to bending their rights, also violate general laws by committing actions bordering on theft. They believe that the goods they have purchased are incomplete, and they complete them themselves by adding additional parts, e.g., electronic equipment, to the original packaging. In the case of this seller, she is therefore obliged to check the completeness of each package when checking out to avoid such practices among customers. Another example of breaking the law indicated by the seller may involve consumers sticking price tags on goods and arguing about the price so that the seller is forced to change it to the consumer's advantage.

The third question asked to sellers was related to possible "bending" of the regulations on their part, for example, to satisfy a problematic customer. Sellers pointed out that sometimes, in stores, for example, complaints or returns are not the responsibility of the sellers but their superiors. This is important because these are the procedures during which, according to them, the law is most often "bent". Sellers or their superiors sometimes return/exchange goods after the deadline is regulated by internal regulations. However, one of the sellers pointed out that such a procedure is difficult due to the electronic program, which automatically does not allow the return/exchange procedure if the deadline is exceeded. In the case of complaints, "bending" the regulations is related to their positive consideration despite, for example, consumer abuse of the product. Only one of the surveyed sellers mentioned that he always prioritizes resolving the above situations for the benefit of the company he works for. Additionally, it indicates that a pleasant conversation and truthfulness are the best ways to resolve a possible dispute with a client.

Sellers were also asked to indicate new legal regulations governing consumer-seller relations that should be introduced in Poland. They mainly pointed to the unification of the deadline for returning goods in stationery stores that accept such a procedure in their internal regulations. Most late returns/exchanges are due to consumers' ignorance of store regulations. It is usually 30 days, but there are stores where it is 14 days or only 7. Thus, sellers also pointed out the need to introduce an obligation requiring stores to display the regulations (if they decide to have some kind of statute) in places where they can be read. Additionally, one salesperson also pointed out the common rudeness towards salespeople among customers as an aspect that each of us should work on personally. It happens that consumers display pathological behavior, e.g. they become aggressive as a result of a complaint being rejected. In such situations, it should be remembered that the seller is only obliged to follow the procedures and that she/he may, for example, be liable to her/his employer for her/his decisions.

Conclusion

Consumer behavior is constantly changing. This is due to the creation of newer needs and the development of marketing and consumerism.

The aim of the article was to assess the awareness of consumer rights on the example of residents of the Karkonosze region. This knowledge is necessary because the processes related to globalization have undoubtedly influenced the formation of constantly changing consumer behavior. Consumer rights must also be constantly modified, and as a result, the level of awareness among consumers and the level of skillful use of them change.

Thus, the study in the form of a survey allowed for the analysis of the level of consumer awareness in the Karkonosze region. The research revealed that most respondents hold a neutral attitude towards legal regulations. Some regulations, such as the timeframe in which a consumer can withdraw from a distance contract without providing a reason, are well known, while others, like the period within which consumers can withdraw from a contract made in a physical store without providing a reason, are less familiar. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents are knowledgeable about exercising their rights correctly and are capable of suggesting needed changes. The information collected during the interview with the Consumer Rights Adviser of the Region allowed conclusions to be drawn regarding the level of knowledge of consumer rights among consumers and entrepreneurs, which turned out to be very diverse. Another important aspect of this conversation was the abuse of their rights by consumers, which the Adviser described as frequent, but pointed out that it was a problem also occurring on the part of entrepreneurs.

The interview also allowed for obtaining data regarding advice and legal information provided over the years 2021-2023 (in person, by phone, and in writing). From the data obtained, it can be concluded that consumers most often turned to the Adviser on matters related to household appliances, electronic devices, and computer equipment (sales advice) and the energy and water sector (service advice), and written advice was very sporadic and over the years analyzed, they concerned different categories.

Other research in the presented article included interviews with sellers. They allowed for the identification of unethical behavior on the part of consumers, which mainly concerned their abuse of their rights, especially related to the complaint and returns process. Sellers also proposed the introduction of new legal regulations, primarily regarding the unification of the return process in stores that allow it.

The researched topic suggests that consumer awareness has the potential to increase in the era of consumerism. Market regulations are constantly changing, but consumers are becoming more aware of them. However, at times, their potential is not fully utilized, and as a society, we need to work on this.

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POSOUZENÍ INFORMOVANOSTI O PRÁVECH SPOTŘEBITELŮ NA PŘÍKLADU KRKONOŠSKÉHO OKRESU

Cílem článku bylo zhodnotit informovanost o právech spotřebitelů na příkladu obyvatel Krkonošského okresu. Hlavní cíl byl rozčleněn na dílčí cíle, a to: posouzení znalosti spotřebitelů o právech a jejich vhodném používání, posouzení znalosti prodejců o právních předpisech, zjištění četnosti a charakteru problémů, se kterými se spotřebitelé obracejí na Okresní úřad pro ochranu spotřebitele.
Hlavní výzkumná hypotéza byla následující: v Krkonošském okrese je povědomí o právech spotřebitelů na subjektivně průměrné úrovni.
Analýza výzkumu ve formě dotazníkového šetření mezi obyvateli Krkonošského okresu, rozhovorů s prodejci a Okresním úřadem pro ochranu spotřebitele, a analýza sekundárního výzkumu tuto tezi potvrdila. Z výzkumu také vyplynulo, že většina respondentů má neutrální postoj k právním předpisům, ale ví, jak je správně využít a dokáže navrhnout potřebné změny.

BEWERTUNG DES BEWUSSTSEINS ÜBER VERBRAUCHERRECHTE AM BEISPIEL DES KREISES KARKONOSZE

Ziel des Artikels ist es, das Bewusstsein für Verbraucherrechte am Beispiel der Bewohner des Riesengebirges zu bewerten. Das Hauptziel wird in spezifische Ziele zerlegt: Bewertung der Rechtskenntnisse der Verbraucher und ihrer geschickten Anwendung, Bewertung der Rechtskenntnisse der Verkäufer, Bestimmung der Häufigkeit und Spezifität von Problemen, mit denen Verbraucher sich an den Kundenrechtsberater der Region wenden.
Die Haupthypothese der Forschung war folgende: Im Riesengebirge ist das Bewusstsein für Verbraucherrechte subjektiv durchschnittlich.
Die Analyse der Forschung, welche in Form einer Umfrage unter den Bewohnern des Riesengebirges, eines Interviews mit Verkäufern und dem Kundenrechtsberater der Region sowie einer Analyse der Sekundärforschung durchgeführt wurde, bestätigte die These. Die Untersuchung ergab auch, dass die Mehrheit der Befragten eine neutrale Haltung gegenüber gesetzlichen Regelungen einnimmt, diese jedoch richtig anzuwenden weiß und in der Lage ist, notwendige Änderungen vorzuschlagen.

OCENA ŚWIADOMOŚCI PRAW KONSUMENCKICH NA PRZYKŁADZIE POWIATU KARKONOSKIEGO

Celem artykułu była ocena świadomości praw konsumenckich na przykładzie mieszkańców powiatu karkonoskiego. Cel główny został rozbity na cele szczegółowe, którymi są: ocena wiedzy konsumentów na temat prawa i jego umiejętnego stosowania, ocena znajomości prawa przez sprzedawców, określenie częstotliwości i specyfiki problemów, z jakimi konsumenci zwracają się do Powiatowego Rzecznika Konsumentów.
Główna hipoteza badawcza była następująca: w powiecie karkonoskim świadomość praw konsumenckich kształtuje się na subiektywnie przeciętnym poziomie.
Analiza badań w postaci: ankiety wśród mieszkańców powiatu karkonoskiego, wywiadów ze sprzedawcami i Powiatowym Rzecznikiem Konsumentów oraz analiza badań wtórnych potwierdziła tę tezę. Badanie wykazało także, że większość respondentów zachowuje neutralny stosunek do regulacji prawnych, jednak wie, jak prawidłowo z nich korzystać i potrafi zaproponować niezbędne zmiany.