MARKETING
INTELLIGENCE
REVIEW

NIM Nuremberg Institute for Market Decisions

Conscious Consumption

SUSTAINABILITY › ETHICAL CONSUMPTION ›
RESPONSIBILITY › BUYING DECISION › REGULATION ›
MINDSHIFT › DEGROWTH › CIRCULAR ECONOMY

FROM ACADEMIC RESEARCH TO PRACTICAL USE

Nürnberg Institut für Marktentscheidungen e. V.
Founder and anchor shareholder of GfK SE
Vol. 14 / No. 1 / 2022

FROM ACADEMIC RESEARCH TO PRACTICAL USE

NIM Marketing Intelligence Review

For managers and decision-makers interested in › current marketing topics and new research results.

Our goal is to provide › accessible, relevant insights from academic marketing research. We focus on › one topic per issue and continue to provide our readers with ideas on how modern marketing research findings can improve marketing decision-making.

Its publisher, the › Nuremberg Institute for Market Decisions, (Nürnberg Institut für Marktentscheidungen e.V., formerly GfK Verein), is an interdisciplinary, non-commercial research institute. Its research focus are market decisions, both by consumers and marketers.
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Editorial

Rarely have the goals of companies and consumers converged as much as they do in the pursuit of sustainable consumption. Sustainable lifestyles appeal to a growing number of individuals and the pressure is increasing on companies to adopt a sustainable marketing orientation.

From waterless cosmetics and vegan fast food to solar-powered cars, companies are investing in product, packaging, and logistics innovations to continue to deliver excellent products to consumers in a more sustainable way. In parallel, consumers are becoming more conscious of their choices, and inquiring into materials, modes of production, and the meanings put forward by brands. Although many barriers to more sustainable consumption exist, the big change is coming.

For example, major brands in the technology sector, such as Dell, are challenging planned obsolescence, which has been the norm in the technology sector and is a major driver of e-waste. Called "Concept Luna," the recently launched proof-of-concept laptop designed by Dell is intended to make repair and maintenance easy. From companies concerned with the impact of their products to consumers' concerns about the impact of their shopping, sustainable consumption is in our minds.

This issue of the NIM Marketing Intelligence Review brings articles based on rigorous academic and market research that cover various aspects of the pursuit of sustainable consumption. These articles inquire into the barriers for sustainable consumption, and the reasons why consumers might resist being made responsible for it. You will also read on conscious consumption, the arguments against it, and the dilemmas it might create for individuals.

Overall, this issue shows that small changes, such as adding information to product labels or developing a consumer-focused app can produce positive results. But given the extent of the problem, we also invite you to rethink consumption and consider your company's approach to sustainability more fundamentally. All hands will be needed to flip the direction of our impact in the world.

Enjoy your reading and keep working on the right things!

Daiane Scaraboto

Melbourne, January 2022

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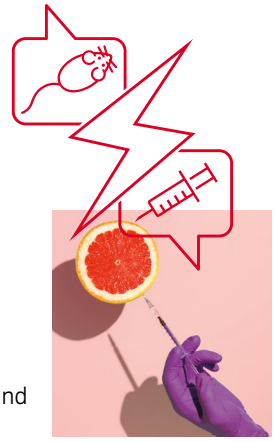

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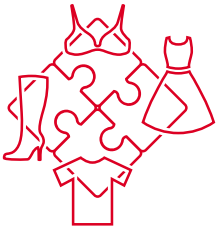

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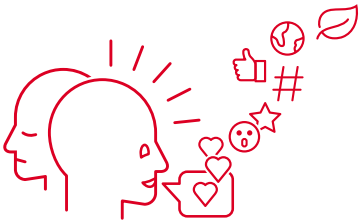

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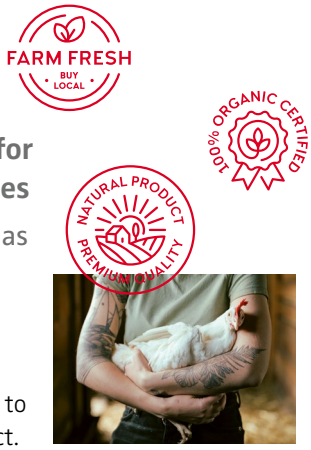
Some people move from learning about some aspect of consumption online to becoming a digital activist.



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To fully use the potential of product labels, it is important to know and optimize their effect.

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Sustainable Consumption: More Using, Less Shopping

Daiane Scaraboto

To develop a more sustainable economy, we need a new definition of "consumption": To consume is to use, not to buy. Understanding consumers as users – rather than shoppers – can prompt organizations to reconsider what they can do to create value for consumers. Rather than extracting resources from the planet to produce more goods that could feed into the cycle of purchases, organizations can devise value-creating ways to collect, reuse, and recycle post-consumption resources. They can consider the many ways in which services can be offered to support consumers in using the products they already own for longer.

Even though more sustainability can be fun in some cases, people will also need to make peace with the fact that consuming sustainably will not necessarily be convenient, cheap, or fast. While consumers and their actions in the marketplace play a key role, responsibility cannot be placed on consumers alone. Developing a sustainable economy will take a concerted effort from multiple market and non-market actors.

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Socially Responsible Consumers – A Trojan Horse of Neoliberalism?

Craig Thompson and Ankita Kumar

Political consumerism is often presented as a viable means against the environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality posed by shareholder capitalism and carbon-intensive consumer lifestyles. The idea is that privatized and voluntary solutions to societal problems by individuals in the role of consumers are preferable to legal, political, and regulatory remedies. However, not all agree that political consumerism will be able to solve our planet's problems. Critics question whether consumers can be sufficiently mobilized by market-based mechanisms to act as risk managers toward socially beneficial ends and to shape the behavior of large corporations.

The in-depth study of the Slow Food Movement suggests that market-mediated approaches need not be condemned in the context of political consumerism. Political consumerism won't be the savior of our world, but it is one of the many pieces in the puzzle of a more sustainable society.

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Good Intentions – Thoughtless Buying Decisions: Understanding and Breaking Barriers to Ethical Consumption

Rebecca Walker Reczek, Julie Irwin, and Danny Zane

When shopping for fun products, it is often easy to avoid troublesome information. Consumers use coping strategies to maintain a good mood and avoid the emotional difficulty of thinking about ideas such as labor mistreatment or environmental problems. In addition to not seeking ethical information or misremembering it, consumers also negatively judge others who do not remain willfully ignorant.
Companies can act against undesirable short- and long-term effects of consumers' coping strategies. They can provide information about ethical product aspects right when consumers make their purchase decisions and they can reduce consumers' effort to collect such information. Also, companies should refrain from comparing more and less ethical consumers. The timing and availability of ethical information are crucial to prevent a vicious cycle. Consumers who make ethical decisions themselves should feel less compelled to think negatively of other ethical consumers, which should encourage them to continue being ethical consumers in the future.

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Vegans and Vaccines: A Tale of Competing Identity Goals

Michael B. Beverland

Many vegans feel torn between their personal beliefs about animal exploitation and their desire to protect themselves and loved ones from COVID-19, as well as to act as responsible members of society. The dilemma between being true to vegan values and protection gets even more critical as accessing many of the services that make life worth living may require a vaccine certificate.
To be at ease with themselves, consumers with competing identity goals use several strategies. They create their own echo chambers to justify their decision for themselves or they compensate for inconsistent behavior. Organizations can apply certain strategies to help consumers overcome such conflicts and act in desired ways, like taking vaccinations. These strategies include building partnerships with other organizations and further segmenting relevant groups to identify and concentrate on more open sub-groups and convince them with specific and targeted information and materials.

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No More Plastic Bags: Overcoming Consumer Resistance to Sustainability Regulation

Alison M. Joubert, Claudia Gonzalez-Arcos, Daiane Scaraboto, Jorgen Sandberg, and Rodrigo Guesalaga

Facilitating more sustainable consumer behavior through regulation is often more complex than expected. One way to significantly reduce consumer resistance to sustainability interventions is to shift the focus from changing individual behavior to changing the required social practices. While some consumers find new sense more easily and change their habits without much effort, others get distracted, discouraged, and delay acceptance and the reconfiguration of the practice. If, like in our case, plastic bags are removed, consumers expect retailers to provide alternative materials for carrying the purchased goods. At the point of sale, advice for accommodating the change can reduce anger and frustration directed at the new situation and help consumers feel a sense of pride and satisfaction. If the bags are also used for garbage disposal, alternative solutions should be pointed out, and consumers should be informed which concrete contribution the measure can achieve.

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Clicking Our Way to Conscious Consumption

Robert V. Kozinets

Most marketers are familiar with the classic marketing funnel that illustrates how people are led from awareness to interest, desire, and then purchasing action for a product or brand. The presented Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel depicts a similar process of increasing involvement. In this new funnel, people move from learning about some aspect of consumption online to becoming more and more involved in digital activism relating to it. Not everyone who learns something meaningful about their consumption will act on it or become a digital activist. The funnel expresses the idea that smaller and smaller numbers will make it to the next stage. Digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and others may empower consumers to raise awareness but at the same time they may also restrict their users' abilities to promote a cause. Consumers will successfully navigate today's broad and fluid digital landscape and continue to use online platforms to learn more about their own consumption. And then some will be moved to promote what they learn online, doing their part to create more conscious consumption.

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Better Product Labels for Better Consumer Choices

Birgit Stoltenberg, Matthias Unfried, and Vladimir Manewitsch

One way to support consumers in their decision-making is by using product labels or quality seals. The labels help consumers decide whether products meet their own needs and preferences. As the main function of labels is to highlight product characteristics in a simple and transparent way, designing a label is a big challenge: On the one hand, they have to be concise and allow for easy orientation; on the other hand, they often have to explain complex criteria and information. The study shows that the design of a label has a direct impact on the assessment of a product and on purchasing behavior. To ensure that a label works as intended and produces the desired effects, it should be tested in advance. Both consumer perception and the resulting choices can be tested in practice. If decision biases are observed, the label can still be modified. To fully use the potential of product labels, it is important to know and optimize their effect.

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Save Your Wardrobe: Supporting Sustainable and Mindful Clothing Consumption

Interview

Consumers love fashion but many also feel guilty about their consumption styles and their often exuberant and short-lived wardrobe. Reports about the social and environmental costs of our clothes concern some consumers and make them rethink their buying behavior. Aspiring to change one´s clothing habits and actually doing it is quite another thing. Can digital services and AI help bridge the gap between stated desires and actions? The startup Save Your Wardrobe (SYW) took up the challenge and created an app which provides a digital eco-system to support more sustainable approaches to clothing consumption. They started a fruitful collaboration with consumer researchers Kat Duffy and Deirdre Shaw from Glasgow University to tailor their services to deliver what consumers need to act more sustainably. In this interview, Kat and Deirdre talk about their collaboration with SYW and the consumer insights they gained to improve the app and to support consumers in moving toward a more sustainable approach to fashion.

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Consumption needs to be dissociated from shopping and reconnected to its most basic meaning: To consume is to use.

Sustainable Consumption: More Using, Less Shopping

Daiane Scaraboto

KEYWORDS

Sustainability, Consumption, Mindshift, Degrowth, Circular Economy

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The old premise that consumption means growth, and growth is good ⤫ Consumer culture as we experience it has developed over the past decades based on the premise that consumption means growth, and growth is good. Following industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which enabled the mass production of consumption goods, individuals were trained to pursue life goals – status, stability, happiness – through consumption and were convinced of the importance of doing so. Since then, consumption has been designed to be enticing and pleasurable. When that is not possible, it is commanded as a civil duty – for good citizens should support their countries' economies.

Considering these assumptions, it becomes easier to understand why, in consumption culture, buying more is better than less. Collecting is encouraged, materialism is not necessarily frowned upon, and unusual attachment to possessions such as hoarding, which has its origins in a mindset of scarcity, are considered pathological deviations that impede the flow of the consumption cycle. Similarly, new is better than existing. In new objects and novel experiences, consumers search for excitement and the constant improvement of their even unfolding identity projects. Finally, fast is better than slow.

Consuming equals shopping ⤫ We are all too familiar with the consumption cycle: It starts with the need for something – be it a new phone to replace an old one that has given in; a new dress that signals one's trendy style or a holiday somewhere idyllic to escape routine. That need triggers the search for offerings that could placate it. As consumers search for alternatives, they are faced with thousands of options that may address the original need just as well as open up others: earphones and covers for the smartphone; new shoes and handbag to go with the dress; the next escapade that simply must be booked. As each purchased solution addresses a need, the cycle progresses through use and disposal – for to

Sustainable consumption requires individuals to buy less, to appreciate and keep what they already own, and to slow down the consumption cycle.

consume is to use up. The phone quickly becomes obsolete, the dress dated, the holiday forgotten. As such, consumption is fueled by the constant lack, insistent desire, and impossible pursuit of having it all and using it too. Because the consumption cycle is at the core of economic development, consumers are often considered in their roles of shoppers – populating retail environments, choosing and acquiring goods and services such as groceries and haircuts to address their own needs or those of others. Consumer spending is usually the biggest component of many countries' GDP, and as such, consumption is seen as a force for economic growth and a sign of a healthy economy. But this is not the end of the story. It cannot be.

The more-new-fast culture is being questioned Since the early 1970s though, scientists have been demonstrating that constant growth rates in population and consumption are not sustainable. For example, the United Nations report "Our Common Future," published in 1987, already alerted that living standards that go beyond the basic minimum are hardly sustainable for the planet. That is, in good part, because the more-new-fast triad of consumer culture comes along with other values that support this extremely damaging proposition: cheap, convenient, disposable, global (see Figure 1).

Those early promoters of sustainable consumption had it clear that sustainable development requires the promotion of different values – some that encourage consumption standards that are "within the bounds of the ecological possible and to which all can reasonably aspire," as the United Nations report demands. Although what those values are remains unclear, it helps to frame them as the complete opposite of what we have been accustomed to (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1 > Typical and randomly displayed meanings of consumption over the past decades

Source: Editors

FIGURE 2 > New and randomly displayed meanings of consumption that need to be promoted for change

Source: Editors

> *We need to radically dissociate consumption from the desire that fuels it and reconnect it to the most basic meaning of the term – to consume is to use.*

Sustainable consumption requires individuals to buy less, to appreciate and keep what they already own, and to slow down the consumption cycle.

A degrowth mindset is gaining traction As we emerge from the forced deceleration caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very encouraging to notice early signs of a shift toward a more positive direction. Generation Z consumers, born in 1996 or later, have shifted the emphasis from price/quality relationships to ethics and sustainability. Now in their 20s, Gen Zers demonstrate a greater degree of thinking and discipline behind their consumption choices. What moves them to purchase is not the pursuit of more-new-fast, but spending their money on something they believe in. This mindset is well attuned to the radical perspective of economic degrowth – which many claim is the only way to achieve sustainable consumption.

Degrowth makes the case that we have to produce and consume differently, and also less; that we have to share more and distribute more fairly, because even those few who consume the most can do significant and irreversible damage to the environment. Degrowth proponents have been working to devise ways in which consumption can support pleasurable lives in resilient societies. They warn us that this will require values and institutions that produce different kinds of persons and different types of relations between persons and things.

The degrowth mindset: To consume is to use, not to buy While many still lag behind in the goal of achieving "pleasurable lives," unable to afford the products and services that would address their very basic needs, lavish lifestyles are exhibited for their aspirational power in reality TV shows, fashion shows, and social media. For the meaning

» *Individuals are creating new practices, meanings, and lifestyles – ones in which sustainability can be chic, cool, enjoyable.* «

of consumption to change, we need to radically dissociate consumption from the desire that fuels it and reconnect it to the most basic meaning of the term – to consume is to use. This means a consumer does not need to be a shopper, but can be a maker, a keeper, a fixer, a tinkerer. And consumption need not be dissociated from pleasure – gardening and crafting, for example, have been shown to offer enjoyment and reduce stress and anxiety, with the added benefits of producing goods one can consume or gift, rather than emptying one's wallet.

Sustainability can be cool, chic, and enjoyable ⨯ Consumers themselves – who do not want to have their status, identity projects, or pleasure threatened – have been working in movements to reclaim and revalue crafts, thrift, and DIY cultures. In movements that have been organically growing online and off, individuals are creating new practices, meanings, and lifestyles – ones in which sustainability can be chic, cool, enjoyable. Take, for example, the #madebyme movement, which has accumulated more than five million posts on Instagram, where people proudly display their creations and often receive the accolades of others who are reusing materials, mending clothes, and cooking their own food. One can be a sustainable hedonist – but individuals will need to be trained in the new rules of the role once again, and be convinced of the importance of consuming sustainably.

Sustainability can be a worthwhile business model ⨯ Understanding consumers as users – rather than shoppers – can prompt organizations to reconsider what they can do to create value for consumers. Rather than extracting resources from the planet to produce more goods that could feed into the cycle of purchases, organizations can devise value-creating ways to collect, reuse, and recycle post-consumption resources. They can consider the many ways in which services can be offered to support consumers in using the products they already own for longer, like the Australian fashion brand Kuwaii (Box 1). Other fashion brands have integrated services offering to dye or upcycle pre-purchased clothes. Others, like the yoga brand Manduka, have started to educate consumers about how long they can expect their products to last ("the lifetime of our yoga mat is approximately 10 years of regular use when loved and cared for"), and offer guarantees that a product will be repaired during that expected lifetime.

Examples of innovative ways in which waste can be turned into profit abound, and many small initiatives can gain scale given sufficient investment. For example, FabBRICK makes decorative and insulative bricks out of old clothes, reducing textile waste and the demand for natural resources in the construction industry. Each brick uses the equivalent of two to three T-shirts' worth of material – not only cotton, but also polyester, elastane, PVC, and other materials – and can be used for many purposes. Fashion brands could redirect production and post-consumption way to similar initiatives, offsetting the costs of recycling programs by using the bricks to insulate stores, build fitting rooms, showrooms, and furniture.

How to clear the road for a more sustainable economy ⨯ Developing a sustainable economy will take a concerted effort from multiple market and non-market actors. While consumers and their actions in the marketplace play a key role, responsibility cannot be placed on consumers alone. In this issue, Thompson and Kumar analyze (p. 19) the chances and limits of responsibilizing consumers and come to the conclusion that consumer responsibilization is no panacea but one of the many pieces in the puzzle of a more sustainable society. Brands and regulators also need to contribute to shifting the fundamental assumptions underlying consumption, and replace the logics, structures, and incentives that support these assumptions. While more sustainability can be fun in some cases, people will also need to make peace with the fact that consuming sustainably will not necessarily be convenient, cheap, or fast. Those solutions that are cheap and that bring only minor inconveniences, such as replacing a combustion engine with an electric one, will not do. Consumers will need to reconsider travelling; they will need to ride their bikes; they will need to walk – and that will slow them down.

How to sell this idea to consumers who, for the past century, have been convinced of the need for speed, flexibility, and ease? How to direct individuals in finding solutions to their

BOX 1

Kuwaii – A new, sustainable business model

The Australian fashion brand Kuwaii designs and produces garments in small runs, often with a pre-order approach to reduce production waste. They produce every single garment locally in Melbourne within a 15km radius of their head office, providing jobs for the community and keeping trades alive. Fabrics and fibers are selected carefully considering the environmental impacts of their production and their quality: how durable they are, how long they will last, how easy they will be to care for, and the overall quality of each particular material. Each season, Kuwaii uses more recycled, organic, and sustainable fabrics and their goal is to source 100% of fabrics from entirely natural, traceable sources with minimal environmental impact by 2025. They also use production surplus fabrics from larger fashion brands by repurposing the textile waste generated that would otherwise end up in landfills.

The brand has a "Wear, Care, and Repair" program, and offers to mend, repair, or recycle any garment or shoe they have produced, no matter how old. Returned garments in need of minor patching or repairs are mended and then prepared for re-sale or donation. Garments that are deemed unwearable or unrepairable are used for art or for making other products such as cleaning cloths or rags.

All packaging is either biodegradable, compostable, recyclable, or reusable, and the brand strives toward a fully circular system where no packaging or garment hits the landfill.

www.kuwaii.com.au/

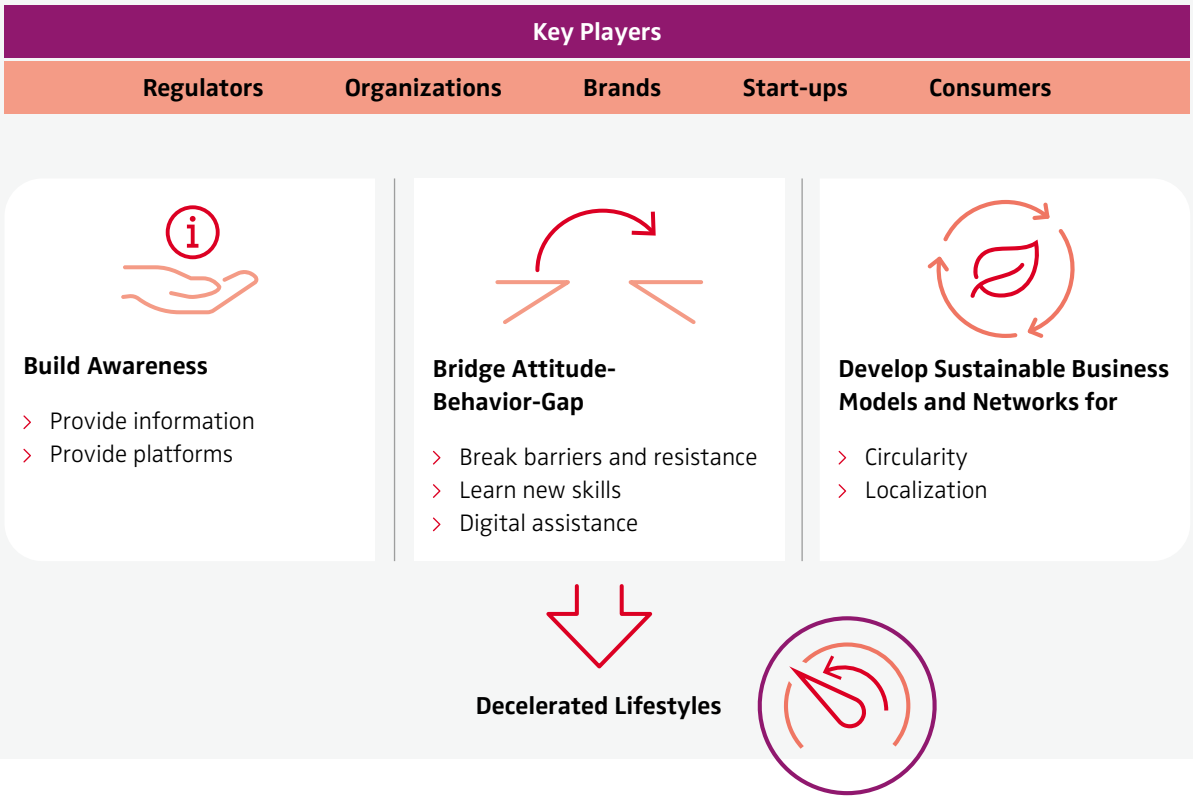
Wear, Care, Repair

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

needs and desires elsewhere, when they should shop much less? Marketing researchers and professionals are already hard at work in answering these questions and in this issue, we have covered some findings: All stakeholders are challenged to jointly raise awareness for sustainability issues of those who do not yet see the need for change. Furthermore, they need to support those who want to change their consumption style in their transition from intentions to actions. And brands and startups will have to shape the supply side to create offers that incorporate new consumption values. With these changes comes the mandate to decelerate lifestyles (Figure 3).

› **Building awareness** ✕ Even if Generation Z is already sensitive concerning the consumption styles of affluent countries, many people still need to learn more about the deeper implication of the dominant consumer culture. In this issue, Kozinets (p. 43) describes how people can use digital platforms to gain more information, but also to become drivers of change and how platform architecture and algorithms can either spur or inhibit consumer action. In another article, Stoltenberg and her coauthors discuss the role of product labels in guiding more ethical consumer choices, demonstrating how important it is to carefully plan what information is included in labels (p. 49).

FIGURE 3 › Pillars for achieving a more sustainable economy



But becoming conscious of the issue is only the first step toward sustainable consumption. Following through and actually changing one's well-established consumption patterns can be a challenging process that needs to be supported.

› **Bridging the attitude-behavior gap** × The various articles in this issue discuss what different stakeholders can do to bridge this attitude-behavior gap. Walker Reczek and her colleagues (p. 25) analyze why consumers' values are not always reflected in their behaviors and present strategies to break such barriers. Beverland (p. 31) identifies identity conflicts that come along with new, sometimes conflicting personal goals and offers strategies to help consumers solve these tensions. Joubert and her colleagues investigate consumer reactions to sustainability regulation – in their case a ban of free plastic bags for shoppers – and suggest guidelines to avoid and overcome resistance (p. 37). Finally, in our interview with consumer researchers Shaw and Duffy we talk about the Save Your Wardrobe App and offer further insights on how more sustainability, more circularity can be achieved in the fashion industry (p. 54). The app helps consumers in building the skills one requires to be a "good consumer." These skills move away from knowing where to find the best deals or exclusive products or keeping up with trends and accumulating experiences. A "good sustainable consumer" will need to understand materials and ingredients and know where to store, how to care for, when to use, and how to fix, preserve, restyle, and reinvent objects and parts. To become sustainable consumers, individuals will need to creatively envision multiple functions for versatile objects.

› **Developing sustainable business models and networks** × Brands, organizations, and startups need to reconsider the vast amounts of resources that are used to develop, produce, and promote ready-made solutions consumers can go without. Such resources can be redirected to support efforts to establish networks and consumer collectives in developing waste-free, tailored solutions to specific needs at the local or individual level. For example, Patagonia, an outdoor clothing brand, created a platform called Patagonia Action Works to

Understanding consumers as users – rather than shoppers – can prompt organizations to reconsider what they can do to create value for consumers.

connect committed individuals to organizations working on environmental issues in the same community. The platform enables anyone to discover and connect with environmental action groups and get involved with the work they do. The brand also offers grants to grassroots environmental activists and has notably withdrawn all its advertising from Facebook since 2020, as part of the #StopHateforProfit campaign.

In fact, organizations need to support consumers in their path to sustainable consumption, or else they will be accused of lagging behind in their share of responsibility. Consumers will not stop at choosing brands that are less damaging – they will search to bring down those that are more damaging. Whereas most brands have already incorporated storylines associated with sustainability, low waste, appropriate ingredients, or appropriate packaging, conscious consumers are aware and avoidant of greenwashing – the deceptive practice of branding a company as environmentally friendly without adopting legitimate sustainable operations. The environment is the cause that Gen Z consumers care the most about, and they are willing to put the effort in making sure that those brands and products that are detrimental to the cause will be stopped. For example, giant online retailer Amazon has been making efforts to connect to younger consumers, but had not managed to resonate with Gen Zers who feel guilty after shopping in the online retailer and are the generation that is the most eager to cut back on their Amazon purchases. Who will offer an alternative immersive online experience that does not involve shopping and ticks all of the sustainability boxes these consumers are looking for?

Decelerating lifestyles If sustainable consumption seems too time-consuming, it is because it is. Lack of time is often cited as a barrier to repairing objects or selecting them more carefully. The implication is that sustainable consumption will also require us to decelerate our lives. Making time for things will help them last longer, as making time for experiences makes them more fulfilling. Hopefully, as individuals adopt this new way of consuming, we will see consumers developing lasting relationships to materials and objects, and these may inspire individuals to better care for their bodies, their homes, their communities, themselves, and others. Finally, sustainable consumers will need to see disposal for what it is – a responsibility – and be supported in devising ways in which objects that are no longer usable can feed back into the planet, ranging from composting to reusing water or growing their own food from seeds that would otherwise be wasted.

Let's face the exciting challenge of reframing consumption Rethinking consumption as use is a radical approach. But radical approaches are needed if we are to find solutions to the climate emergency. Sustainable consumption as use can still fuel the economy – degrowth is not the same as a recession, for it is planned and intentional. Rather than a linear and downward destructive path, a sustainable economy will move in a circular route, in which each new iteration adds value without extracting, producing, and polluting. Value, then, needs to be found in doings rather than things, in searching for social justice rather than cheaper prices, in connecting to nature rather than TikTok, in caring for oneself and others rather than playing status games. Reducing consumption should not be seen as a terrifying outlook, but as an exciting challenge that, once addressed, can bring about the best in society.

FURTHER READING

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Political consumerism won't be the savior of the world, but it need not be condemned either.

Socially Responsible Consumers – A Trojan Horse of Neoliberalism?

Craig Thompson and Ankita Kumar

KEYWORDS
Political Consumerism, Ethical Consumption, Slow Food

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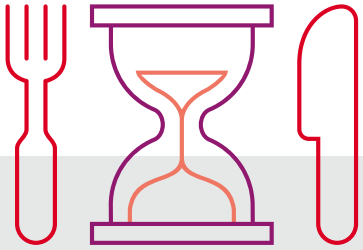
It's your choice, consumer! ⚔ In the discourse around fostering sustainability and social justice, consumers are expected to play a key role: ''Buy local, buy green, buy fair-trade! – it's in your hands to make the world a better place, to combat climate change.'' So-called political consumerism is often presented as a viable means against environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality posed by share-holder-capitalism and carbon-intensive consumer lifestyles. Socially responsible consumers can vote with their money to combat social injustice and ecological threats against profit-seeking transnational giants in the corporate world. The idea is that privatized and voluntary solutions to societal problems by individuals in the role of consumers are preferable to legal, political, and regulatory remedies. However, not all agree that political consumerism will be able to solve our planet's problems.

Political consumerism – Neoliberal colonization of the political field? ⚔ While some theorists see political consumerism as a means to overcome outdated and counterproductive dualities between the public and the private spheres and between citizenship and consumption, others argue that these market-oriented redefinitions of social activism are part of a counterproductive neoliberal colonization of the political field. Rather than delegating the responsibility for more sustainability and fairness to consumers and free market dynamics, politicians should address structural conditions and a fair distribution of wealth beyond consumer responsibilization. Critics further question whether consumers can be sufficiently mobilized by market-based mechanisms to act as risk managers toward socially beneficial ends and to shape the behavior of large corporations.



BOX 1

A study of the Slow-Food Network

Slow Food is a global, grassroots, non-profit, member-supported organization dedicated to preserving and strengthening local food cultures and traditions. It has over 1,000,000 activists across 160 countries. The NGO organizes community-based taste education initiatives, outreach programs, and advocacy campaigns. In 2001, Slow Food petitioned against the EU's ban of the use of raw milk, which is used to make many traditional cheeses. The local chapters enjoy high autonomy with regard to their priorities. They promote eco-gastronomy and support local artisans, farmers, and regional cuisines through communal projects. Slow Food's institutional genesis is commonly traced to Arcigola, an organization supporting regional cuisine, founded in 1977 in Italy by Carlo Petrini and others affiliated with the Italian Communist Party. Though far removed from the radical politics of Italy's leftist vanguard, the receptivity that middle-class American consumers have shown toward Slow Food discourses is also grounded in the cultural legacy of anti-capitalist, back-to-the-land, countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Slow Food®

Network

160
Countries

1,000,000
Activists

10,000
Projects

https://www.slowfood.com/

To understand the actions and motives of its participants and of the role the network plays in fostering alternative ways of food production and consumption, we conducted in-depth interviews with 19 participants of the movement, such as past and present chapter leaders, peripheral and low-income participants, and associated food producers. We also used participant observation at events for one year in a metropolitan area in the midwestern United States. The analysis of the qualitative data followed a hermeneutic approach.

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Not all agree that political consumerism will be able to solve our planet's problems.

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The actually existing neoliberalism in the Slow Food network differs from the dominant and oft-criticized neoliberal order where speed and efficiency reign.

«

The risks of fighting fire with fire ⤫ The following arguments are often brought forward against using market forces against detrimental effects of market forces to tackle current societal challenges.

- **Consumer responsibilization is an excuse for not doing enough on a broader scale** ⤫ Critics fear that delegating corrective action to market forces delays broader regulatory action; public regulation and collective organization are shunned for private and voluntary solutions. Purchasing goods with an ethical aura like organic, local, or fair trade, etc., is not regarded as a sufficient response to the environmental crises and socio-economic inequities but rather as a placating ideology.

- **Consumers are not sufficiently imaginative** ⤫ Buying ethical goods can give consumers the feeling that they are already doing enough in terms of sustainability. It constrains individuals' imaginative capacities to envision a world beyond the prevailing consumerism. The act of purchasing goods that exude an ethical aura can hence be a surrogate for sustained involvement in social causes. For example, rather than mobilizing for stricter water standards, responsibilized political consumers buy bottled water without questioning this act. As a consequence, political consumerism can dissipate the feelings of urgency and guilt that might motivate consumers to engage in extended collective action needed to redress institutionalized inequities and globally scaled ecological problems posed by the transnational, corporatized system of production and distribution.

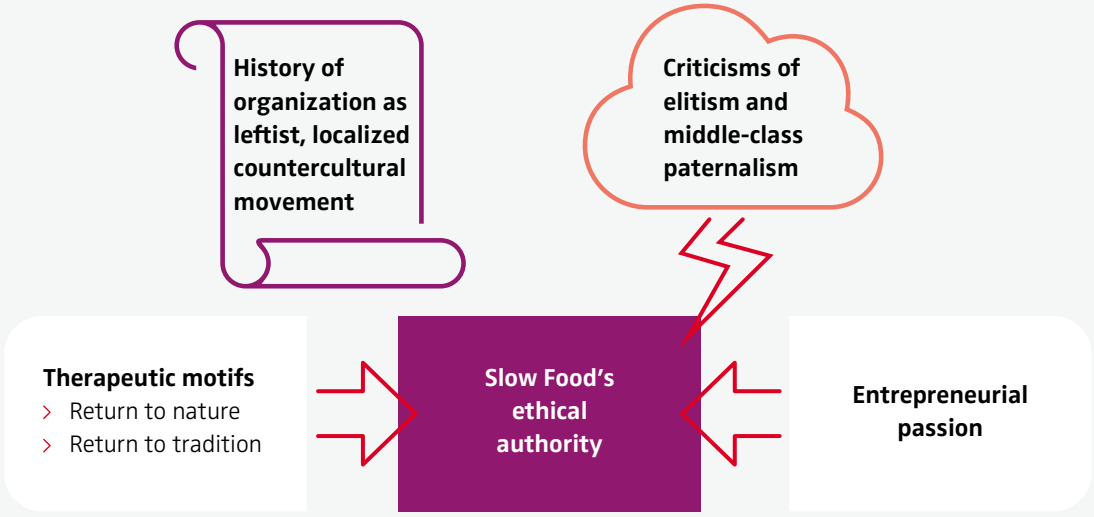
- **Ethical consumption is an elitist concept** ⤫ Typically, fair-trade, organic, or local products are more expensive than conventional products. Therefore, the concept of consumers being in charge and voting with their money has an elitist touch: Only affluent consumers have the luxury of choice. And the potential traction of a concept based on consumer´s self-responsibility is limited in a world that struggles with increasing poverty and uncertain economic stability. Many consumers can simply not afford ethical consumption.

To gain more insights into the role of grassroots consumer movements in ethical consumption, we conducted an in-depth study of the Slow Food network (Box 1).

In search of meanings and roles of Slow Food ⤫ Almost from its inception, Slow Food's ethical authority has been challenged by associations with social elitism, status signaling, and exclusionary taste. These attributions cast doubt on the ethical authority of the Slow Food movement by suggesting it is an ideological justification for pursing self-interested pleasure and signaling social superiority to consumers who favor industrialized fast food. Our participants, however, report and experience alternative narratives and defend and buttress the ethical authority of their Slow Food commitments. In particular, they emphasize therapeutic motives and living out and sharing entrepreneurial passion with others. The activist roots of the organization – opposing corporatized fast food and industrial food production, personified by Carlo Petrini – further infuse Slow Food with countercultural credibility (Figure 1).

- **Therapy against industrialized lifestyles** ⤫ Return to nature and tradition have played a key role in the Slow Food movement from its very beginning. Slow Food activists tend to have nostalgic images of bygone rural lifestyles and traditional foodways that are evocative of a simpler, purer, and more intimate age which has now been displaced by the forces of modernization and industrialization. They seek more enriching and rewarding experiences and the pleasures of living in a simpler, slower time and combine these with a political agenda: more sustainability, the conservation of plant and animal varieties, criticisms of monocrop agriculture and highly processed, fast food diets.

FIGURE 1 › How activists safeguard Slow Food's ethical authority through their beliefs and actions



› **Passionate entrepreneurialism** ✕ Passion and dedication is a further reason to justify the ethical authority of Slow Food practitioners. By cultivating and performing a passion for a given endeavor, Slow Food aficionados not only gain an existential justification for their actions but also understand these endeavors as a calling. Their actions are intrinsically rewarding, rather than being imposed by expectations from mainstream society – as in the case of consumers who are following trends or pursuing status. As passionate entrepreneurs, Slow Food aficionados are continuously seeking to expand their culinary capital. Their aim is not to gain economic or social advantages in a competitive sphere of the status system; they aspire to communal relationships based on the goal of sharing passions. Together, they seek to discover new tastes, flavors, varieties, and cultivation techniques and want to acquire skills to preserve culinary traditions. Passionate entrepreneurialism is often enacted through DIY culinary practices which typically involve the recovery of lost skills like cooking, canning, pickling, gardening, and raising animals and butchering. In so doing, they efface the conventional boundary between producers and consumers. The Slow Food enthusiasts venerate these DIY skills as building a more decentralized food system and affording

» *Political consumerism does not reduce social activism to an individuated process of just choosing the more ethical variant.* «

greater autonomy from both the corporate-controlled marketplace and the culinary status system that associates fine dining with expensive ingredients and gourmet farm-to-table restaurants.

Political consumerism: Neoliberal fantasy or driver of ethical consumption? From our analysis we conclude that market-mediated – aka neoliberal – approaches need not be condemned in the context of political consumerism. The actually existing neoliberalism in the Slow Food network differs from the dominant and oft-criticized neoliberal order where speed and efficiency reign. In the case of Slow Food, its advocates reinforce the ethical authority of their beliefs and actions through a nostalgic appeal to pre-modern traditions and by interpreting their culinary practices as passionate pursuits that can be shared and democratized. The context of this movement does not produce responsibilized consumers, who see themselves as independent actors managing personal risk through self-interested cost-benefit calculations. Rather, it enjoins consumers to cultivate and share skills and knowledge that afford a collective autonomy from the corporate-controlled, industrialized food system.

Also, our study suggests that this form of political consumerism does not reduce social activism to an individuated process of just choosing the more ethical variant among available offers on conventional marketplaces. Slow Food's political consumerist principles overtly contest neoliberalizing demands for increased efficiency. They reject the idea that the market, via mechanisms of price and demand, should be the ultimate adjudicator of societal value. Slow Food enthusiasts use a nostalgic vision of pre-modern traditions to envision an alternative present. Nostalgia and the yearning for an idyllic and seemingly lost past can be – contrary to the views of critics of consumer responsibilization – an important stimulator of radical imagination. Nostalgic memories can provide an understanding of a better attainable world that challenges prevailing systems and ways of acting on a fundamental level.

In conclusion, while political consumerism won't be the savior of our world, it need not be condemned by critics either. It is one of the many pieces in the puzzle of a sustainable society.

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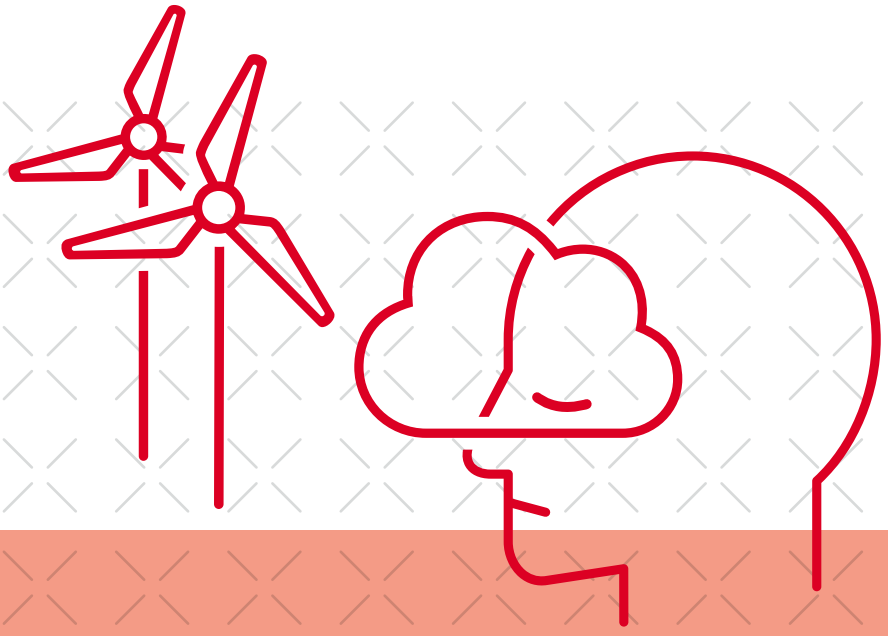

Companies can act against undesirable effects of consumers' tendency to avoid or misremember ethical product information.

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Good Intentions – Thoughtless Buying Decisions: Understanding and Breaking Barriers to Ethical Consumption

Rebecca Walker Reczek, Julie Irwin, and Danny Zane

KEYWORDS

Ethical Products, Ethical Consumption, Fair Labor, Sustainability, Ethical Consumerism, Corporate Social Responsibility

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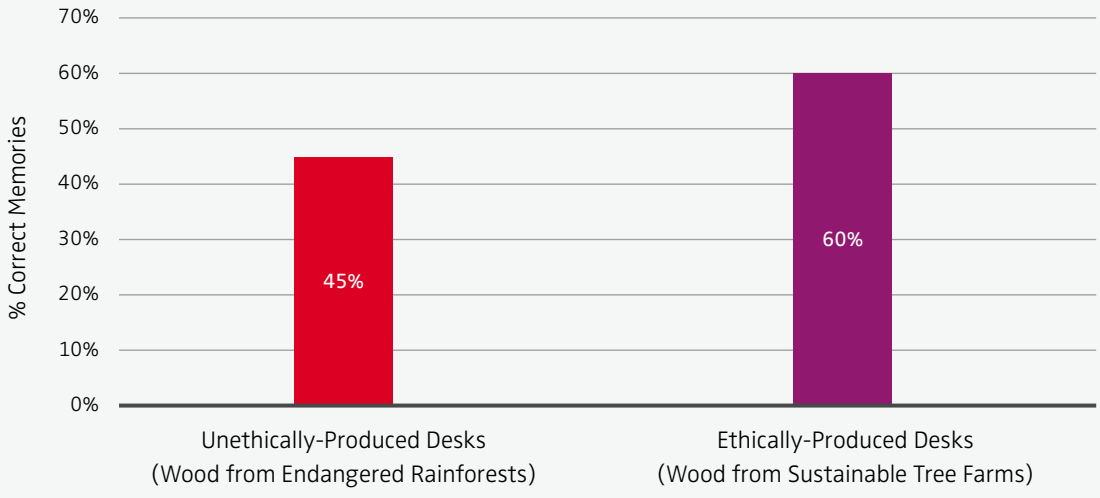
Consumers' purchases often conflict with their ethical values ⨯ Consumers generally don't want to harm others or the environment through their purchases. It would make sense, then, that their shopping behavior should reflect these values. For example, if they like the idea of good labor practices, they should purchase jeans made solely by adult workers paid fair wages. If they desire to reduce environmental waste, they should seek out a backpack made with recycled materials. In reality, actual consumer choices often do not reflect their values. Our research has illuminated some psychological barriers that can stop even well-intentioned consumers from making ethical consumption choices.

Reasons for ethically inconsistent purchase decisions ⨯ When shopping for fun products like jeans, few people take a moment to think about troublesome issues such as children being exploited in factories. Thus, there is an inherent barrier to getting consumers to consider product ethicality. Unfortunately, it is often easy enough to avoid information about ethically-charged, and less pleasant, product features because the information is not readily available. Although it is usually very easy to find facts about non-ethical product attributes such as price, information on a product's ethicality can be tougher to locate. Shoppers often need to purposefully seek out relevant clues, such as by finding a report about a company's ethics. Sometimes it might just be emotionally easier to not seek the information out, even if they might care about it. Consumers use the following coping strategies to maintain a good mood and avoid the emotional difficulty of thinking about ideas such as labor mistreatment or environmental problems.

FIGURE 1 › Memory for product ethicality 15 minutes after exposure to the information

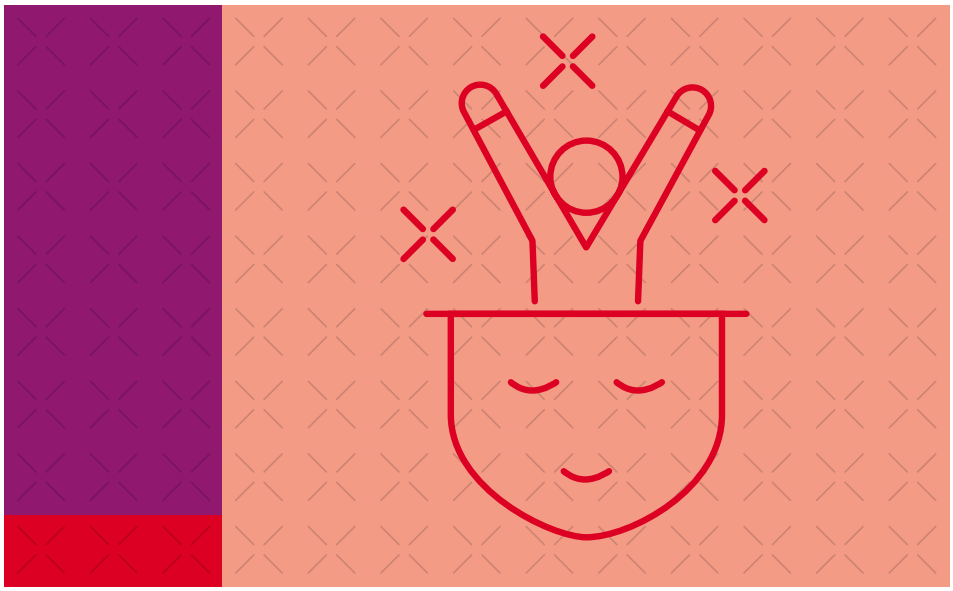


(All respondents correctly memorized the information initially.)

› **Willful ignorance** ✕ Early research in this area showed that consumers often choose to remain willfully ignorant about whether a product has been produced ethically. Consumers might remain ignorant simply because they do not care about ethical issues, but willful ignorance does not reflect a lack of interest. Remarkably, consumers who care the most about an ethical issue are especially likely to avoid relevant information because they have the hardest time coping after learning about unethical aspects of a product's creation. Also, if consumers are provided with the same ethical information they previously avoided, they often use it in their decision making.

› **Motivated forgetting** ✕ Willful ignorance seems easily solved: just present consumers with easily assessable ethical information. Unfortunately, the time at which the information is provided is critical. If it is provided too far in advance of the point-of-purchase, consumers tend to forget which products are ethical. If consumers encounter ethical product information too early, they engage in motivated forgetting, misremembering information about unethical aspects of a product at a much higher rate than other types of product information. For example, in one study, 236 undergraduates correctly memorized information about which of six desk brands were ethically made using sustainably sourced wood and which were unethically made using wood from endangered rainforests. However, only 15 minutes later, they misremembered information about the unethically-produced desks at a significantly higher rate than the ethically-produced desks. They mistook them to be ethically-produced or did not remember where the wood came from at all. People simply forget that a product was made unethically as a coping mechanism to avoid conflicting feelings they would experience if they contemplated buying such a product (Figure 1).

› **Disparaging people who make ethical purchase decisions** ✕ In addition to not seeking ethical information and misremembering it, consumers also negatively judge others who do not remain willfully ignorant. This denigration of more ethical customers occurs because an individual's sense of being a good person is often central to their identity. When a consumer perceives a threat to their own ethicality, they lash out at the source of that threat as a way to recover from it and protect themselves.



An especially concerning finding from our studies is that, after denigrating a more ethical shopper, consumers were less concerned about the ethical issue in question and less likely to take future action in support of it. Specifically, consumers who had denigrated another consumer for choosing to find out which of a set of backpack brands were made with recycled material subsequently reported caring less about the environment and expressed less willingness to sign a ''Think Green'' pledge. More detailed findings of this study are reported in Box 1 and Figure 2.

How to encourage consumers to listen to the better angels of their nature ⨯ Consumers seem remarkably adept at avoiding the negative feelings that thinking about ethical issues can produce. We suspect that they are not necessarily exhibiting these coping strategies on purpose and may not be able to control them. Unfortunately, these coping mechanisms can not only affect the immediate purchase but also initiate a cascade of disheartening downstream effects, including negatively impacting their own perceptions of how much they care about the ethical issues and their judgments of others. So how can companies act against these undesirable short- and long-term effects of consumers' coping strategies?

› **Provide information about ethical product aspects when consumers make their purchase decision** ⨯ We believe the best way to encourage consumers to act in line with their ethical beliefs is to provide ethical attribute information at the point-of-purchase. Providing this information reduces the need for consumers to search for or remember facts about potentially problematic aspects of the product, reducing the possibility of avoidance behaviors. This practice would also reduce consumers' potential

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Consumers use coping strategies to maintain a good mood and avoid the emotional difficulty of thinking about ideas such as labor mistreatment or environmental problems.

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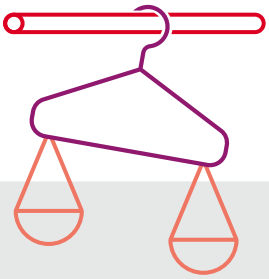


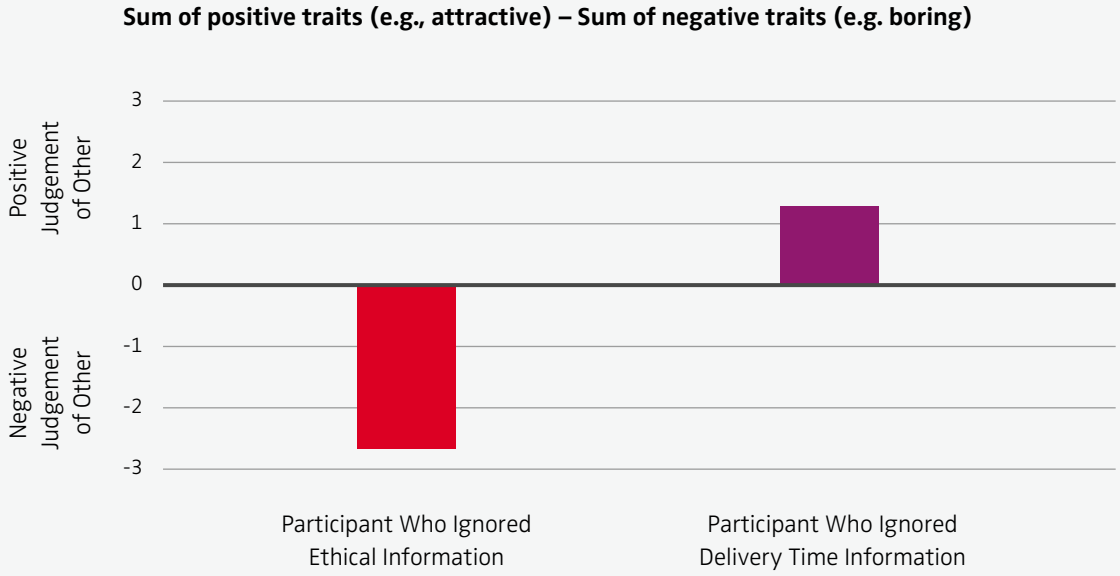
BOX 1

A study of how consumers judge more ethical consumers

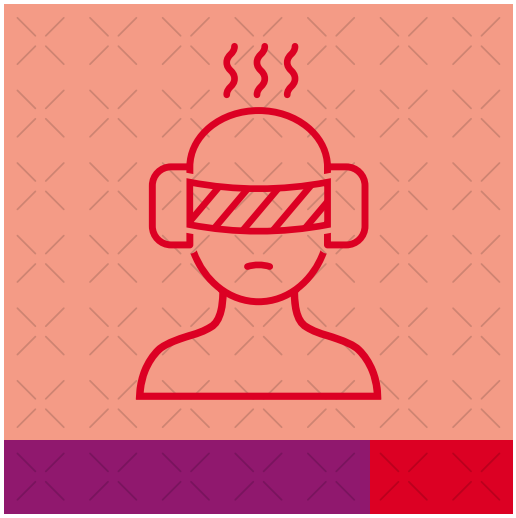
To understand how consumers judge more ethical consumers, we conducted a study in which 147 undergraduates first chose what information they wanted to learn about several pairs of jeans. They were told that, due to time limitations, they could only select two of the available four product attributes to learn about the four brand options. Three of the attributes – style, wash, and price – were the same for all participants and had no tie to ethicality. However, for half of the participants, the fourth attribute was whether the company used child labor. For the other half, who comprised the control condition, the fourth attribute was the product's delivery time, which has less direct ethical implications. Consistent with the willful ignorance effect described above, the majority of participants in the child labor information condition chose not to look at that attribute.

However, our key research question in this project was whether participants who had simply avoided ethical information would denigrate other consumers who had considered ethicality during their choice. To test this possibility, we had all participants provide their opinions about another consumer, ostensibly for market segmentation purposes. If participants had first ignored the labor information, they rated a consumer who did look at this information extremely negatively on a variety of traits, deeming them boring, unfashionable, and even unsexy. If participants had ignored delivery time, though, they did not rate a consumer who paid attention to this non-ethical attribute negatively. In fact, they held positive views of them. Figure 2 shows this effect using the sum of the positive traits (e.g., attractive and sexy) minus the sum of the negative traits (e.g., boring and odd).

FIGURE 2 > How consumers rate other consumers who chose to consider ethical information when they themselves didn't



In addition to not seeking ethical information and misremembering it, consumers also negatively judge others who do not remain willfully ignorant.



to denigrate others who make ethical choices, because it would boost the number of consumers who take ethicality into account when making a purchase in the first place.

› **Reduce consumers' effort to collect ethicality-related information** Although many solutions currently exist to give consumers the power to gather ethical information themselves, they all require a certain degree of effort, which all but the most dedicated consumers may not be willing to expend. Instead, information about product ethicality ideally should be directly served to shoppers in a relatively standardized format, potentially either via industry self-regulation or mandated policy. The implementation of this practice is obviously complicated and may carry political weight. However, until consumers see and understand information that is easy to spot about product ethicality at point-of-purchase, the barriers our research has identified will continue to prevent well-meaning consumers from expressing their moral values via their purchases.

› **Refrain from comparing more and less ethical consumers** Finally, companies producing ethical products also must take steps to ensure their marketing messages do not portray their current customers as more ethical than other consumers. Comparative messaging might lead potential customers to denigrate these existing customers and ultimately distance themselves from the brand, and, worse, from the ethical cause itself.

Summing up, the timing and availability of ethical information are crucial to prevent a vicious cycle. Easily accessible information presented right when consumers are making their purchasing decision should help shoppers express their ethical values in what they buy. If they make ethical decisions themselves, they should feel less compelled to think negatively of other ethical consumers, which should encourage them to continue being ethical consumers in the future.

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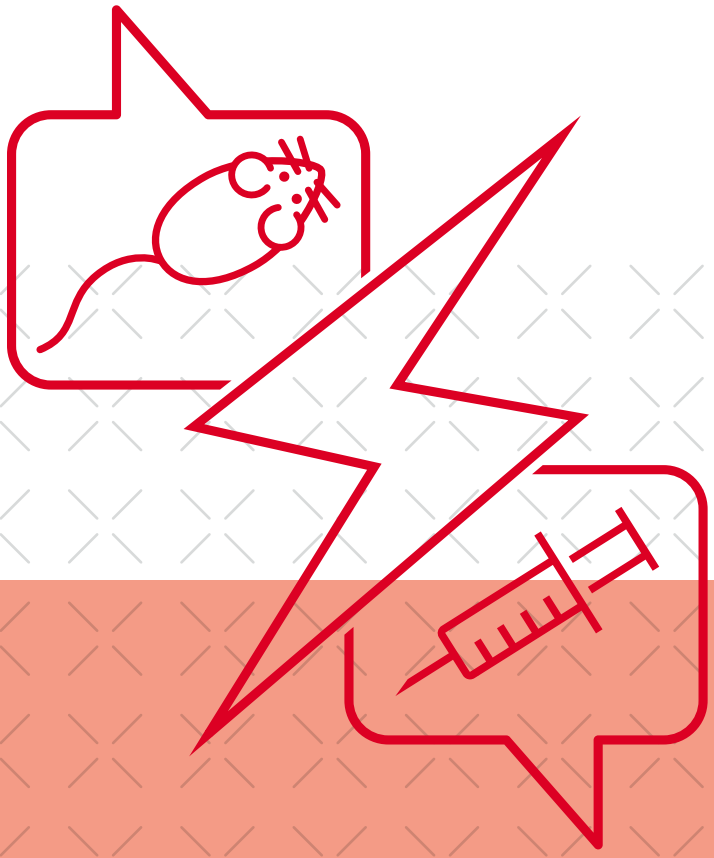

Organizations can apply certain strategies to help consumers overcome identity goal conflicts and act toward specific goals.

Vegans and Vaccines: A Tale of Competing Identity Goals

Michael B. Beverland

KEYWORDS

Identity Consumption, Self-Authentication, Vaccination, COVID-19, Veganism, Goal Conflict

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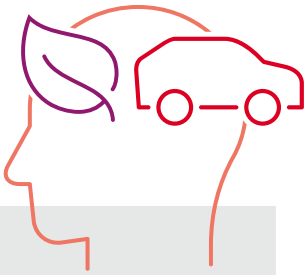
The arrival of COVID-19, new vaccines, and conspiracy theories As COVID-19 shut down economies, ravaged nations, and forced many of us to live more isolated lives, policy makers placed their hopes on the arrival of vaccines. At the same time, conspiracy theories flourished online, suggesting the virus was little more than a hoax, or a variant of the flu, or was the product of various nefarious agents or powers. As vaccines began to roll out, not everyone was happy, with anti-vaccine activists engaging in online misinformation and public protests, identifying a range of imaginary dangers and in some cases, threatening medical staff with violence. Online, advocates of vaccines were quick to ridicule those resisting or rejecting vaccines, while policy makers discussed the possibility of compulsory vaccination, or aired their concerns over such measures as threats to a way of life. Subsequently vaccine passports became a requirement for engagement in many consumption activities.

General motives for resistance against vaccines For those resisting vaccines, the motives were varied, but often involved notions of identity, be it personal self-identity or collective ''we-ness.'' Consumer researchers have long known that consumption choices, including the uptake of vaccines, are motivated by how people see themselves or who they desire to be. However, what happens when consumers are faced with two competing goals? In the context of vaccine uptake, this situation is one many vegans face, particularly those identifying as ethical as opposed to dietary vegans, who seek to remove all exploitation of non-human animals from consumption. Unlike anti-vaccination protestors, many vegans felt torn between their personal beliefs about animal



BOX 1

Consumers' creative ways to deal with identity-goal contradiction

Conscious consumption is rife with tension, conflict, and paradox. As Arlie Hochschild writes in her book Strangers in their Own Land, consumers who express a love of nature may still hunt animals, drive an SUV, and support right-wing political parties who exacerbate damage to the natural environment. To be at ease with themselves, they use several strategies.

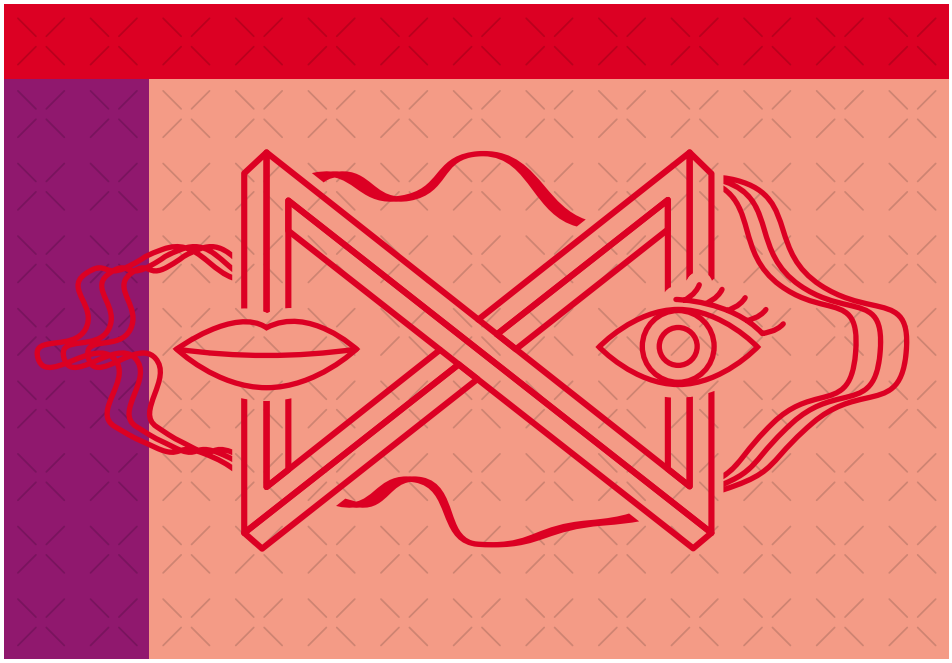
- **Cherry-picking behavior** ⨯ In my own research, I've identified that consumers create their own personal echo chamber, drawing on cues that reinforce their quest for self-authentication while ignoring or pushing back against those that undermine it. What matters is not so much whether consumers are consistent, but whether they are able to continue a felt sense of authenticity that enables them to sustain their identities.

- **Finding ways to compensate inconsistent behaviors** ⨯ In addition to this cherry-picking evidence, consumers can be remarkably creative when faced with contradictions between desired identities. One consumer I interviewed identified how their SUV was essential for their work as a skilled tradesperson (a source of personal pride). At the same time, he was well aware that for a committed environmentalist, this car was problematic. He, therefore, experienced a debt to nature and tried to address it through greener and more sensitive consumption choices elsewhere.

- **Referring to collective ethos to justify individual behavior** ⨯ Dealing with moral greyness is typical for consumers seeking to identify through conscious consumption and choosing between being oneself and fitting in involves more than simply denying the self in favor of the collective and vice versa. Much consumer research on fitting in has examined smaller collectives such as brand communities where fitting in is a function of learning a few simple, universally shared, rules. However, in the national context, the picture is different. Not everyone agrees on what being a "true" member of society represents. Those rejecting vaccines draw on a range of arguments entirely consistent with national identity including freedom, traditions, and protest. For example, New Zealand-based vaccine protesters argue they are following a tradition of skepticism and challenging authority that has long been part of local identity, and indeed is reflected in the image of a suffragette on the nation's $10 banknote for example. This opens up a range of possible appeals to collective identity that can be targeted at different groups of vaccine-hesitant people.

exploitation and their desire to protect themselves and loved ones from COVID-19, as well as act as responsible members of society. Examining how such goal conflicts come about and how they can be managed in the case of vegans vs. vaccines can provide insights into overcoming similar instances of identity-driven tensions and subsequent behavior.

Why vegans are hesitant about vaccines ⨯ First, vaccines typically have to be tested on non-human animals as part of official approval procedures. Since ethical vegans reject the notion that humans have the right to exploit non-human animals, they may reject vaccines at a philosophical level because testing still involves treating non-human animals as objects of use. Second, vaccines often, but not always, contain animal ingredients, including gelatin, lactose, and blood from endangered horseshoe crabs. Although groups such as Animal Aid point out that COVID-19 vaccines are free of such products, ethical vegans may remain concerned about the presence of animal products in vaccines. Third, vegans are not one homogenous group. While many are happy to seek help from the medical sector, others may embrace alternative therapies, engage with conspiracies about medical science and/or government programs, and hold radical views regarding COVID-19 as "nature's revenge" for animal and environmental exploitation, to name just one among many others. All of these can create tensions for vegan consumers



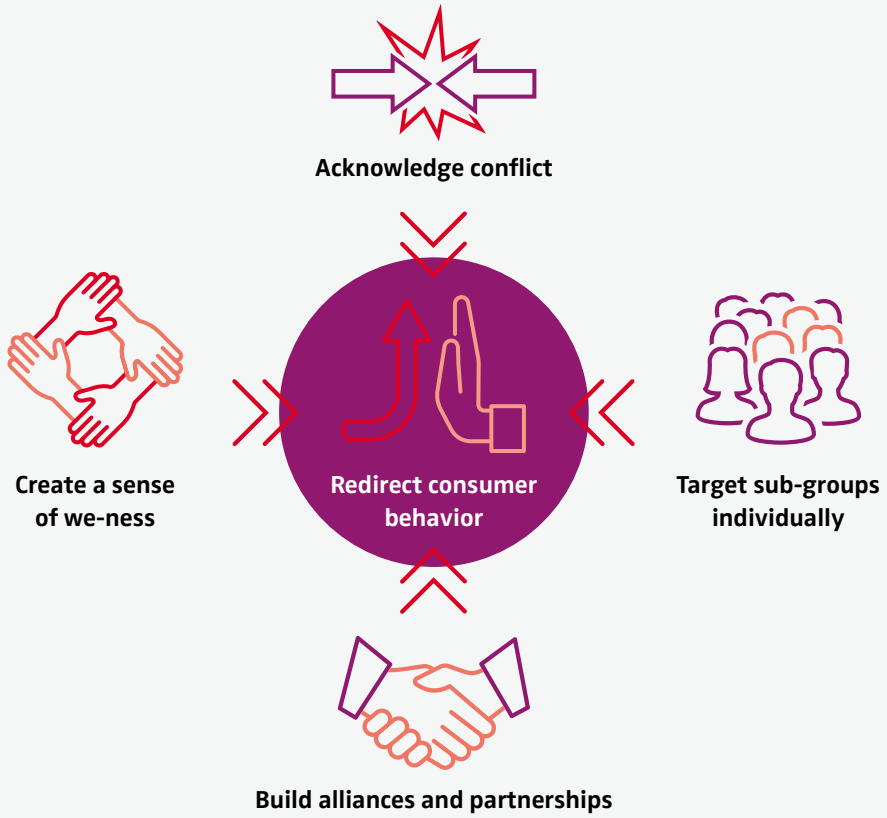
» *Conscious consumption is rife with tension, conflict, and paradox.* «

when faced with the difficult choice to protect themselves and their families, while also being authentic to themselves.

Consumers' desire to consume authentically can be tricky to realize ⨯ Once material needs are taken care of, much consumerism moved to expressions of identity, including a desire to express one's true or authentic self. In the case of conscious consumption, this means our choices reflect our morals. However, while authenticity involves being true to oneself, it is also socially constructed and requires living up to particular norms or expectations of others. Therefore, being authentic involves both being oneself and fitting in.
For ethical vegans, being vaccinated represents a mix of self-protection and collective goals, like protecting one's family, and in identity terms, being a responsible member of society. The dilemma between being true to vegan values and protection gets even more critical, as accessing many of the services that make life worth living may require a vaccine certificate. This represents a more complex scenario than rejecting non-essential consumption involving animal-based protein, by-products such as leather, visiting zoos, and animal-based entertainment.

Strategies to help vegans bridge conflicting identity goals ⨯ Helping vegans solve identity conflicts is critical as vaccine efficacy requires community-level herd immunity.

FIGURE 1 › Strategies to solve identity conflicts and redirect consumer behavior



Given that some anti-vaccination campaigners are co-opting veganism to avoid vaccination, such measures seem even more important. So, how can organizations attempting to promote vaccinations help vegans overcome this conflict? I recommend the following strategies (see also Figure 1).

› **Acknowledge the conflict** ⤫ Philosopher Gary L. Francione did just this when positing a detailed blog on Facebook to his network of followers. Identifying that vaccine use raised genuine moral challenges for vegans, he then went on to distinguish between ethical actions and requirements of life, detailing how one could get vaccinated while also remaining true to vegan ideals. Other animal advocates have done the same, identifying the use of animal products in vaccines, but the importance of getting vaccinated so one can continue to advocate for improved practices and processes in the development of future vaccines.

› **Create a sense of we-ness** ⤫ New Zealand has successfully rallied its population to fight COVID-19 through an appeal to the "team of five million." This phrase was

» *Targeting each sub-group with specific materials will be critical, as will engagement with key insiders.* «

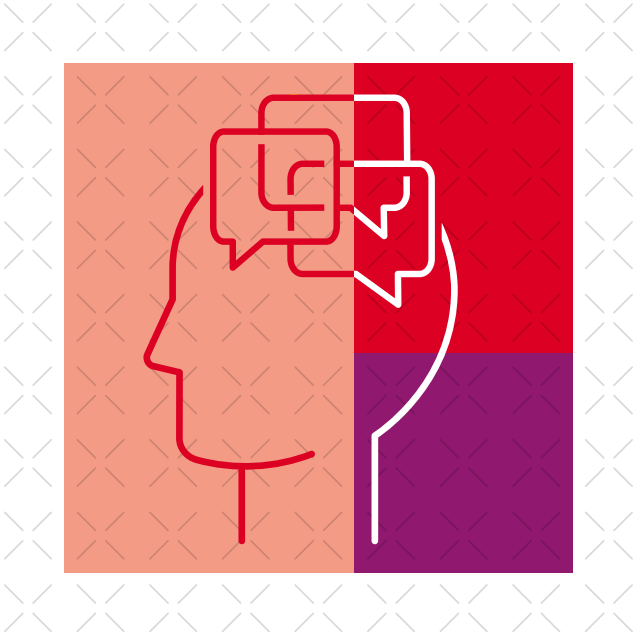
Tensions between individual and collective identity goals are typical of conscious consumption choices.

used to pull Kiwis together so they would comply with restrictions and get vaccinated. The use of the term "team" draws parallels with sports and past practices that helped raise funds for causes, reduce littering, and band together in times of difficulty. Everyday mundane national brands can also play a role. In Australia, bar owners came together to offer a free beer to the vaccinated, while hardware chain Bunnings has developed drive-through vaccination centers at their stores.

- **Pick the low-hanging fruit** Not all self-identified groups are homogenous. However, understanding the relations between them is also critical. Getting dietary vegans to use vaccines in theory should not be difficult, but this group is not always viewed positively by ethical vegans. Each community will have those more minded to hear your message and engage in thought leadership than others. The aforementioned example of Gary L. Francione represents one case of low-hanging fruit – an informed group who are also open to explore the challenges of consuming consciously. Targeting each sub-group or tribe with specific materials will be critical, as will engagement with key insiders.

- **Build partnerships between credible agencies and government** The National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, as an example, has developed a separate web page for vegans, providing details about the vaccines but also linking to statements from groups such as Animal Aid, the Vegan Society, and the Vegetarian Society who support vaccination.

Identity goal conflicts represent a chance to redirect consumer behavior Conscious consumption involves dealing with shades of gray and consumers have become adept at maintaining a sense of authenticity in the face of cries of hypocrisy from moral purists. Tensions between individual and collective identity goals are typical of conscious consumption choices, including decisions to consume sustainably and ethically. Even if an increased emphasis on self-realization is making appeals to the common good more difficult, solving these tensions will be essential. In future, societies dealing with environmental and health-related threats will likely require even more adaptations from consumers that may conflict with personal preferences or traditions.



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Knowing the reasons for consumer resistance against sustainability interventions is necessary in order to ease their introduction.

No More Plastic Bags: Overcoming Consumer Resistance to Sustainability Regulation

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KEYWORDS

Consumer Resistance, Sustainability Intervention, Social Change, Regulation

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Using regulation to encourage sustainable behavior Reports about environmental problems such as polluted oceans, toxic rivers, and extinction of species pop up everywhere. As the challenges of the environmental crisis accelerate, governments are searching for solutions to reduce the negative impact of economic activity that threatens communities, regions, and society as a whole. Regulation is a common response to restrict harmful consumer and corporate behavior. A very popular object of regulation is the plastic bag – almost an icon of marine and terrestrial pollution. By 2018, nearly 130 countries had implemented some form of ban on using disposable plastic bags. Despite their popularity, bans on plastic bags are often met with strong pushback by consumers, retailers, and other members of society. Why do consumers push back against such a seemingly reasonable regulation? And what can be done to reduce such resistance and win consumers over to play along in measures for protecting the environment? Our research on Chile´s nationwide ban of plastic bags in 2019 (see Box 1) enabled us to answer these questions and develop some guidelines for the successful implementation of sustainability interventions.

The challenge of changing social practices Shopping is usually a mundane and routinized activity for people. Shoppers can easily reproduce the existing routines without much effort. In our case, consumers took the availability of plastic bags and their ways of utilizing them for granted and counted on them. Eliminating this element through the plastic bag ban changed the familiar course and caused some resistance and discouragement and delayed the required change of the shopping practice. In this endeavor, three simultaneous change processes take place (Figure 1).

»

Consumers need to understand what the loss of an element means for the shopping routine and develop new meanings for the changing practice.

«

BOX 1

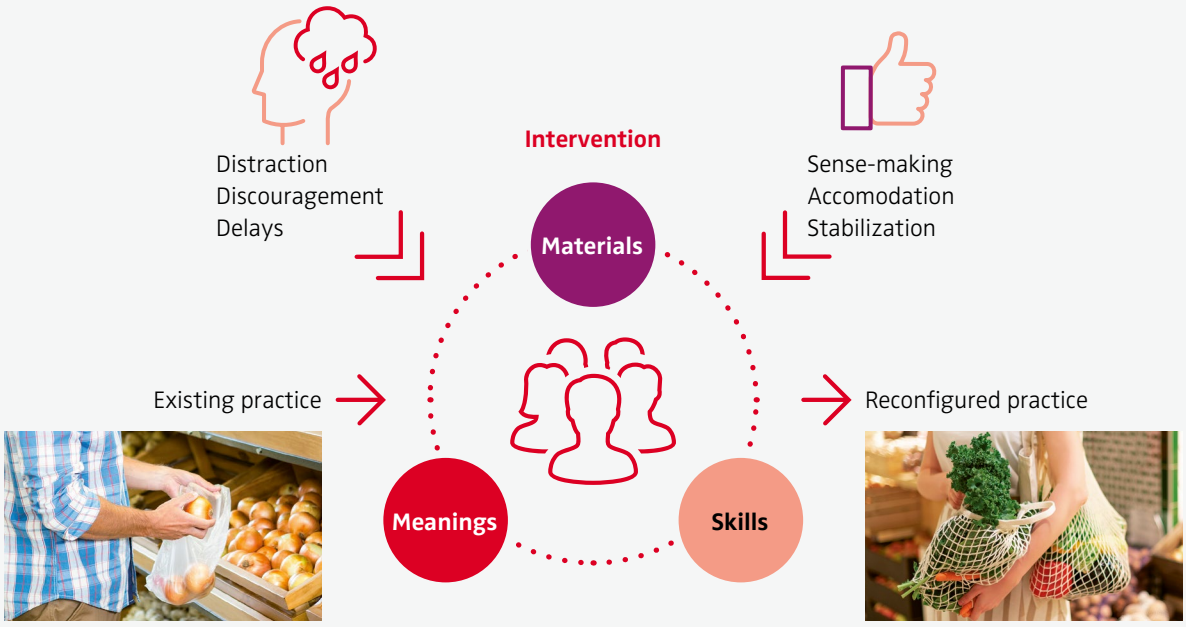
Chile's nationwide ban of disposable plastic bags

Chile was the first South American country to ban the use of plastic bags nationwide. Despite wide citizen support for the ban – a nationwide survey in 2017/18 indicated that 95% of people were in favor – the measure was still met with resistance when it was rolled out. Consumers started complaining and venting on social media and others went as far as assaulting supermarket workers or stealing bags. Why? To find out, we conducted interviews and observations with consumers and checkout assistants, and collected documents, news articles, and social media posts related to the Chilean ban, starting in 2013 until four months after the implementation of the ban in the entire country in June 2019. We analyzed these data focusing specifically on why consumers resist interventions of this kind.

We discovered that consumers refused to accept or support a sustainability intervention because the individual behaviors being targeted – in this case using disposable plastic bags for shopping – are embedded in social practices with their own meanings to consumers. These practices determine people's way of life and, to a large extent, who they are. From this perspective, a behavior such as using a plastic bag to carry groceries is simply a performance of the socially shared, habituated practice of shopping. Therefore, even a minor intervention can cause anger and frustration because, for consumers, there is more at stake than just the loss of a plastic bag. People needed to change their habits and reconfigure their lives around this lost material.

Social practices like shopping can be broken down into three elements: materials – such as the carts and bags; skills – like lifting or loading groceries; and meaning – what people attribute to the practice e.g., convenience, pleasure. The ban essentially eliminated one element – the material – and changed how shoppers viewed the other two – skills and meanings, and even affected related, indirect activities – like packaging and garbage disposal (see center of Figure 1). Consumers needed to accommodate new materials, such as reusable bags of different sizes and weights, and stabilize their new shopping practices. Consumers also found that they were bearing the brunt of the sustainability measure. Some experienced exasperation or shame when they forgot to bring their own bags to the store – causing resistance and slowing down adoption and support for the regulation.

FIGURE 1 › The transformation process of an established practice into a new and changed practice



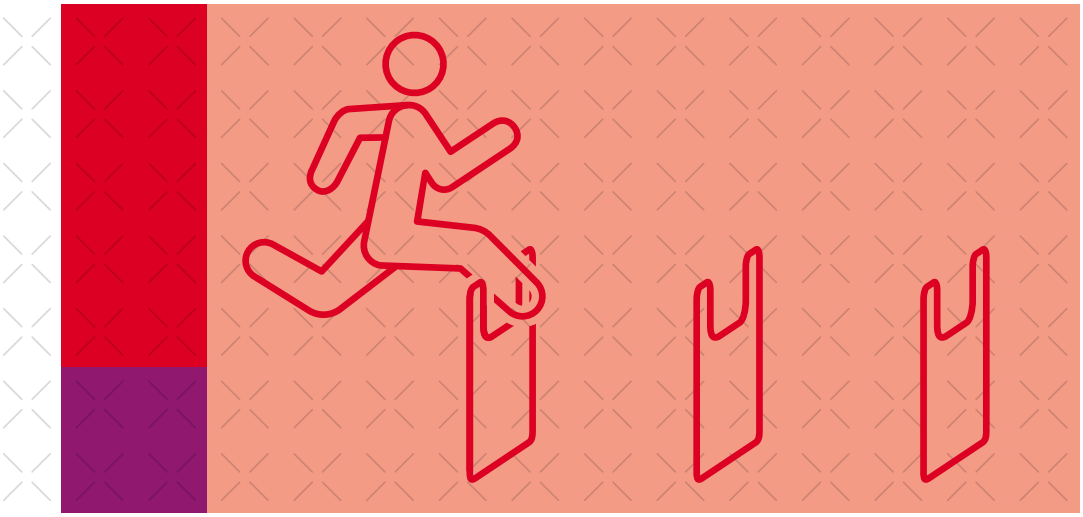
» *Changed practices need to be performed often and efficiently to become a routine.* «

› **Sensemaking** ⤫ Consumers need to understand what the loss of an element means for the shopping routine and develop new meanings for the changing practice. The plastic bag's meaning of being convenient and always available had to be reinterpreted as something harmful to the environment.

› **Accommodating** ⤫ In addition, new skills need to be developed for using and handling alternatives to the plastic bags. Some consumers started to consider alternative materials like hard plastic boxes, others developed the skill of thinking of bringing their own bag. The newly required skills affected the whole shopping process: quickly placing products on the checkout belt, sorting products for a swift checkout, distributing loaded plastic bags in both hands to carry them easily into their cars, unloading purchases at home and to find space to store reusable bags or boxes.

› **Stabilizing** ⤫ Changed practices need to be performed often and efficiently to become a routine. Consumers embody the changed practice with a degree of difficulty and speed: engaging in them disrupted routines, lifestyles, and even consumers' perceptions of themselves.

Hurdles on the way – understanding potential negative reactions ⤫ While some customers find new sense more easily (''this is great for the planet'') and change their habits without much effort, others get distracted, discouraged, and delay acceptance and the reconfiguration of the practice. Three major challenges made the practice change more difficult for consumers and lead to resistance.



Designing interventions that account for hurdles may reduce consumer resistance at the outset.

- **Battles about who is responsible** × Instead of diverting effort to new shopping routines, consumers started pondering on who should be responsible for desired outcomes. Some considered it unfair that they should carry the burden of increasing sustainability and questioned the motives of the supermarkets and manufacturers, assuming mere cost-cutting attempts. They hesitated to change their routines without seeing effort from other actors.

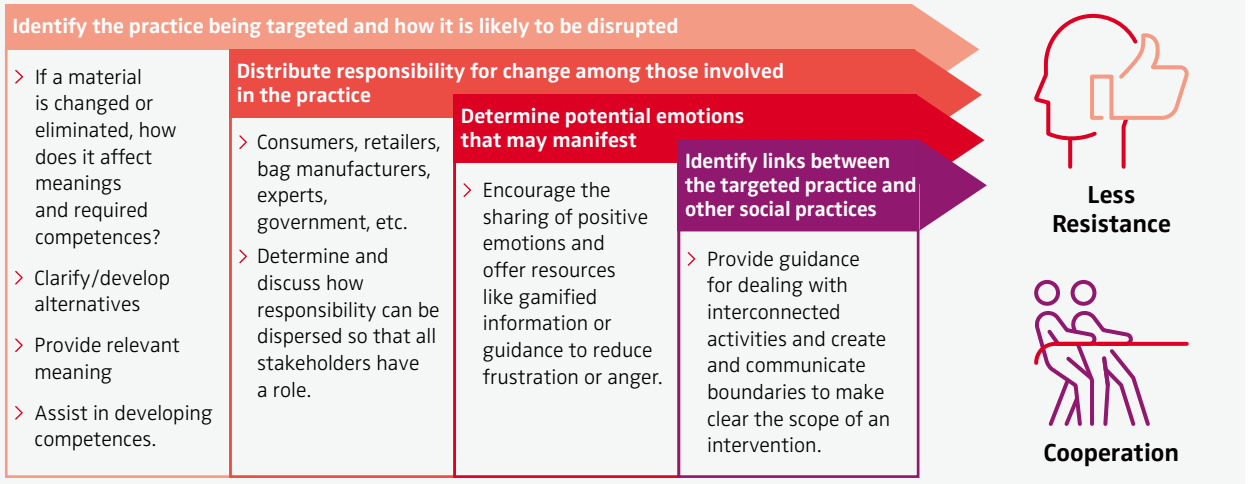
- **Unsettling emotions brought about by the changing practice** × Some shoppers felt no longer completely attuned or "at home" with their previously familiar practices. This led to anxiety and fear. People who forgot to bring their own bags also felt ashamed and guilty and became angry because they were put into this situation.

- **(Un)linking related practices** × Consumers forge new connections or have to break existing ones between shopping and other practices. For example, the ban disrupted the disposal of domestic garbage as free plastic bags were no longer available. On the other hand, consumers forge new links by questioning why other forms of plastic packaging like for fruits and vegetables was not affected or while (much worse) deforestation or coal mines were not sanctioned.

Once these reasons for consumer resistance are known, they provide greater clarity around why consumers will push back against sustainability interventions. Based on our insights we suggest the following steps to reduce resistance against regulatory measures and make them more effective.

How to design and adjust sustainability interventions × Our findings show policy makers and other agents involved in sustainability interventions that changing social practices – not individual behaviors – should be their primary goal. Figure 2 shows how they should proceed to encourage the adoption of sustainability measures. If, like in our case, plastic bags are banned, consumers will expect retailers to provide alternative materials for carrying the purchased goods. At the point of sale, advice for accommodating the change can reduce anger and frustration with the new situation and help consumers feel a sense of pride and satisfaction. If the bags are also used for garbage disposal, alternative solutions should be pointed out. Also, it should be made clear which concrete (though limited) contribution the individual measure can achieve.

FIGURE 2 › Planning and designing practice-based sustainability interventions



Designing interventions that account for the aforementioned hurdles may reduce consumer resistance at the outset. Nevertheless, policymakers must continue monitoring the reconfiguration processes to be able to react in time and make the necessary adjustments to new sources and types of resistance that could emerge. These adjustments should focus on the three key processes in the establishment of new routines.

› **Refocus sense-making** ⤫ If consumers are experiencing tension and lacking focus, intervention efforts should reduce these distractions. For example, to ensure benefits for consumers, retailers might introduce limited-time discounts on eco-friendly garbage bags for shoppers who comply with the new regulation by bringing reusable bags. If this incentive is not financially viable, retailers could consider other ways to encourage adoption, like offering bonuses for early compliance.

› **Encourage accommodation** ⤫ If consumers are avoiding risks and restricting their experimentation during the change process, intervention efforts should focus on the challenges that trigger the discouragement. If consumers are struggling to develop competences due to unsettling emotionality, for example, additional educational programs might be helpful. At the point of sale, instruction banners might acknowledge initial forgetfulness and offer sustainable alternatives for shoppers who left their reusable bags at home.

› **Accelerate stabilization** ⤫ If consumers are grappling with discomfort and don't seem to be able to settle with a new version of the social practice, the focus should be on removing barriers. Traditionally, testimonials and success stories are recommended to foster consumer compliance and willingness to change behavior.

Facilitating more sustainable consumer behavior through regulation is often more complex than expected. One way to reduce consumer resistance to sustainability interventions significantly is shifting the focus from changing individual behavior to changing the required social practices. ⤫

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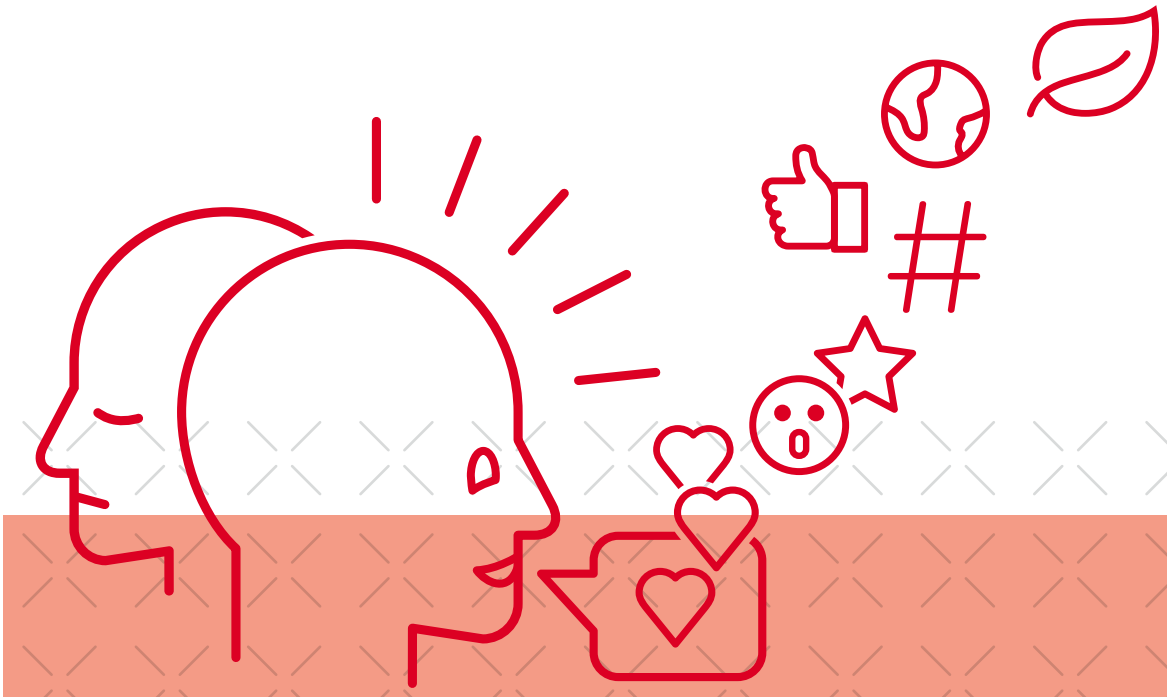
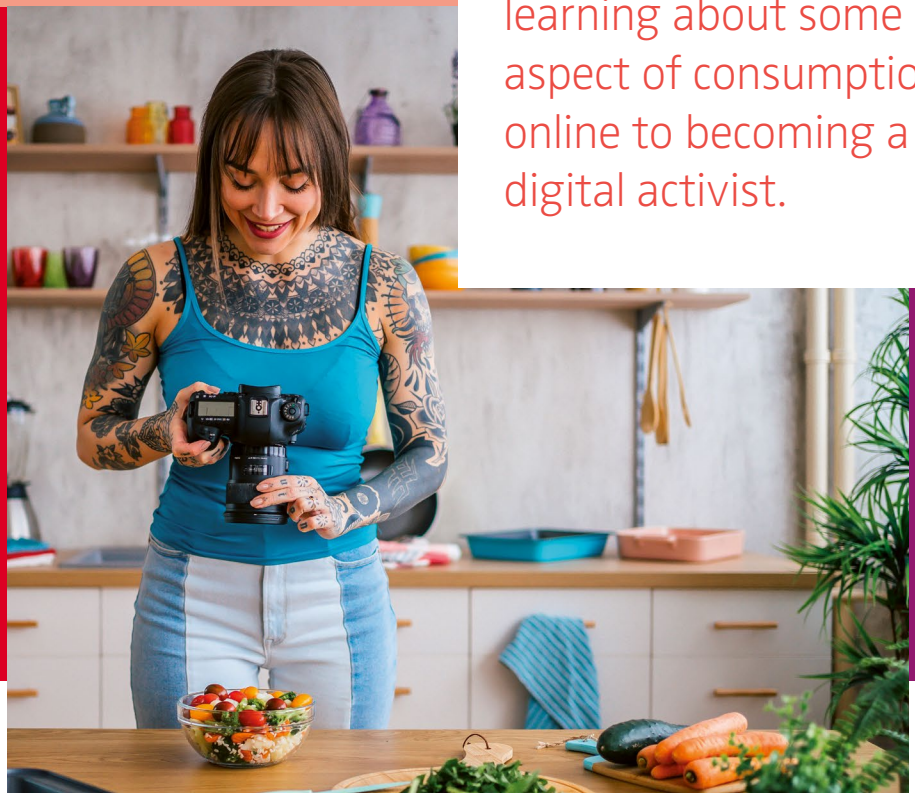


Some people move from learning about some aspect of consumption online to becoming a digital activist.



Clicking Our Way to Conscious Consumption

Robert V. Kozinets

KEYWORDS
Activism, Conscious Consumption, Empowerment, Platforms, Social Media

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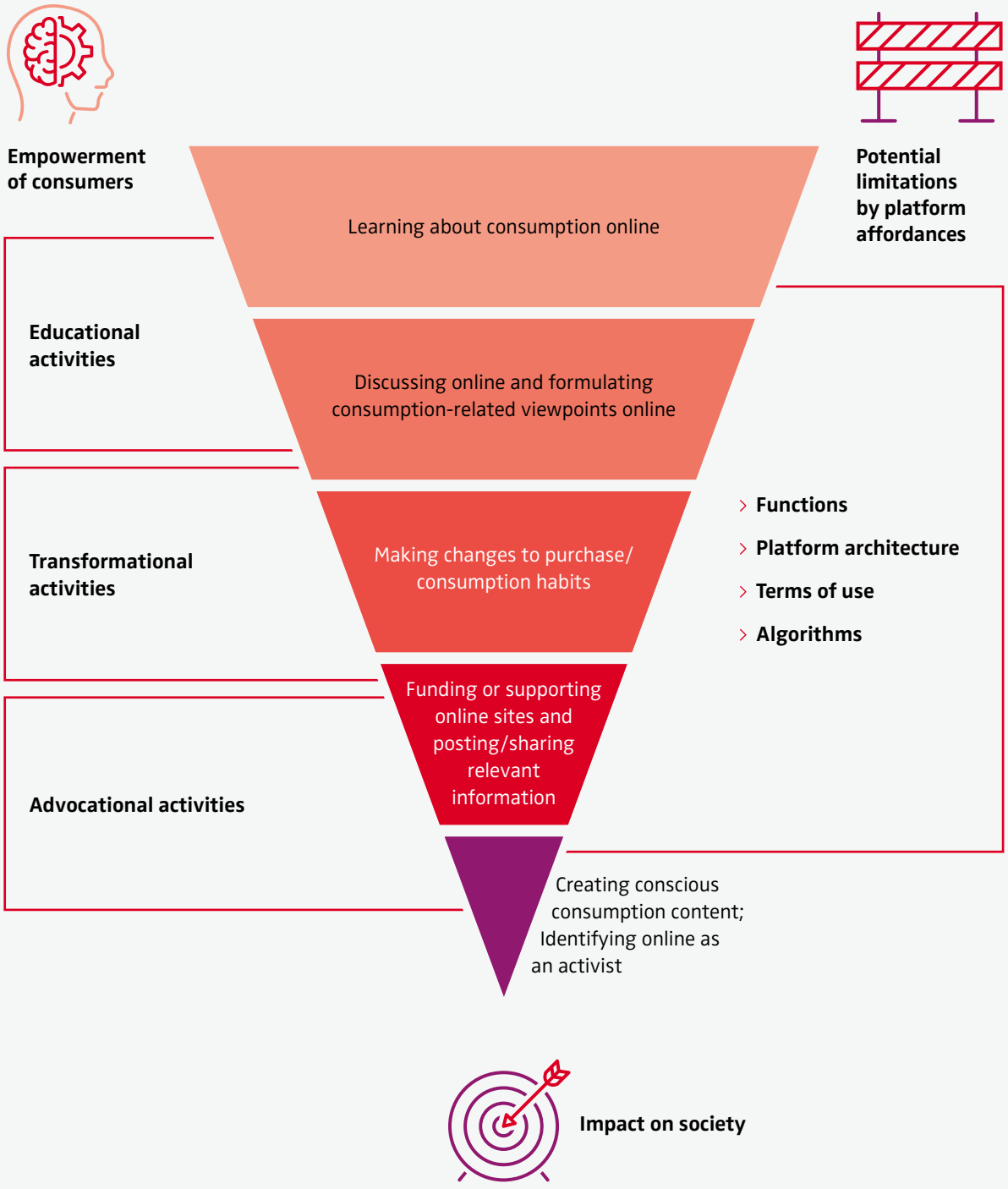
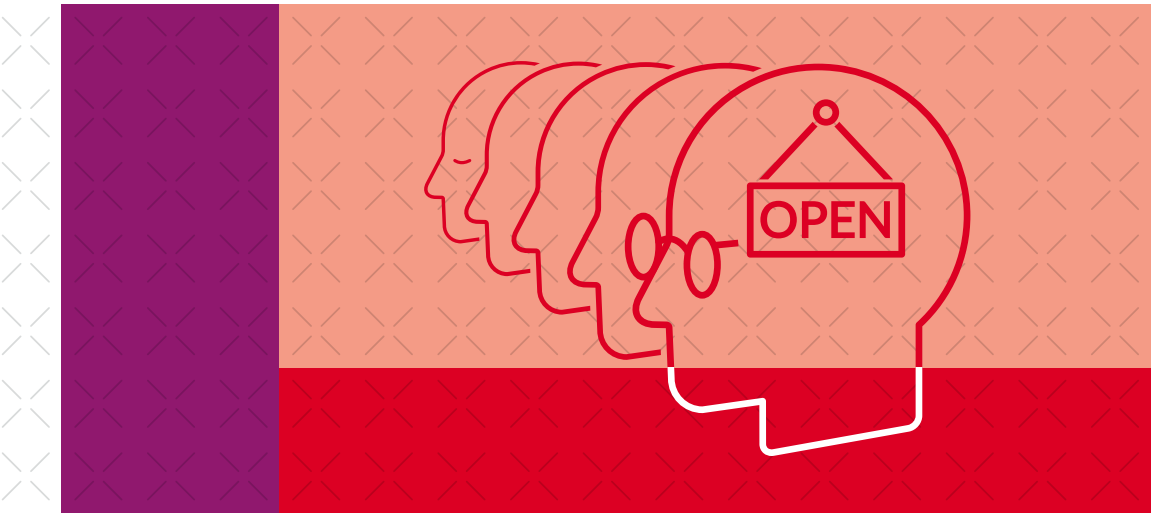
Online Consumer Resistance is almost as old as the internet ⨯ People turning to online platforms to discuss consumption is certainly not a new development. Indeed, it can be traced back to some of the earliest uses of electronic communication over 50 years ago. Already in the 1990s, a wide variety of activities related to conscious consumption happened online. Numerous online communications were dedicated to intentional purchasing, such as exchanges about buycotts and boycotts. These conversations cut across online sites on many topics that might seem unrelated, such as groups dedicated to discussions of sports, music, lifestyles, and politics. In research at that time, we discovered that these consumers wanted to flex their muscles by affecting other people's consumption – they wanted to feel like they could do something to positively affect the world.

Many of the consumers in our studies also saw their online activity as a form of consciousness raising. Online information helped consumers move beyond what online activists considered the pleasant and nonreflective consumption habits of the average person. People we interviewed talked about conscious consumption allowing them to escape ''the robotic buy-sell-buy-sell system,'' the general ''self-enslavement'' to media corporations, and as a type of ''mental hygiene'' that helped them to perceive the world more clearly.

Becoming conscious and active in the network ⨯ What does it mean to say that consumption becomes more conscious – and that this can happen online? Consider that the opposite of being conscious is to be unaware, unintentional, inattentive, or insensitive, or even to be unconscious entirely. Becoming a more conscious consumer does simply mean that you have information about your consumption that you didn't previously possess. It also means that you are sensitized to the importance of acting on that information. It is, in

FIGURE 1 > The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel





effect, a type of awakening. Becoming a conscious, or more conscious, or even an activist consumer means that you go from being unaware and uncaring about some aspect of consumption to being deliberate, emotionally and physically and culturally engaged with it.

The chances of social media to engage others Conscious consumption and consumer resistance are two sides of the same coin. As the people we studied became more aware and engaged, they couldn't help but become a bit more activist. From interviewed activists, we learned how valuable they considered social media in their early awakening. They found Internet webpages and online groups increasingly important as the tools of their trade. Social media platforms made it easier for them to educate and engage other consumers. We discovered a distinct process guiding the use of online resources to become a more conscious consumer. This process evolved through time as social media platforms and practices developed. Not all activities related to conscious consumption lead to activism. But what evolves can be described as going through a funnel-like process.

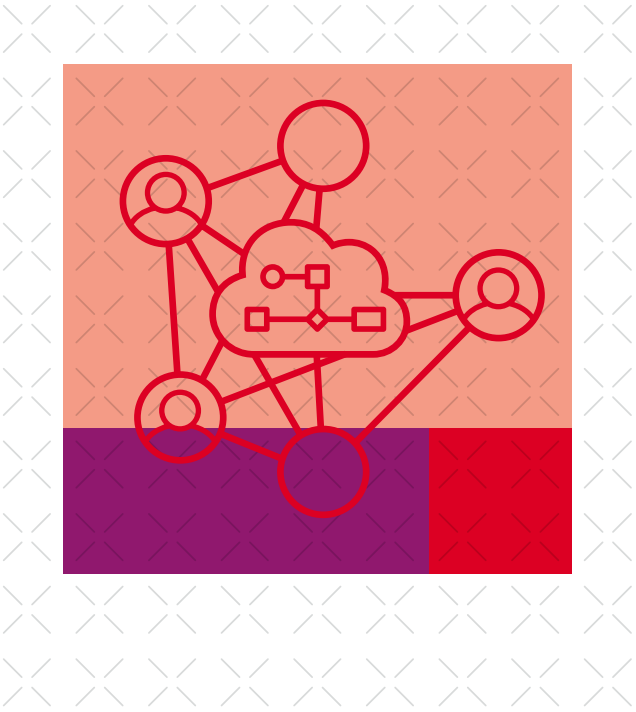
The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel Most marketers are familiar with the classic marketing funnel that illustrates how people are led from awareness to interest, desire, and then purchasing action for a product or brand. The Conscious Consumption to Digital Activism Funnel depicts a similar process of increasing involvement. In this new funnel, people move from learning about some aspect of consumption online to becoming more and more involved in digital activism relating to it. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and others may empower consumers to raise awareness but at the same time they may also restrict their users' abilities to promote a cause.

» *Becoming a conscious, or more conscious, or even an activist consumer means that you go from being unaware and uncaring about some aspect of consumption to being deliberate, emotionally and physically and culturally engaged with it.* «

All platforms with the potential to affect consumers, affect empowerment through their architecture and the functions they offer.

In the original marketing funnel, not everyone who becomes aware of a product ends up moving all the way to the purchase stage. Similarly, in the Conscious Consumption Funnel, not everyone who learns something meaningful about their consumption will act on it or become a digital activist. As the funnel narrows at the bottom, it expresses the idea that smaller and smaller numbers will make it to the next stage. The funnel consists of three main stages of platform-mediated consumer action.

- **Educational activities** ⨯ The initial stage of the funnel is like the awareness stage in the marketing funnel. But rather than referencing a brand or product, it refers to awareness of the links between a particular kind of consumption and some of its social, ethical, or environmental implications. This can happen in surprising locations, such as with Harry Potter fans educating the public about the importance of buying fair trade chocolate.



Not everyone who encounters this information will engage with it. But some might post a question about it. Or they could verify and look up additional information on news sources, webpages, or Wikipedia.

- **Transformational activities** ⨯ A smaller subset of these engaged consumers will transition from educational types of online activities to transformational activities. At this point, the consumption information people learn online ends up affecting them. As a result, they change their purchase or consumption behaviors. Perhaps, after hearing a vlogger, someone who is shopping for fast fashion chooses to buy vintage instead. Their consumption has been transformed, even in a small way, by the information they learned online.

- **Advocational activities** ⨯ In the final, advocational, phases of the funnel, consumers find purpose by passionately and actively supporting causes related to their newfound conscious consumption. Perhaps they donate to help support their favorite investigative journalism site related to the healthy farming of family-based businesses. Or they spread to their social network a story about how a corporate brand abuses its offshore laborers. At this point, they have moved from merely receiving information online to passionately promoting it.

  The consumers become creators of content, or perhaps become influencers who dedicate personal posts to the conscious consumption topic. They may, at this point, identify themselves as activists. Sometimes, they will combine their consumption lifestyle activism with their professional life. An example of an online activist who did such as thing is the YouTube vlogger Monami Frost, who started a vegan restaurant called Frost Burgers.

Platforms enable but also restrict conscious consumption

⨯ Social media offers a powerful way for consumers to educate one another about the moral sphere of their consumption and to support certain behavior. However, platforms, their functions and algorithms also color and influence

the way people learn about consumption. In fact, they can even restrict the kinds of empowerment that consumers might experience. Platforms put fences around conscious consumption and limit potential consumer actions.

- **Functional limits** ⤫ All platforms with the potential to affect consumers, affect empowerment through their architecture and the functions they offer. On Facebook, WeChat, and Twitter, consumers can easily and quite freely discuss issues that matter to them. One consumer can discuss deforestation issues and another one employment inequality. Consumers can enter text and images, teaching people to grow their own food, reuse packaging, attempt zero waste, or use community-supported options. However, this open functionality is not found on all platforms. Many platforms, such as Yelp, TripAdvisor, and Amazon will only allow their users to review something very specific or to rate it on a scale. These platforms are no place for organizing an activist response.

- **Restrictive terms of use** ⤫ Also, reviews or comments may not ever be made public because the platform's terms of use may reserve a right to prohibit or censor specific content. The Brazilian consumer feedback platform "Reclame Aqui" that we studied in detail explicitly forbid conversations about activism and boycott campaigns. Even more importantly, the platform only allowed feedback on the service related to purchased items, not on social or environmental issues that might be involved in their production. There was simply no open way to use the platform for consciousness-raising.

- **Algorithms and economic limits** ⤫ And even major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter allowing a wide arrange of functional possibilities end up limiting discussions in different ways. Unless they are promoted, countercultural discussions are far less likely to appear in people's newsfeeds than the many promoted and sponsored posts from profit-making companies. Therefore, it is more difficult to raise awareness for hard to monetize topics. Platforms are businesses. Their functions and algorithms are not there to help people become more conscious consumers, but to make a profit for their owners by selling data and targeted advertising.

Consumer action abound in the platform age ⤫ Today, social media is filled with people informing and persuading each other about a myriad of topics, including consumption. On Reddit, two million consumers turn to the group r/frugal to discuss ways to purchase and consume more deliberately in their daily lives. On Facebook, pages and clubs with names like "Environmentally Conscious Consumers" and "Conscious Consumers Club" allow consumers to share content with each other about concerns relating to sustainability and mindful consuming.

Conscious consumption related content creators and influencers also abound. Kate Hall is an Instagrammer and online influencer who focuses on ethical fashion and an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Jane Velez-Mitchell started the online news service "Jane Unchained News" to spread information about animal rights, vegan life, and the effect of our food consumption on climate.

Social media presents a vast world of information to help people learn more about the deeper implications of their consumption. The funnel model illustrates how consumers can move through a process of learning or awakening to greater levels of awareness, action, and advocacy. Yet, there can be significant constraints on this consciousness raising. As platforms and social media evolve, so too will the ever-evolving opportunities and challenges that consumers face. Just as consumer groups found ways to voice concerns in the early internet days, there is no doubt that consumers will successfully navigate today's broad and fluid digital landscape. They will continue to use online platforms to learn more about their own consumption. And then some, perhaps many, of them will be moved to promote what they learn online, doing their part to create more conscious, moral, and compassionate consumption. ⤫

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To fully use the potential of product labels, it is important to know and optimize their effect. →

NATURAL PRODUCT

Better Product Labels for Better Consumer Choices

Birgit Stoltenberg, Matthias Unfried, and Vladimir Manewitsch

KEYWORDS
Product Labels, Product Seals, Cognitive Biases, Ethical Consumption

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Ethical consumption is on the rise Sustainable and ethical consumption has become increasingly important and has had a major impact on consumer buying behavior over the last 10 years. For example, sales of organic food in Germany have more than doubled since 2010. On the one hand, this change in behavior is intrinsically motivated, as individuals may enjoy doing something good for others or the environment – economists refer to this phenomenon as the "warm glow effect." On the other hand, consumers are increasingly aware that they can make a difference and change markets through their buying behavior. However, people's needs and preferences are diverse. Conscious consumption can be driven by health-related motives. But it can also be triggered by socio-political, ethical, or environmental considerations. Some consumers specifically seek products or services that are produced in accordance with their subjective values. Others consciously focus on consuming less and limiting purchases to a necessary minimum.

Conscious consumers need a good basis for decision-making But how do people find products or services that best reflect their own values? One way to support consumers in their decision-making is by using product labels or quality seals. Such labels usually highlight certain product characteristics, e.g., whether the product was produced according to ecological principles, and enable consumers to easily identify different qualities. Therefore, they help consumers decide whether products meet their own needs and preferences.

In some cases, product labels and certifications are subject to regulation. There are legal requirements for granting quality labels, especially when their goal is of public interest and consumers are nudged to behave in a certain socially desirable way. Other labels are issued by manufacturers or associations and often aim at highlighting specific or unique product characteristics.

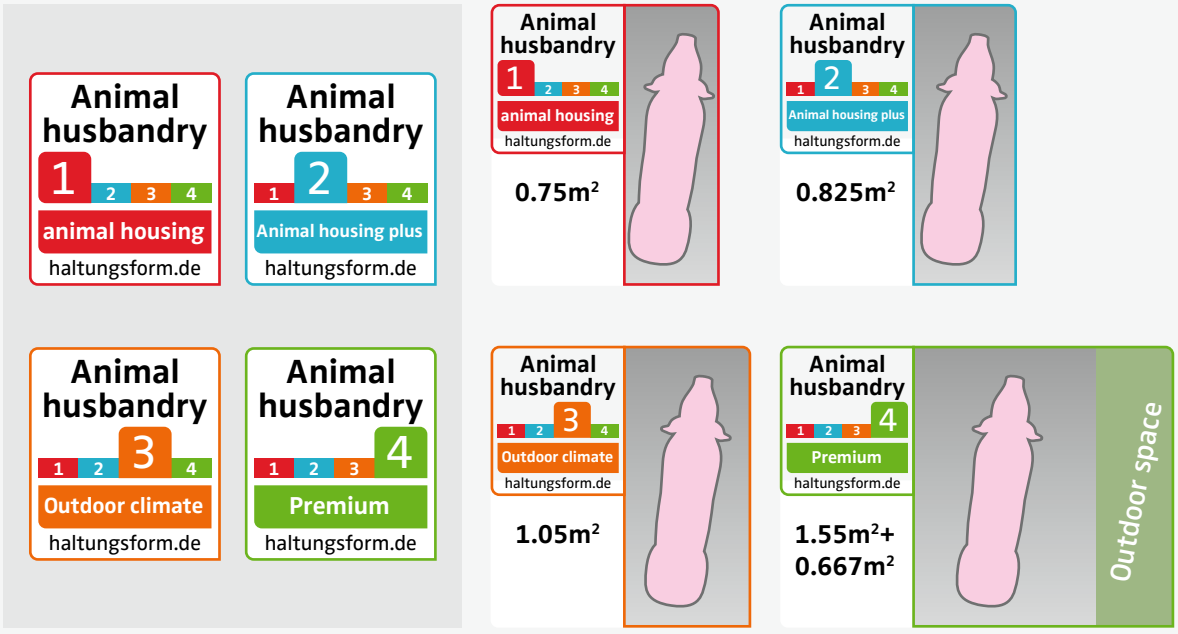
BOX 1

Study on the perception of the German Animal Husbandry Label and a modification

About 400 participants – representative of the adult pork-consuming population in Germany – were recruited for the study. The online survey consisted of a conjoint design plus general questions on purchasing and consumption behavior and on attitudes on ethical and sustainable consumption. The conjoint part focused on preferences for different husbandry conditions in relation to other product attributes such as price, packaging, or origin.

To analyze the perception and influence of the original and the modified label design (see Fig. 1), we randomly formed two groups. The control group evaluated products with the actual German Animal Husbandry Label, the experimental group received an extended version of the label and its four categories. In this modification, in addition to the information on the real label, the available husbandry space per animal in each category was visualized and indicated. Category 1 corresponds to the minimum legal requirements and level 4 to the standards that apply to organic meat production. The other product characteristics were the same for both groups.

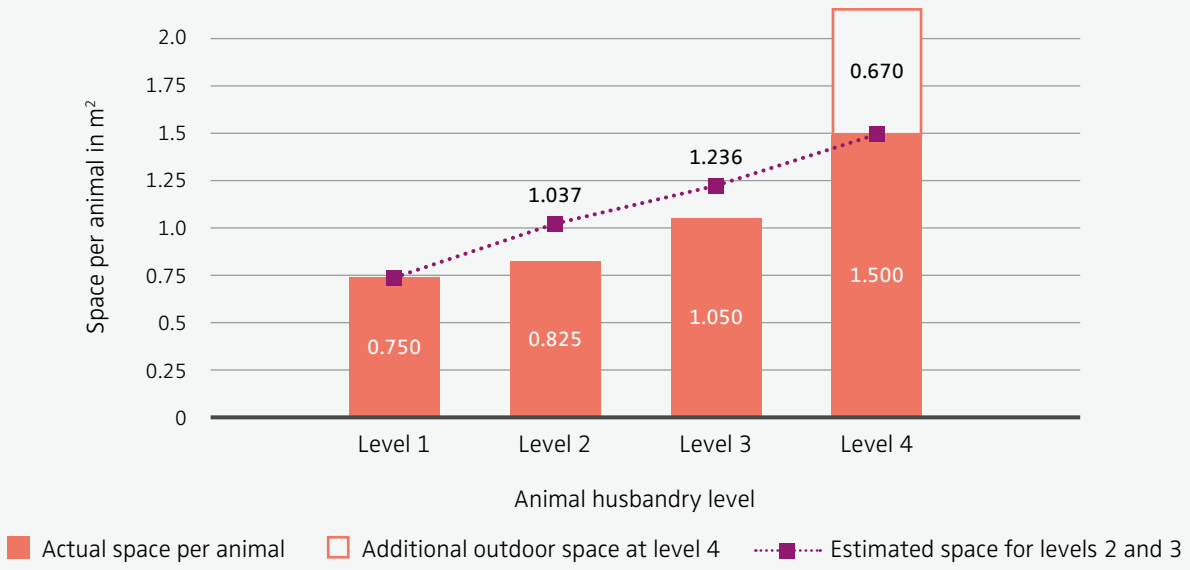
FIGURE 1 › Current German Animal Husbandry Label (left) and extended label with visualization and indication of the available space per animal (right)*



*translated version (Original in German)

- The study confirmed earlier findings that given information scarcity people make their own assumptions.
- In our case, they overestimated the husbandry space per animal in the middle categories compared to the other levels.
- Moreover, the additional information on the modified label prevented this misinterpretation,
- and the willingness to buy products with higher label levels increased with the additional information.

FIGURE 2 > Estimated vs. actual husbandry space of the two middle level categories



Product labels – the amount of information is tricky ⨯ Given that the main function of labels is to highlight product characteristics in a simple and transparent way, designing a label is a big challenge: On the one hand, labels have to be concise and allow for easy orientation; on the other hand, they often have to explain complex criteria and information. If too much information is included in the label, it might become incomprehensible and fail to fulfill its actual purpose. If, on the other hand, its design is too minimalistic and lacks information, relevant content may be missing. In this case, consumers might make their own assumptions. And if these assumptions are wrong, undesirable effects can arise for both consumers and manufacturers.

Label design – up and downsides of categories ⨯ Especially in the case of ethical or sustainable products, labels often use different categories or levels. These indicate, for example, to what extent a product meets certain criteria. Typically, the different levels are marked by letters or numbers, sometimes with a colored background. In the case of the European Energy Efficiency Label, for example, the categories A to E indicate the efficiency of electric devices, while the German Animal Husbandry Label uses the numeric levels 1 to 4 to describe different qualities of animal husbandry. Quality levels enable consumers to classify products, but do not allow for detailed comparisons. Without additional information, consumers often have difficulties in assessing the actual differences between categories, and individuals have to make assumptions – consciously or unconsciously – about the details of a label category.

In a conjoint study (Box 1), we used the German Animal Husbandry Label to investigate how consumers perceive categorical product labels, how this perception influences purchase decisions, and whether additional information on the categories change perceptions and purchase decisions. The German Animal Husbandry Label describes the conditions under which animals are kept using four levels. Level 1, for example, corresponds to the minimum legal spacing requirements, level 4 to the standards that apply to organic meat production. One half of the participants, the control group, was shown the animal husbandry label as it is currently used in retailing. The other half, the experimental group, was exposed to a modified label version with some additional information.

The lack of information on product labels encourages misinterpretation ⨯ To determine which husbandry space participants in the control group expected under information scarcity, we informed them about the minimum standard (level 1) and the legal minimum indoor requirements for organic meat production (level 4) and asked them to estimate the available husbandry space for levels 2 and 3. As Fig. 2 indicates, participants overestimated the husbandry

To ensure that a label works as intended and produces the desired effects, it should be tested in advance.

conditions for levels 2 and 3 and assumed a linear increase in space. In fact, the space increases only slightly in the lower levels and substantially only in level 4.

This misperception is problematic both for consumers and producers. On the one hand, it can favor the overvaluation of certain products and entail suboptimal purchase decisions which do not entirely correspond to consumers' values or preferences. On the other hand, meat producers or labelling authorities could set unplanned and undesired purchase incentives.

With the additional information about the husbandry space per animal, buyers did not have to make assumptions about the standard of the respective label levels and could thus decide according to their actual preferences.

Additional information increases the impact of the husbandry conditions on purchase decisions In both experimental groups, animal husbandry and price proved to be the dominant product attributes. While the price was the most important factor in the group with the original label, it was the animal husbandry condition in the group with the extended label. The additional information therefore changed the relative importance of the product attributes (Fig. 3).

The extended label not only changed the weight of the attributes but also purchasing behavior. Adding information on the available husbandry space led to significantly lower market shares of products with the lower animal husbandry standards of levels 1 and 2 and to a higher demand for products with the highest standards (Fig. 4).

This shift in market share suggests that consumers cannot (fully) decide in line with their preferences when they make wrong assumptions due to a lack of information. With the current label design, they seem to overestimate the hus-

FIGURE 3 › With additional information on the label levels, the husbandry condition becomes the most important product characteristic

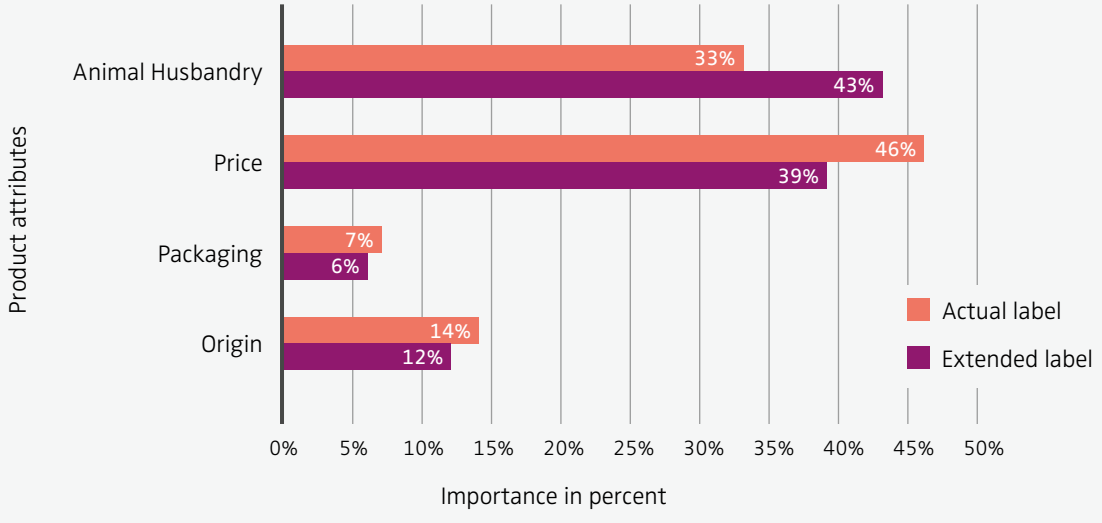
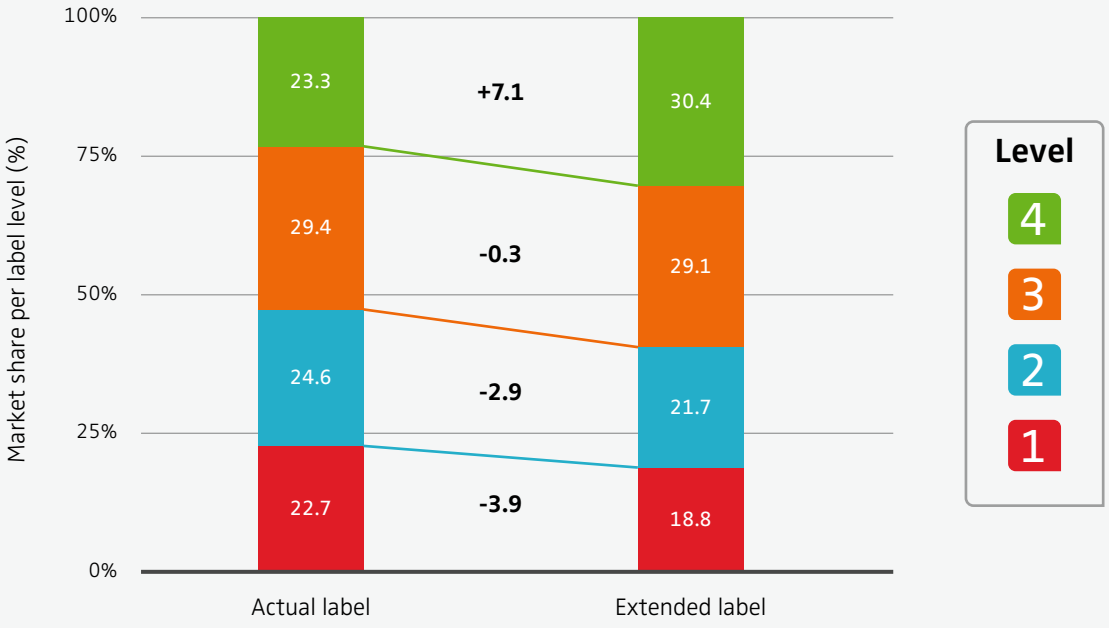


FIGURE 4 > Additional information increases the market share of products with the highest animal husbandry standards



bandry conditions and thus the value of certain products. With the extended information, more participants opted for the products with the highest animal husbandry standards, even if they were more expensive.

Good product labels require a mindful design and tests in advance Producers and marketing managers of products with higher standards should note that using labels with simple categories without additional information can lead to unutilized market potential for higher-quality products. Consumers rated products of lower label levels better than they actually were and bought products that only supposedly met significantly higher standards. A label with simple categories can therefore lead to undesirable consumption effects: less demand or lower willingness to pay for higher-quality variants.

However, this insight also concerns regulators that plan to use product labels to nudge consumer behavior in a certain, socially desirable direction, such as more ethical consumption. If product labels allow for misinterpretations, they can even be counterproductive and miss their point by unintentionally promoting less ethical product variants.

To ensure that a label works as intended and produces the desired effects, it should be tested in advance. Both consumer perception and the resulting choices can be tested in practice. If decision biases are observed, the label can still be modified.

With our study, we were able to show that the design of a label has a direct impact on the assessment of a product and on purchasing behavior. To fully use the potential of product labels, it is important to know and optimize their effect. Ecologically and ethically responsible consumption is increasingly important for many people. Well-designed labels help consumers base their purchasing decisions on these values and make conscious decisions in favor of appropriate products. Ultimately, all involved parties as well as society as a whole can benefit.

Save Your Wardrobe: Supporting Sustainable and Mindful Clothing Consumption

Interview with consumer researchers Deirdre Shaw and Kat Duffy from the University of Glasgow

Consumers love fashion but many also feel guilty about their consumption styles and their often exuberant and short-lived wardrobe. Reports about the social and environmental costs of our clothes concern some consumers and make them rethink their buying behavior. Aspiring to change one's clothing habits and actually doing it are two quite different things. Can digital services and AI help bridge the gap between stated desires and actions? The startup Save Your Wardrobe (SYW) took up the challenge and created an app which provides a digital eco-system to support more sustainable approaches to clothing consumption. They started a fruitful collaboration with consumer researchers Kat Duffy and Deirdre Shaw from Glasgow University to tailor their services to deliver what consumers need to act more sustainably. In this interview, Kat and Deirdre talk about their collaboration with SYW and the consumer insights they gained to improve the app and to support consumers in moving toward a more sustainable approach to fashion.

Daiane ⤫ ***As a start, could you please tell us a little bit about the Save Your Wardrobe (SYW) app?***

Kat ⤫ Sure, it's a digital app which is premised on the idea that the most sustainable clothing is clothing that you already own. It aims to provide a complete view of someone's wardrobe. It helps you think about the items that you have, but also your behaviors and lifestyle around those items. It also has an ecosystem of services attached to it which is very much focused on unlocking clothing longevity through more sustainable behaviors; thinking about aftercare of garments, disposal routes, alterations, repair or donation. It helps you care for a garment; if it no longer fits within the inventory in your wardrobe you can make more responsible conscious choices in terms of what to do with it.

How did you find Save Your Wardrobe and decide to team up?

Deirdre ⤫ In 2018 Kat and I were working on a research project on sustainable clothing consumption. During that year I attended the Copenhagen Fashion Summit where I met Mehdi from Save your Wardrobe. Their mission is around sustainability and mindfulness and this aligned really well

DEIRDRE SHAW →

← KAT DUFFY

ABOUT SAVE YOUR WARDROBE

Save Your Wardrobe is a digital platform and app that helps consumers to use their wardrobe more sustainably and supports extending the lifecycle of fashion products. The startup was cofounded by Hasna Kourda and Mehdi Doghri in 2017. Kourda, now CEO of Save your Wardrobe, was born and raised in Tunisia, where lots of used European clothes end up in landfills, causing serious environmental problems. After moving to the UK, she witnessed how many people handled and disposed of clothes and fashion and came up with the idea of Save Your Wardrobe.

The app offers AI-driven wardrobe recommendations based on a user's lifestyle. Furthermore, the platform offers a curated eco-system of sustainability-enhancing services for clothes like repairs, alteration, donations, and options for reselling pieces no longer needed.

www.saveyourwardrobe.com/

ABOUT OUR INTERVIEW PARTNERS

Deirdre Shaw is Professor of Marketing and Consumer Research and Kat Duffy is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing, both at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow in Scotland.

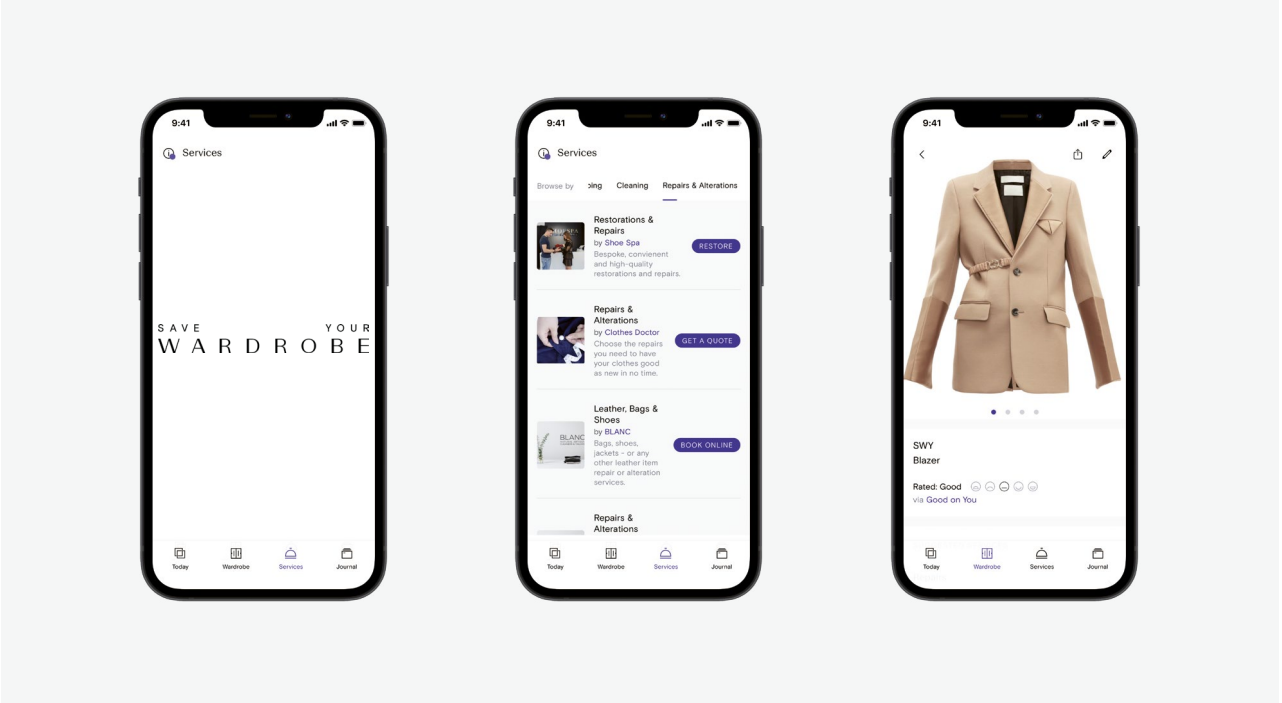
Deirdre has researched the area of consumption ethics throughout her career. Kat's research interests are in consumer culture and include clothing sustainability and circularity as well as the digitalization of consumption. Their research has been published in top tier international marketing journals. On the Save Your Wardrobe project, they have, to date, published two research reports.

Shaw, D. and Duffy, K. (2019): Save Your Wardrobe: Digitalising Sustainable Clothing Consumption. Project Report. University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

Shaw, D. and Duffy, K. (2020): Save Your Wardrobe: Digitalising Sustainable Consumption: Further Insights. Documentation. University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

THE INTERVIEWER

The interview was conducted by Professor Daiane Scaraboto in November 2021.



with the research we were doing. They had a lot of technical knowledge around the app but were less knowledgeable about the consumers and users. That's why our collaboration began, because we could come in to help them understand their users, how they would use the app, what their needs were and aspects like that.

You mentioned that mindfulness was in SYW's mission and that it aligned with your research interests. What is the role of mindfulness in your research and in sustainable fashion consumption?

Deirdre ⚔ The concept of mindfulness was popping up in the industry and H&M, and other mainstream fashion brands were talking about being more mindful. Mindfulness became a hot topic in fashion magazines and blogs, too. Also, in the academic literature it was discussed as a conduit to sustainability. So, we decided to use mindfulness as an anchor when we asked people to engage in more sustainable practices. Becoming sustainable isn't easy and we were really interested in how mindfulness is working in daily routines. We framed mindfulness as going beyond awareness to setting a new intention and to reframing approaches to consumption at a broader level. We found that those people who questioned their consumption of clothing more generally and stepped away from the market to engage in restraint were the most successful in achieving mindful clothing consumption.

And when you learned about SYW, did you get interested in how the app might help consumers to act more mindfully?

Kat ⚔ We know that digital tools can offer assistance to consumers in terms of advice on what to buy or where to buy or what to boycott, so we were interested in whether this would act as a pathway to action for consumers' intentions. People are used to using digital solutions in a mindfulness space to get more headspace and calm. The SYW app uses AI in terms of gaining a more holistic picture of how your clothing behaviors sit within your lifestyle. The premise is that if you can know more about what you're doing with your clothing, you can make more informed, more mindful choices.

So, the app is facilitating those decisions not by lowering the required cognitive effort but by adding information? How does it work?

Deirdre ⚔ Starting with the app is quite labor intensive because you have to upload your wardrobe. We wondered whether this would be a barrier to people, but actually we found the opposite. Through uploading their wardrobes, people engaged further with their clothing. They realize what they don't wear anymore and start making decisions about a piece: Perhaps that's something to pass on, or is it

It has an ecosystem of services attached to it which is very much focused on unlocking clothing longevity through more sustainable behaviors.

an item that needs to be repaired? So, using the app was a burden in terms of engaging in this process but at the same time there were many benefits.

It's like transferring a mental load onto the app, right? The app keeps the knowledge for you and you don't have to constantly think about everything?

Kat ✕ Right. Participants talked about how the app enabled them to almost shop their existing wardrobe again because they were able to reframe what they already owned. They could see it digitally, whereas perhaps due to space constraints, they just didn't have their eyes on many pieces. Also, more information led to people feeling empowered to make better choices.

Did you come across other apps or websites that could help consumers become more conscious and mindful of their fashion consumption?

Kat ✕ The SYW app is linked with a whole ecosystem of digital services. One of those is ''Good on You'' which provides sustainability ratings for many of the familiar high street brands. Consumers found this useful to underpin their thinking around brands because many were aware of greenwashing and felt almost paralyzed about what information they should trust and embed in their choices. SYW is also really focused on education and supporting consumers through their blogs, through social media and webinars. Most important, they focus on raising awareness of repair and care and the skill sets that might have been lost across generations. They help their users to overcome skill gaps that become relevant again now that we're moving to more circular principles in terms of our clothing.

Does the app have any collective aspect or community angle to it? Or is it essentially individuals working on their own?

Deirdre ✕ The app is an individual inventory of what people own and it's reflective of individual behaviors, but there's a constant discussion about the role of community. It is not yet embedded in the app but there's potential for the future. Some of our participants said, for instance, that they would like to compare their behaviors with other people's behaviors. Also, in our last wave of research opportunities for more activism were discussed. There were others who wanted to open up their wardrobe for sharing, through some sort of sharing system. So, I think, community is something the app is constantly working toward.

Let's now talk about the pandemic. Did the COVID crisis change consumers' view on fashion consumption?

Deirdre ✕ The pandemic highlighted some of the worst aspects of clothing production and consumption behavior. We saw all kinds of non-payments of factories in Bangladesh by some brands. In the UK, we had the exposés of the Leicester factories in terms of how workers had been treated but also ignoring the virus in those factories. Despite all of that media coverage, we saw an increase in online shopping of fast fashion, and the associated impacts that come from transportation there, then transportation back of what did not fit. There were also reports that some retailers don't resell those returned items, with additional associated waste coming from that.

How have the lockdowns that we've all been through shaped how consumers relate to their wardrobes?

Deirdre ✕ The lockdowns were an opportunity to stop and consciously reflect on what they had been doing before. Through engaging with the app, people started to become more conscious of the clothes they were wearing. It was almost like a permission to reboot while all the other damaging things happened in the fashion industry. The lockdowns definitely gave people the opportunity to realize that they were part of the problem and this was quite uncomfortable.

» *The SYW app uses AI in terms of gaining a more holistic picture of how your clothing behaviors sit within your lifestyle.* «

Do you think these positive intentions and habits will remain when people resume a faster pace of life in the post-pandemic world?

Kat ⨯ I am not sure, but we are collecting additional data to explore whether and which new practices become embedded longer term. There was quite a bit of enthusiasm for the app to make recommendations about more sustainable brands. But that's not really sustainability in clothing. That's just another market on top of existing primary markets and that's not what the app is about. It is about connecting with what you already have, it's about clothing longevity, helping to maintain and care and repair that clothing and to pass it on afterwards. For fashion to become really sustainable, there has to be a seismic shift within the fashion industry. We need concerted effort in terms of reduction of consumption, not just a modification.

Who is responsible for this shift? Consumers?

Deirdre ⨯ I don't think it's fair to responsibilize consumers but also we can't deresponsibilize them. It's important to think about the fashion industry as a multi-pronged environment with different actors, each of whom have roles and responsibilities, including the consumer. To rely on any one in isolation is not going to drive the whole agenda forward. Business and policy need to help the consumer in doing the right thing, and we're not going to see the dismantling of a linear model without policy intervention like extended producer responsibility or carbon taxing and other elements.

What do your respondents think about consumers being responsibilized? Are some of them pushing back?

Deirdre ⨯ Interestingly, we did not find that consumers felt responsibilized. Their interest was how they could enjoy their clothing in a more meaningful and responsible way. The challenge here is the lack of clear paths to action. Those people who want to do the right thing are challenged by the lack of an infrastructure to support doing the right thing in an easy, convenient, and affordable way. If I want to recycle my clothing, it's really difficult to know if it is actually going to be recycled. Where do I take it to? How am I supposed to bag it up and put it into the recycling? If I want to repair items, it's generally quite expensive. It's maybe not that accessible.

How does the SYW app make repairs, for instance, more accessible?

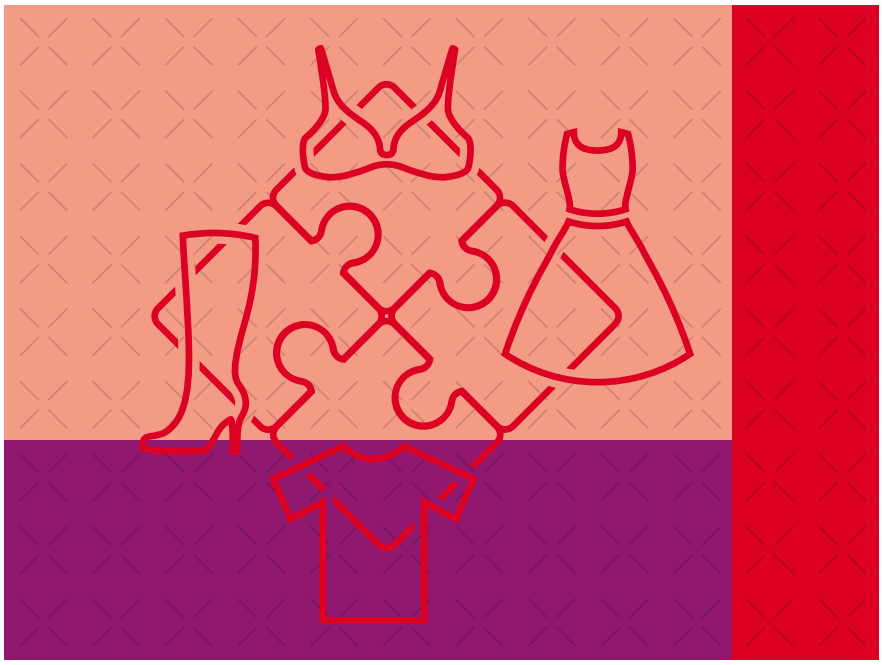
Kat ⨯ They have built on the ecosystem that already exists in local economies with family-run businesses who offer repair and mending but as an industry have been quite slow to digitalize. So they act as a facilitator because you can gain an understanding of how much a repair is going to cost you, and what's the time frame for it to be returned to you. I think this is key: Circularity needs to be convenient, readily available, and simple to access. Being able to do all these things from your phone is a huge bonus.

And the app does that at a local level? If I input my location, can I get recommendations?

Kat ⨯ At the moment the app is quite London-centric with the ambition to roll out. Also, they have teamed up with the German ecommerce platform Zalando and they are trialing how offering and embedding aftercare in the local infrastructure works in Berlin and in Dusseldorf.

Maybe even more than repairs, reselling has become a hot topic. Recent research suggests that some people perceive the value they get from their reselling of clothes as windfall money to buy more new clothes. Is this really helping a sustainability agenda?

Kat ⨯ There are useful aspects of reselling because it empowers consumers to adopt more circular practices but it is problematic if they continue to consume at the same level. It's great to see a destigmatization of second hand and that it's no longer frowned upon but actually lauded. But how it works in terms of more sustainable values needs to be probed. If it just keeps the same speed going and you just resell the item if you've been photographed on Instagram and then use that money to buy something new again it keeps the cycle perpetuating.



Through engaging with the app, people started to become more conscious of the clothes they were wearing.

So, ultimately, is it a question of mindset, of slowing down? Have you seen approaches for sustained change that brands could support and encourage, not only in consumers but in the industry as a whole?

Deirdre We need to reduce, not modify consumption. We need to help consumers increase the longevity of clothing. The brands need to produce items that can have a longer life in the first place and then they need to offer the services that facilitate longer use. This is already happening with brands like Patagonia but it needs to become more mainstream. It must get easier for consumers to connect with services that they need and that's exactly what SYW is trying to do: to provide a supportive infrastructure where people can connect within their local communities, where they can pop out to a repair or mending shop because you need to have that accessible and convenient to you. Change needs to come, it needs to come urgently and it has to be about reduction.

This is a great concluding statement. Thank you so much for the interview. Your cooperation with SYW is amazing. It's great to see you understanding what consumers actually do rather than what they say they do and how this helps to make the change we need in the fashion industry happen.

Editors

ABOUT DAIANE SCARABOTO

Dr. Daiane Scaraboto is Associate Professor in Marketing at the Faculty of Business and Economics at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Her research challenges taken-for-granted understandings of markets such as the notions of value and exchange by examining how consumers cocreate and instigate market change and creatively resist marketing practices. Her work is published in the Journal of Marketing and Journal of Consumer Research, among other outlets. Recently, she has investigated the reasons why consumers resist sustainability interventions and the creative ways in which consumers solve their needs without recurring to the marketplace, such as through upcycling and repairing objects.

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PUBLISHER

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(Nuremberg Institute for Market Decisions)
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The NIM Marketing Intelligence Review (formerly GfK Marketing Intelligence Review) is a marketing journal directed at managers and decision-makers who are interested in new insights and methods of academic marketing research and marketing decision-making. It is published biannually.

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GRAPHICAL REALIZATION
DESIGNBÜRO, Stephan Hasselbauer

PRINT
Druckhaus Haspel Erlangen e. K.

SUBSCRIPTIONS
75 € per annum

ISSN 1865-5866

ONLINE VERSIONS
www.nim.org/mir

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