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Constructing Sustainability

*Consumer Roles and Contributions in Shaping Ethical Consumption
within Online Communities*

by

Rebekka Hnikarrsdóttir & Ymke de Wit

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Supervisor: Annette Cerne
Examiner: Tommy Shih

Abstract

Title: Constructing Sustainability: Consumer Roles and Contributions in Shaping Ethical Consumption within Online Communities.

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Authors: Rebekka Hnikarrsdóttir & Ymke de Wit

Key words: Ethical consumption gap, Governmentality, Identity, Cultural Capital, Responsibilization and retailers.

Purpose: This study aims to explore the complexities of ethical consumption and identify the factors shaping consumers' sustainability decisions through online discussions. It seeks to understand how consumers articulate concerns, analyzing topics like the ethical consumption gap, governmentality, responsibilization etc. The research aims to drive positive change in both individual behaviors and societal attitudes towards sustainability.

Methodology: This research employs netnography, a qualitative method, from a critical realist perspective with an abductive approach. Additionally, critical discourse analysis, facilitated by the Nvivo system, is utilized to analyze the findings.

Conclusions: The conclusion of the research, based on consumers sharing their thoughts online and demonstrating sustainable practices, reveals that they advocate for balancing individual efforts with collective action. They recognize the need for lifestyle changes, corporate accountability, and government regulations. Furthermore, they argue that systemic change is needed and suggest leading by example as one way to achieve it.

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1. Introduction

Imagine feeling overwhelmed by all the advice you are hearing from people about how to live a more sustainable life. It is tough to figure out the best path because you want to be more eco-friendly but do not want to completely change your lifestyle. Plus, there is the worry that sustainability might come with a higher price tag. Even though you are eager to do your part, the large number of options, with their pros and cons, leaves you feeling confused. Therefore, you turn to online communities for support, where people share their sustainable living experiences (Ripamonti et al. 2005). As you read through the comments, you discover practical ways to live sustainably that do not require a complete overhaul of your life. This lifts your spirits and makes you excited to continue your journey toward sustainability. In this research, we will explore the complexities of ethical consumption, examining what contributes to the challenges and their impact on both individuals and society as understood through online interactions.

The objectives of marketing often seem to clash with those of sustainability. Traditional marketing typically encourages growth, promotes continuous fulfillment of desires and needs, and often operates under the assumption of infinite resources. In contrast sustainability advocates for the mimicry of natural circular flows and acknowledge the fact that resources are limited. Despite this clash, marketing and sustainability are closely linked and from an optimistic perspective, marketing holds significant potential in shaping consumer behavior towards sustainability (White et al. 2019). Consumer behavior is not only determined by the individual but also by the social practices they conduct in their daily lives.

These practices involve various actors such as consumers, retailers, governments, and marketers. Policy makers should acknowledge the involvement of all stakeholders in these practices beyond just consumers and allocate responsibility accordingly (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). While consumers may engage in the act of shopping, retailers establish the frameworks for shopping experiences, the government determines the regulations for commercial activities and social marketers promote the concept of ethical consumption. Responsibility is distributed across various stakeholders, yet consumers often bear the burden as mentioned in Gonzalez-Arcos et al. (2021).

Numerous studies have explored environmental aspects, including activism, the adoption of recycled materials and packaging, and the environmental footprint of production of goods (Auger et al. 2007; Devinney et al. 2006; Lusk & Briggemann, 2009). Many scholars argue that consumers in the developed world are evolving, leading to a surge in activism (Dauvergne & Islam, 2023; Henn et al. 2022; Herbert 2021; Sloam et al. 2022). Present day consumers have access to more products than at any other time, they are wealthier and better educated, and are increasingly brand conscious (Harrison, 2003). When these changes are combined with the increasing availability of ethical products then it is expected that consumers are more likely to be socially conscious and engaged as they now have the opportunity to do so (Auger et al. 2007). Simultaneously, consumers are becoming increasingly conscious of the sustainability implications of their purchasing decisions (Grunert, 2011). Studying consumer behavior and sustainability reveals fascinating insights, sparking curiosity to delve deeper into the online dynamics and expressions of consumers.

1.1 Background

Consumers make their decisions based on what they consider most important at the time. Consumption is a way that people express themselves, they buy products that show who they are and what they like. It is a topic which is discussed among friend groups, families, colleagues, and online as it is something everyone does daily. Therefore, with the increase of environmental problems all over the world, it can be considered more important to consume sustainably (WWF, 2024). Epstein (2008) defines sustainable consumer behavior as the awareness of the long-term consequences of an individual behavior on the environment.

According to Hosta and Zabkar (2021) new perspectives and implementations of ethical consumption are surfacing, capturing the multifaceted nature of sustainability. The complexity and struggles between doing what is good for the environment and society may contribute to consumers' challenges in attaining ethical consumption (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). The working definition: ethical consumption, was first introduced by the Oslo Symposium in 1994, as the use of products which fulfill needs while minimizing the use of natural resources which has been the primary focus of studies on ethical consumption (Liu et al. 2017; Hwang et al. 2020). For example, within the domain of ethical food consumption, there have been several trends noted over the past few years. It began with the rise of

veganism (Sexton et al. 2022), the popularity of oat milk, and the awareness of meat consumption (Aasen et al. 2023).

Consumers often encounter a lack of information and are inclined to favor brands associated with socially responsible behaviors which makes them feel more comfortable purchasing products from such brands (Arvola et al. 2008; Brown & Dacin, 1997). For instance, even though many labels contain specifications to promote sustainable products, consumers often struggle to understand what these labels mean, and they might not be credible indicators for a sustainable product (Kaczorowska et al. 2019). This tendency is reflected in consumer behavior literature, particularly in studies examining the correlation between consumers' ethical behaviors and their willingness to pay (De Pelsmacker et al. 2005; Kaczorowska et al. 2019). In response, managers tend to adopt social and environmental initiatives to distinguish their brands in a highly competitive market (Boccia et al. 2019). Scholars have illustrated that initiatives focused on social responsibility contribute to an enhancing brand image and consumers' attitudes towards the brand (Toussaint et al. 2020). As a result, sustainable products have been getting more attention.

Consumers wield significant influence in achieving ethical consumption outcomes through their purchasing power. Their commercial preferences and consumption habits mirror the kind of society they aspire to live in (Toussaint et al. 2020). However, a notable challenge arises from the insufficient information available to consumers for making well-informed purchasing decisions. Often, consumers lack insight into the production processes behind the products they intend to buy and base their choices on various factors, with price often taking priority (Toussaint et al. 2020). Despite price frequently being a primary consideration, a study by Ciasullo et al. (2017) reveals that consumers express willingness to pay a 20% premium for sustainable items. However, this alone does not invalidate the need for systemic change. Another study by Riesgo et al. (2022) shows that price remains the predominant factor for most consumers when selecting sustainable options, resulting in their reluctance to choose sustainable products. Consequently, some consumers may desire to purchase sustainable goods but encounter constraints due to competing obligations or other spending priorities. Moreover, consumers typically rely on retailers to ensure the responsible sourcing of products, assuming that everything is in order (Toussaint et al. 2020).

The lack of transparency and available information poses significant challenges for consumers in making informed choices. Companies and brands should provide clear information about their products, manufacturing processes, and origins (Toussaint et al. 2020). Labels provide consumers the opportunity to consider environmental and ethical considerations when making purchase decisions. However, merely offering this opportunity does not guarantee that they will take advantage of it. The likelihood of their engagement depends on their motivation to interact with sustainability information. The more motivated consumers are, the more likely they are to invest effort in understanding these labels and using them to weigh various product attributes in their decision-making process (Grunert et al. 2014).

Additionally, it relies on consumers' understanding of what these labels signify and their capacity to utilize this information effectively. Even if consumers are motivated, they may struggle to utilize labels that are unfamiliar or unclear (Grunert et al. 2014). The government plays a key role in promoting sustainability by setting regulations for product labeling in stores and establishing sustainability guidelines that companies must follow (Porter & Earl, 1990). The government leads by example, demonstrating sustainable practices to consumers. When citizens and businesses see how the government embraces and enforces sustainability, they are more likely to follow its lead (Palm et al. 2019).

Similarly, cities can encourage ethical consumption in creative ways. For example, in 2015, a unique shopping mall called ReTuna opened in Eskilstuna, Sweden. This mall combines commercial interests with sustainability by selling items donated by residents. This approach not only promotes sustainability but also fosters a sense of community (Hedegård et al. 2016). It shows that sustainability and commercial activity can coexist, providing an inspiring model for both cities and businesses.

1.2 Research Purpose

It is estimated that households' consumption contributes to 60% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with mobility, housing, and food being the biggest contributors (Ivanova et al. 2016). Where wealthier countries are generating the most impact per capita. These emissions from housing and mobility are more difficult to control, therefore making consumption

related issues easier to focus on for substantial reductions (Bauer et al. 2022). Moreover, the European Parliament states that it is important to create a circular economy, where it is important to reduce waste to the minimum (European Parliament, 2023). This is another reason why consuming ethically is considered important.

Consumers increasingly express concerns about the ethicality and impact of their consumption choices upon the environment, animals and/or society (Carrington et al. 2014). In recent years, the increasing prevalence of online platforms has facilitated extensive discourse among consumers regarding sustainability concerns. However, despite the growing significance of these digital platforms in shaping public opinion, and influencing consumer behavior, there remains a notable gap in understanding how individuals articulate their sustainability concerns within online discussions and threads. This gap raises critical questions about the engagement of the consumers with environmental issues in online communities. By focusing specifically on digital platforms, we seek to understand how online discussions shape and reflect consumer perceptions and behaviors related to sustainability. We hope our research will provide valuable insights that drive positive change in both individual behaviors and broader societal attitudes towards sustainability issues.

1.3 Aim and Objective

The aim of this research is to explore the complexities and challenges of ethical consumption, and to identify the factors that influence consumers' decision-making processes when it comes to sustainability. We seek to shed light on consumers sustainability concerns and how they express them in online discussions. Through a comprehensive exploration of these discussions, we aspire to provide valuable insights that can inform sustainable practices, and societal awareness.

Consequently, the research delves into how consumers express their sustainability concerns, thoughts, and actions, through online discussions and threads, aiming to analyze and interpret the language they use. This analysis seeks to understand the context in which they express themselves through text. The central focus of this research revolves around understanding the nuanced ways in which consumers articulate their concerns and how these expressions reflect their approach to sustainability. All this by answering the following question:

“How do consumers participate in constructing ethical consumption?”

The following objectives have been established to assist guiding us through this study, analyzing the following topics: ethical consumption gap, governmentality, cultural capital, identity, responsabilization and the role of retailers. By focusing on these topics and analyzing their impact, we hope to achieve the aim of the research overarching objective.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

This master thesis is organized into five chapters, following a carefully designed structure to address the research question.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the topics of ethical consumption and sustainability, providing background information. Additionally, it outlines the research topic with the main research question, detailing the research problem and aim. Delimitations of the study are discussed, followed by an overview of the research structure throughout the report.

Chapter 2: Literature review

The chapter begins with an introduction, followed by six subchapters that explore key literature on six distinct topics: the ethical consumption gap, governmentality, cultural capital, identity, responsabilization, and the role of retailers. Each topic is extensively researched, incorporating relevant theories and discussions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology chapter serves as a detailed guide for the research, beginning with an explanation of the research approach, including the abductive approach and critical realism perspective. It outlines the research design, focusing on the choice of netnography and after a chapter on data collection methods. Additionally, it discusses the use of critical discourse analysis and addresses ethical considerations, limitations, validity, and reliability.

Chapter 4: Analysis and discussion

In this chapter, a comprehensive analysis is conducted using critical discourse analysis. Additionally, the feelings of Reddit users are supported with quotes from the community,

enhancing the reader's understanding of the analysis. Furthermore, a chapter summary is provided to give a clear overview of the discussion.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and further research

Within this chapter a conclusion is given that came out of the analysis and discussion chapter, regarding sustainable change, should be done collectively, with individuals leading by example. Furthermore, theoretical and practical contributions are discussed as well as the limitations of the research and future research suggestions.

2. Literature review

Sustainability research, dating back to the early 20th century, now spotlights ethical consumption, notably since 2015 (Kristia et al. 2023). Addressing ethical consumption is critical, where for example food production alone is responsible for 28% of CO₂ emissions, which is part of the impact on United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) (Osman et al. 2021). The ethical consumption gap aligns to UNSDG goal 12 - responsible consumption and production. This goal emphasizes the importance of consumers taking action by reducing waste, being mindful of their purchases, and opting for sustainable alternatives whenever feasible. Notably, the material footprint per capita in high-income countries is ten times greater than that in low-income countries (Sustainable Development Goals, 2024).

The economy needs to transition away from the linear model, which has been in place for over 150 years and has proven highly profitable but also results in significant waste generation (Kuzmina, 2019). Consequently, the European Parliament advocates for a shift towards a circular economy, focusing on creating products designed for longevity, reusability, repairability, and recyclability (European Parliament, 2023). For instance, choosing a bar of soap or recyclable plastic shampoo bottle instead of a non-recyclable plastic bottle of shampoo at the supermarket is a step in the direction of embracing this circular approach. Moreover, an ethical consumer can be said to be aware of the environmental and social issues in the world regarding consumption (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

Existing literature has explored various perspectives of ethical consumption, identifying variables such as price, availability, information, and marketing strategies (Moncure et al. 2013). Researchers have raised concerns that the lack of understanding and knowledge among consumers stemming from factors such as limited exposure to information, information overload and confusion, may contribute to the reluctance to adopt ethical consumption practices (White et al. 2019). Others have suggested that the reluctance for not adopting ethical consumption might stem from factors such as skepticism, lack of support or perceptions of unfairness (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021).

According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1977), attitude is one of the factors influencing behavior, and when individuals have a more positive attitude toward a specific subject, such as sustainability, it often results in a more positive intention to consume. Consumers' attitudes drive a tendency to engage with, react to, or align with a subject in either a favorable or unfavorable manner, and they are influenced by an individual's values and beliefs (Anilkumar & Joseph, 2015). Moreover, consumers' personal values and level of skepticism play a crucial role in their purchasing behavior. They are more likely to choose products that align with their sustainability beliefs (Siriattakul et al. 2019). There is ongoing discussion about the environmental impacts of activities like recycling and agricultural practices in both public discourse and political arenas (Scoones, 2016). This indicates a widespread awareness of environmental issues among the general population.

Companies often use terms like "eco-friendly" or "environmentally conscious" to persuade consumers that their products are beneficial for the planet. However, it can be tricky for consumers to determine whether these products truly live up to their environmental claims (Marcatajo, 2023). Additionally, a significant portion of consumers, around 56%, express doubts about the accuracy of product labeling provided by companies. This skepticism influences their purchasing decisions (Cho & Taylor, 2020). In response, government agencies are urging companies to participate in programs that help consumers distinguish genuinely sustainable options (Cho & Taylor, 2020).

Consumers who show an interest in sustainability often view it as part of their identity and sense of self (Belk, 1988). This identity can be influenced by various factors such as nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, or others. It shapes how they perceive themselves and what they choose to consume. Consumers play a key role in environmental research, just as retailers do. It could be argued that the responsibility for sustainability can be seen as a shared duty between both groups (Grunert, 2011). Moreover, a concept introduced by Michel Foucault (1977), governmentality, which challenges traditional notions of power (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). This concept of power in relation to the environment explores who controls the decisions that determine environmental outcomes. The gap between rich and poor grows even more noticeable, particularly when considering who holds the power (Chomsky, 2017).

In this chapter, a literature review is conducted on six key topics related to ethical consumption: the ethical consumption gap, governmentality, cultural capital, identity, responsabilization, and the role of retailers. The research and literature on these subjects are comprehensively summarized and analyzed.

2.1 Ethical Consumption Gap

In the past years, there has been a growing concern regarding societal and environmental issues, therefore, more and more consumers decided to consume more ethically (Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010). As a response, the retail industry saw an opportunity, ethical and socially responsible products have been set up in multiple retail settings for consumers to purchase (Andersch et al. 2019). Ethical consumption can be seen as a form of activism: consumers who are trying to purchase from socially responsible companies (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). It is recognized by ethical consumers that an increased purchasing power can positively impact society, as they can potentially boycott or avoid unethical companies. Furthermore, Tsarensko et al. (2013) note that ethical consumption involves a willingness to pay a surcharge for sustainable products. However, not everyone has the financial resources to purchase those products and to exercise their freedom of choice (Olson et al. 2021).

There are two perspectives that have had a growing interest in ethical consumption. One is the managerial perspective; marketing research has concentrated on the consumer focus shifting towards sustainability (Shaw et al. 2016), however, primarily with the aim of targeting ethical consumers to boost their profits noted by Zollo et al. (2017). On the other hand, there is the consumer perspective, focused on the individual making the ‘right’ consumption choices (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). This raises questions about what constitutes ‘right’ consumption choices. Additionally, it questions whether consumers are fully informed about the ethical practices of companies in their marketing. For instance, some individuals exclusively purchase ethical products and boycott unsustainable companies because they are well-informed, while others possess all the information but do not act upon it (Carrigan & Attalla, 2014). When individuals buy certain products, they might have different reasons and motivations. For instance, some may do so out of concern for the environment and want to make the world a better place, and others might choose for example an organic product

because they believe that it will benefit their health (Zlatev & Miller, 2016). In the end this could mean that they select the same product, only from different purchasing motives.

Consumers, ethical or not, follow five steps when making their purchasing decisions according to Akehurst et al. (2012); they recognize a need, gather information, assess alternatives, complete the purchase, and review their purchase. Within this decision-making model, there are multiple moments when the consumer can be influenced. The consumer can have a positive attitude towards consuming ethically, however, choosing to purchase something else (Zollo et al. 2017). Moreover, individuals with an existing positive attitude towards ethical consumption are more susceptible to the influence of green advertisements compared to those who do not share such beliefs (Kim et al. 2016). This is where the ethical consumption gap arises; there's a contrast between consumers' intentions to make ethical purchases and their actual actions (Carrington et al. 2016). These differences are rooted in people's "unethical" buying and consumption routines, which often put them on autopilot, making it hard to change their behavior. Additionally, Carrington et al. (2016) indicates that using rationalization methods to ease guilt about "unethical" purchases might widen the gap between intention and action. Rationalization allows individuals to ignore feelings of guilt, enabling them to keep buying products that do not match their ethical principles (Szmigin et al. 2009).

2.2 Governmentality

As environmental issues become increasingly urgent, the need for ethical consumption becomes more evident (Government Sweden, 2018). It highlights not only individual choices but also the wider social structures and power dynamics shaping how things are consumed. In this context, ethical consumption emerges as a vital tool for challenging deep-rooted inequalities and promoting a fairer, more environmentally conscious society (UNSDG 12).

Governmentality is a term introduced by Foucault (1977), as a concept that represents how people are governed and controlled in (neo) liberal democracies. There are different underlying rationalities behind governmentality, it is not just the state or governments (Hamann, 2009). It is about freely controlling yourself, among certain guidelines.

As the division of poor and rich is getting worse, whereby the poor and rich people paths will be crossed less and less, however, the influence of the rich is significant (Keeley, 2015). In the work of Chomsky (2017), it is explained in ten principles, how the rich try to keep their power. There are two principles that raise the question if it can have an influence on the ethical consumption gap. Principle #8 'Keep the Rabble in Line', this is where strategies are in place to keep the general population divided and distracted. Moreover, principle #10 'Marginalize the Population' where the majority of the population feels like they cannot make meaningful change (Chomsky, 2017).

The ideas about keeping people divided and feeling powerless could help explain why some people do not buy ethically even though they say they want to. These principles could lead to a consumption gap, where certain groups in society feel marginalized and powerless, while others have a disproportionate amount of influence. As individuals navigate this landscape, consumption becomes a means of self-expression and social identity. Yet, amidst growing environmental concerns, there is an increasing imperative to prioritize ethical consumption practices (Pennel & Sabau, 2023).

This is where companies can potentially step in, organizing activities like co-creation contests where consumers share their ideas. They tap into the collective intelligence of the masses, and in return, consumers may receive prizes. This can potentially create a sense of belonging among consumers (Cassinger & Bertilsson, 2011). Co-creation can be a way of creating value for the companies, it is about marketing managers leveraging customers and putting them to work for free labor (Zwick et. al. 2008). Consumers frequently provide free labor for companies through activities such as writing reviews and completing surveys. While brands rely on their recommendations, they rarely compensate consumers for the service or feedback provided. Consumers contribute to the brand's growth and success, often paying higher prices for the products as a result (Arnould et al. 2023). Therefore, there are two sides to this; it could be that consumers feel valued, only it is more about controlling consumers and predicting their actions (Cassinger & Bertilsson, 2011).

In addition to governmentality, there's also political consumerism, which comprises four types of actions by consumers (Ekström, 2010). First, there is boycotting, where consumers refrain from buying or using products from a specific company. Second, there's boycotting,

which is the opposite of boycotting, where consumers actively support a company by purchasing its products or services to show approval of its actions. Third, there are discursive actions in consumption, such as groups organizing ‘buy nothing day’ to raise awareness about overconsumption. Fourth, there are lifestyle changes in consumption patterns. These four methods illustrate how consumers are trying to stimulate change and increase awareness about societal issues. They are striving to break free from the influence of capitalism and aspire to be more responsible political actors. This shift is turning consumer rights into consumer duties (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007).

It is also important to note that governance alone cannot fully tackle what Newell (2010) identifies as the ‘elephant in the room’: the environmental challenges stemming from capitalism. Capitalism provides the context in which the majority of the world currently addresses global environmental changes. It both produces and is shaped by specific types of environmental change while shaping the political institutions and social dynamics that determine our collective ability to effectively respond to these changes (Newell, 2010). There are calls to either ‘green’ capitalism or advocating for a fundamentally different form of capitalism: one that is less prone to crisis, instability and consistent with tackling climate change. The challenge lies in attempting to manage both the power and resources of capitalism while mitigating its tendencies to produce inequalities and if left unregulated, contribute to environmental devastation (Newell, 2010). Therefore, the governmentality of capitalism becomes crucial: effective regulations and governance may be essential for harnessing capitalism’s potential for positive change while mitigating its destructive impacts on a global scale. Is an ecologically sustainable capitalism possible?

The perception of consumer capabilities varies from one culture to another, indicating that it greatly depends on the individual consumer's personal understanding (Kjaernes et al. 2007). For example, some people think that public authorities should be the ones to encourage change. A notable trend in political consumerism is the rise of ‘self-interest’ and ‘feel-good’ elements, such as consumers choosing products labeled ‘organic’ or ‘fairtrade’ because it makes them feel good about their purchases (Boström & Klintman, 2018). There are differing opinions on this. Some view it positively because it encourages people to buy more ethical products, while others worry it might lead to increased consumption, a phenomenon known as ethical fetishism (Guthman, 2009). As, within ethical fetishism the individuals prioritize the appearance of ethical behavior rather than the genuine ethical practices (Carrier, 2010).

It could be argued that the aim would be to refrain from consumption. To reduce consumption, one can prioritize spending time with people and building relationships, rather than solely focusing on work, earning money, and spending it (Ekström, 2010). However, attempting to opt out of the market poses challenges, as consumers still need goods and services. This creates a dilemma where someone inevitably ends up spending money. Take, for instance, Burning Man, where currency holds no value and participants must barter goods. However, it is worth noting that attendees still purchase their tickets with money, thus participating in consumption to some extent (Kozinets, 2002a). Burning man focuses on self-expression and rejects corporatism and capitalism. Rather than using money, attendees rely on borrowing, bartering and trading goods to obtain what they need (Guzman, n.d.)

2.3 Cultural Capital

Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge and skills acquired by individuals during their upbringing and formative years (Arnould et al. 2023). This can manifest in various forms, such as educational attainment, refined tastes, or possession of specific skills or credentials (Bourdieu, 2008). Notably, individuals are socialized differently, resulting in diverse cultural capital and consequently, varied ethical considerations in consumption.

Interestingly, traditional cultures are often perceived as more environmentally sustainable compared to modern Western cultures (Cochrane, 2006). This observation leads to more investigation into why these differences exist and how cultures can learn from each other. This can also be interpreted through the lens of High Cultural Capital (HCC) and Low Cultural Capital (LCC) (Arnould et al. 2023). People with a LCC will approach things more from an emotional perspective, whilst people with a HCC will analyze things more, and have an analytical perspective. In Carfagna et al. (2014) research, it is tested that the white/ higher income individuals/ university graduates, people with HCC, are more likely to boycott or buycott products. Consumers who belong to the High Cultural Capital (HCC) group often seek to distinguish themselves from the mainstream market. They aim to cultivate a sense of individuality and may engage with the market in a discreet manner (Arnould et al. 2023). Moreover, individuals with HCC are recognized for frequently being early adopters (Holt, 1998).

Ethical consumption is often viewed as an integral aspect of people's lifestyles, reflecting their social connections, civic engagement, and political participation (Willis & Schor, 2012). However, Guthman (2003) argues that ethical consumption primarily resonates with elite, white, and privileged consumers. Furthermore, Johnston et al. (2011) mentions that ethical consumption tends to be associated with high-cost practices. This underpins the fact that ethical consumption is expensive, and not for the everyday consumer. Therefore, despite consumers expressing concern for the environment, they may not necessarily translate this into their purchasing behavior, due to typically higher prices of sustainable products compared to traditional ones (Yue et al. 2020). Previous research has shown that there is a relationship between price sensitivity and the intention to purchase sustainable products.

Consumption to meet survival needs (such as food), has traditionally been associated with the joy gained through attainment, desire fulfillment, and or bodily incorporation, not as an act conceptualized as (im)moral, save etiquette and custom or aligned with a political program (Gunderson, 2014). Much of the developed world is characterized by consumption practices that have moved far beyond the primary utilitarian function of serving basic human needs. Consumption can fill the hunger for a space in which we construct a sense of self and what is important in life (Kozinets, 2001). The establishment of consumption culture has been accompanied by mounting concern among consumers about the impact of their consumption levels (Diamantopoulos et al. 2003; Shaw & Clarke, 1999).

A multitude of challenges associated with overconsumption are tied to adverse outcomes such as poverty, inequality, and significant financial strain, particularly affecting individuals with limited resources who are compelled to maintain high consumption levels due to pervasive marketing tactics. These dynamics result in detrimental effects on both society and overall well-being (Ardley & May, 2020). Previous literature on overconsumption has predominantly examined this issue through the lens of social critique aimed at consumerist cultures. Central to this discourse is the critique of the pervasive belief that material consumption is a central pathway to happiness (Goodwin et al. 1997).

2.4 Identity

The concept of identity is multifaceted, with interpretations varying among individuals. It encompasses notions of self, aspirations, belonging, and group affiliations (Arnould et al. 2023). Today, consumption serves as a means for people to express their identity, reflecting ‘who they are’ or ‘where they belong’ (Gay, 1997). The following said by Ulver, (2023).

“Consumer Culture Trends researchers also adopted the word “project” to emphasize that individuals could play an active role in creating and commanding their lives.” – Ulver (2023, p. 19).

Individuals actively shape their identities, as emphasized by Ulver (2023) through their choices and actions in consumption. This perspective underscores the agency individuals possess in constructing and directing their lives. Giddens (1984), referred to agency as the capabilities of individuals wield in shaping and guiding their own paths. Thus, power and reflexivity become the pivotal aspects that diverge from social norms. Social norms serve as the embodiment of structure, both enabling and limiting agency through their establishment. Giddens (1984) considered the notions of structure, system, and the duality of structures as the core of structuration theory. He defined structure as a set of rules and resources within a system. Therefore, agency and structure shape and are shaped by each other. Social systems are the embodiment of structure, at the same time, manifested through situated human activities. The interdependent relationship between agency and structure is implicated through social systems in a recursive manner (Fu & Clarke, 2019).

Early consumer focus revolved around rational decision-making, but evolved over time to include more irrational choices, reflecting changes in consumerism. Possessions play a significant role in identity formation (Belk, 1988; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Belk (1988) further outlines how possessions, ranging from personal to group items, constitute the extended self, influencing consumer behavior. Moreover, the functions of the extended self can be outlined into the following fundamental states: having, doing, and being, which form the basis of our existence. These states explain consumers' actions and are aligned with the behaviors they can adopt toward sustainability, encompassing the ‘having, doing, and being’ aspects they engage in to can potentially enhance their environmental impact.

According to Hosta & Zabkar (2021) factors influencing consumer choices encompass self-oriented considerations, ethical ideologies, and social norms, these shape intentions and when combined with information regarding sustainability these intentions can facilitate ethical consumption. Therefore, an ethical consumer is someone who carefully evaluates their needs while also considering the effects of their choices on others. Such individuals foster a positive mindset, ethical values, and societal norms, demonstrating both willingness and actual behavior aligned with sustainability (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). However, Munro (2023) states that while consumers often express concern for the environment but admit that they do not take as much action as they would like.

Consumption extends beyond the mere use of products as it fosters social connections and shapes identities within communities and subcultures (Arvidsson, 2005; Cova, 1997). These connections generate shared meanings and ethical surpluses, contributing to a sense of belonging by symbols, knowledge, and social skills. Sociologists have long recognized that economic decisions are socially embedded (Beckert, 1996; DiMaggio & Louch, 1998). Decision-making processes, whether at the individual or organizational level, are heavily influenced by the surrounding social environment and interpersonal networks, such as communities, suppliers, customers, or competitors (Takec et al. 2011). Therefore, social belonging plays a crucial role in encouraging ethical consumption behavior. The reason for this is that social connections within a community can impact individual choices and beliefs. Social belonging is often best understood through the concept of social embeddedness, which serves as a significant indicator (Hwang, 2020). Therefore, companies should aim to enhance consumers' sense of belonging to society to encourage ethical consumption.

The lines between internal and external stakeholders are becoming increasingly blurred particularly for certain groups and types of external stakeholders, for example consumers that are strongly embedded in the network of the company through co-creation activities (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Studies conducted by Tajfel et al. (1971) on social identity, along with research conducted by Ashforth and Mael (1989); and Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) on organizational identification, indicate that individuals frequently form a sense of identity with the organizations to which they belong. They integrate favorable aspects of the organizational identity into their own identity to fulfill certain higher-order self-related needs, (Dutton et al. 1994). While this concept of identification has traditionally been confined to formal membership contexts more relevant to internal stakeholders (Berrone et al. 2007;

Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Scott & Lane, 2000; Simmons, 2009). Many scholars have argued that in today's marketplace, as external stakeholders, such as consumers, gain more knowledge about and establish relationships not only with the products but also with the organization behind the products (McAlexander et al. 2002). They voluntarily align their identity with select few organizations even without formal membership (Hildebrant, 2011).

The impact of social norms on consumer behavior is a central element in understanding consumption patterns. According to Melnyk et al. (2022) social norms are characterized as the rules and standards recognized by a group, exert a considerable influence on various aspects of daily consumption. Acting as decision-making shortcuts, these norms are often leveraged by marketers and policymakers to promote socially acceptable behaviors and discourage those deemed unfavorable (Melnyk et al. 2022). Moreover, according to Ajzen (1991) social norms encompass cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, with the theory of planned behavior attributing them to perceived social pressure to either perform or avoid certain behaviors. Over time, social norms have been integrated into the theory of planned behavior, successfully explaining behavior, while also emphasizing the significance of personal norms (Ajzen, 1991).

Social norms can contribute to the formation of personal norms, as they describe standards of conduct and provide a framework for the development of personal norms (Melnyk et al. 2022). However, Hosta and Zabkar's (2021) study suggests that social norms alone may not significantly influence consumers' preference towards responsible behavior. Instead, personal norms, concerns, and ethical ideologies emerge as the primary drivers of responsible behavior, particularly when coupled with accessible information (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). These findings are consistent with the review by White et al. (2019), which emphasizes the importance of both social and personal norms, alongside information, in effecting sustainable changes in consumer behavior.

Social pressure, as represented by subjective norms in the theory of planned behavior, can influence behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norms, on the other hand, refer to the perceived social pressure individuals feel when contemplating whether to engage in a particular behavior (Botetzagias et al. 2015; Indrianto et al. 2022), indicating the influence of significant others or groups on an individual's decision-making process (Wang et al. 2021).

Researchers have raised concerns about the causal relationship between attitude, subjective norm, and intention within the theory of planned behavior (Sussman & Gifford, 2018; Wang et al. 2019). Certain studies have indicated a positive association between subjective norm and attitude (Wang et al. 2021), contrasting with the traditional understanding of the theory of planned behavior. Liska (1984) suggested that beliefs could directly influence behavior without being mediated by attitude.

Environmental knowledge plays a role in shaping an individual's understanding of environmental impacts (Hwang 2020). Antil's (1984) research exploring the relationship between environmental knowledge and environmental behavior revealed that consumers possessing greater environmental knowledge tended to engage in more ethical consumption behaviors compared to those with less knowledge. Furthermore, Schahn and Holzer (1990) argue that having specific environmental knowledge is essential for the success of environmental protection movements and that such knowledge is associated with adopting sustainable behaviors towards the environment. Having access to accurate information is therefore essential for ethical consumption. Consumers are tasked with the responsibility of acquiring reliable information, which plays a pivotal role in facilitating ethical consumption practices. However, the absence of sufficient information poses a significant barrier, constraining consumers' purchasing decisions and impeding their ability to select sustainable products (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021).

2.5 Responsibilization

Numerous sustainability initiatives place the burden of societal issues such as climate change on consumers. This approach known as responsibilization, based on neoliberal ideology shifts the burden of responsibility from the state and corporations onto the consumer (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). It entails a collaboration between government and corporations to motivate consumers to take an active and responsible role in addressing social issues through their everyday consumption. Responsibilization operates on the assumption that consumers want to act responsibly and make ethical decisions, encouraging consumers to adopt a new responsible identity. People are made to believe they can solve societal and environmental problems through what they buy (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). However, consumers often resist such responsibilization (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021).

This resistance is closely linked to the nature of consumerism itself. Consumerism as defined by Stearns (2001) describes a society where individuals shape their life aspirations by acquiring goods beyond those necessary for survival. It manifests as a mentality, behavioral motivation and individual action as well as commercial institutions and serves as a defining characteristic of society at large (Trentmann, 2004). Consumerism should be seen not as a single choice but as a series of decisions over time.

Many purchasing decisions are influenced by non-rational factors, as marketers often craft advertisements to appeal to emotions rather than logic (Markin, 1979). Despite this, rational consumers still attempt to find logic in their purchasing decisions and justify their choices. However, research by Hudson et al. (2013) suggests that being more informed about ethical products does not significantly impact consumers' purchase decisions, indicating a lack of connection between rational and ethical consumption. Various arguments exist for why people engage in overconsumption. Schor (2021) highlights that individuals are often trapped in a cycle of work and spending, prioritize capital accumulation over environmental concerns, and are influenced by societal norms that promote consumption. In essence, society itself fosters a culture of consumption, where individuals are encouraged to consume more by societal pressures.

Another part of responsabilization, is consumer skepticism. In previous research there is a gap shown, where the trust in brands can have an impact on the relationship toward environmentally sustainable products and the intention to purchase (Ulusoy & Barretta, 2016). Trust is important for consumers to pick a product; it affects consumers and their purchase intentions. Consumers lose trust in brands when they make unrightful claims regarding, for example sustainability (Ulusoy & Barretta, 2016). When consumers feel betrayed, they tend to become more skeptical about a brand, which can lead to consumer backlash, such as boycotts (Moreno & Kang, 2020). This skepticism often marks the beginning of consumer resistance, a process where consumers seek to challenge or distance themselves from consumer culture.

Moreover, consumer resistance involves rejecting the 'dark side' of marketing (Heath et al. 2017). In this context, marketing is viewed as a powerful force, while consumers are perceived as vulnerable, a perspective seen in research by Heath et al. (2017). However,

Cherrier (2009) suggests that this view is overly simplistic, indicating that consumers can actively resist falling into marketing's traps. Consumers are resisting a system they perceive as beyond their control consumer culture, which pushes them toward heavy buying and consumption. Furthermore, government efforts to encourage more sustainable living, such as imposing extra fees on plastic and reusable cups, often face significant consumer resistance (Convery et al. 2007). These measures place the responsibility on consumers rather than corporations, as they pay for these extra fees (Dutch Government, 2023), adding to the public's frustration.

In a chapter by Zimmerman (2020), a case is discussed where a man asserts that he did not know anything illegal was in his car, though he also admits he did not take the time to check it beforehand. This scenario is like making purchase decisions without proper research, it can be considered willful ignorance on the consumer's part. For instance, it is like people ignoring how animals are produced for meat. This can be called commodity fetishism, where commodities are seen for their visible value, and people do not look at the underlying social value and production processes (Arnould et al. 2023). Furthermore, in the article of Zane et al. (2016) it is discussed how consumers often talk about ethical consumption, but few take the time to verify the sources of their product. They also highlight that when people observe others engaging in ethical behavior, they may feel inspired to do the same. However, another common response is to feel threatened and then justify their own behavior by criticizing those who consume ethically. This tendency to disparage the ethical actions of others is considered the more likely response.

2.6 The Role of Retailers

According to Devinney et al. (2006) achieving civility in society or fostering social responsibility within a corporation demands much more than mere endorsement of noble ideals by political or economic leaders, regardless of their origin. The responsibility of corporations and societies largely stems from the acceptance and compliance of the average individual with the values championed by social and corporate leaders, leading to behaviors aligned with those beliefs.

Companies are engaged in a competitive pursuit to establish and incorporate environmental considerations into their fundamental operations, products, and supply chains, thereby associating sustainability with their most valuable asset: the brand (Dauvergne & Lister, 2012). Although brands are typically identified by a label or a logo, as Arnould (2009) explains their identity is predominately defined by their conduct and the value that consumers assign to them. Companies are also making measurable advances in corporate sustainability; however, these advancements do not necessarily imply that these companies have become sustainable. They continue to serve as drivers of escalating consumerism (Dauvergne & Lister, 2012). Companies are not only embracing sustainability to reduce costs. It is also being integrated as a fundamental business strategy to foster growth, to attract new customers, increase sales and access emerging markets (Dauvergne & Lister, 2012). Consequently, the business opportunities surrounding sustainability are on the rise.

A nuanced critique of current marketing practices reveals both opportunities and challenges for promoting ethical consumption. On one hand, marketing can be a powerful tool for raising awareness about sustainability, such as educating consumers about the environment and social impacts of their consumption choices and promoting the adoption of sustainable behaviors (Ottman, 2017). On the other hand, marketing can also perpetuate unsustainable consumption patterns by promoting excessive consumption (Peattie & Belz, 2010).

In marketing discourse, consumption has often been equated with market demand (Ardley & May, 2020). Profit-driven enterprises actively promote consumption, viewing it as beneficial for business growth. Consequently, the issue of overconsumption has typically received scant attention from businesses, likely due to its complex nature and the challenges it poses regarding purpose and viable solutions (Tollin et al. 2015). When businesses do address overconsumption, the focus tends to be on individual products or consumer behavior rather than consumption patterns as a whole. The prevailing belief is that the problem lies not in the overall level of consumption but in the nature of the products being consumed. Eco-friendly products are often seen as a favorable choice (Bocken et al. 2014), prompting efforts to understand the eco-conscious consumer demographic. Companies have developed targeted marketing strategies to appeal to this segment effectively (Baker et al. 2014; Gam, 2011). However, this perspective assumes that an increase in the consumption of eco-friendly products can offset the negative impacts of overall consumption growth, without addressing the underlying issue (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014).

The current wave of consumer activism is characterized by ethical consumerism, which emerged from environmentalism (Johnston, 2008) and has since been embraced by various movements concerned with issues like corporate power, economic globalization, social injustice, and human rights abuses.

Ethical consumers advocate for products and practices that align with their values, such as clothing not produced in sweatshops (Mandle, 2000), and organic, locally sourced foods. The core principle of ethical consumerism is the belief that individuals can influence social progress and reduce environmental harm through their purchasing decisions. This concept is often encapsulated in the phrase "vote with your money" (Shaw et al. 2006) indicating that consumer choices in the marketplace can incentivize positive changes or discourage harmful practices among producers. Some scholars view this form of consumer activism as a legitimate mode of political participation (Dickinson & Hollander, 1991; Schudson, 2007; Shaw et al. 2006; Stolle et al. 2005; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005), while others criticize it.

Critics argue that ethical consumerism can serve to depoliticize individuals within a capitalist framework (Gunderson, 2014), allowing them to adopt identities as political activists through consumption rather than more substantive political action. Additionally, some see green consumerism as a way for affluent individuals to signal their status and differentiate themselves from mass consumers, rather than effecting meaningful change (Guthman, 2003; Johnston & Bauman, 2007).

The impact on sustainability extends beyond the point of purchase. As consumption consists of three stages: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase, each stage must be considered equally important in achieving ethical consumption (Hwang et al. 2020). Thus, how consumers buy, transport, store, prepare and dispose of products also significantly affects sustainability. Consumers can reward more sustainable production by their choices, and similarly punish less sustainable alternatives. Retailers play a major role here, as they determine the products available for consumers to choose from. Retailers may opt to stock products produced sustainably due to consumer preference or as a part of their corporate social responsibility policies. However, retailers always strive to offer consumers a choice, meaning that the more sustainable option must always compete with conventional products that consumers are accustomed to (Grunert, 2011). Consumption choices are influenced by

multiple factors, and sustainability is rarely the sole consideration (Grunert, 2005). When various factors compete in consumers' minds, trade-offs occur. The primary and perhaps the most significant trade-off often revolves around price (Grunert, 2011).

As consumers become more aware of the importance of consuming safe products (Smith & Paladino, 2010), the trend towards natural and healthy food has gained popularity, resulting in a surge in demand for green organic food (Nagappan & Getinet, 2015; Cheng et al. 2023). Consequently, consumers are showing a greater willingness to opt for healthier and more environmentally friendly options in their food choices, leading to a rise in the market value of such food products (Jitrawang & Krairit, 2019). Even though prices of green and organic food can be two to eight times higher than non-organic alternatives, consumers are increasingly favoring these options (Gabriel et al. 2021). Additionally, buying secondhand clothing helps protect the environment by reducing the waste of natural resources (Zahid et al. 2023). In recent years, however, there has been a surge in overconsumption during promotional days such as Black Friday, a day heavily promoted by marketers, when companies offer massive discounts on their products (Peters & Thomas, 2022). While consumers may be inclined to invest in sustainable goods at a higher price, they also appreciate the affordability of discounted products (Kapitan et al. 2021).

Over the last decade, food retailers and manufacturers have increasingly dedicated themselves to engaging in social responsibility as a means to address their impact on the environment (Dauvergne & Lister, 2012). These commitments focused particularly on environmental concerns in their supply chains (Newell et al. 2012). Ideally, consumers should not have to question whether a product is sustainable; this responsibility lies with the final stage of the value chain to ensure products meet minimum sustainability standards (Toussaint et al. 2020). A significant portion of global production occurs within supply chains lacking a dominant lead company, encompassing consumers goods that are now moving through emerging and developing economies (Dauvergne & Lister, 2012). Companies have utilized their influence to pressure suppliers into cut-cutting measures. While this strategy helps maintain low retail prices, it can also push suppliers to cut corners to meet low-cost demands (Dauvergne & Lister, 2012).

It is widely recognized that plastic is harmful to the environment, yet it is prevalent in many products sold, often unnecessarily wrapped in plastic (Thompson et al. 2009). The

consequences of plastic waste pose risks to both human health and environmental pollution (Leal Filho et al. 2019). Companies should prioritize cleaner production methods and develop more eco-friendly plastic products. This makes it harder for customers to be sustainable, because eco-friendly plastic products are often more expensive, not all customers can afford to purchase them (Pahlevi & Suhartanto, 2020). Moreover, for consumers to make the right “sustainable” choices, they need to be able to make environmentally informed purchases (Potter et al. 2022). Products in the market are nowadays labeled with, for example, organic agriculture or rainforest alliance, however, these labels do not always mean that they have a lower environmental impact.

2.7 Chapter Summary

In recent years, ethical consumption has increased as consumers prioritize products aligned with ethical and social responsibility values. This trend is seen as a form of activism, empowering consumers to leverage their purchasing power to support ethical companies and avoid unethical ones. However, financial constraints can limit consumers ability to prioritize sustainable products, creating barriers to adopting ethical consumption practices.

Moreover, addressing environmental challenges within capitalism remains intimidating, it requires effective regulation and governance. Political consumerism provides ways to make a difference, like boycotting or changing lifestyles, showing a wish to push back against capitalist control. However, dealing with environmental issues in a capitalist system is tough.

Another point that has an effect on sustainability is individuals their cultural capital, it shapes individuals' ethical considerations, with diverse perspectives influenced by upbringing and socialization. HCC individuals adopt ethical consumption practices discreetly, distinguishing themselves from mainstream markets. However, ethical consumption is criticized for primarily resonating with privileged consumers due to its high costs, hindering widespread adoption.

Achieving civility and social responsibility requires individual acceptance and compliance with promoted values. Corporations integrating environmental considerations into operations enhances their brand identities, only it is not guaranteed that they are sustainable. Despite the

challenges, the increase in desire for ethical choices highlights the need to tackle environmental issues at every stage of production, especially regarding plastic waste. Access to affordable and environmentally informed choices continues to be a challenge for consumers.

3. Methodology

In this chapter the methodological plan of the research is explained. Where we describe our research approach, justifying the research method; netnography as the research method. As well as the research design and the data collection process of netnography. After, the data analysis is discussed, ethical considerations, and limitations.

3.1 Research Approach

Our research approach is abductive, which is a mix between inductive and deductive approach, this form of reasoning is where plausible connections are being made.

In a deductive approach we would first look at existing theories. After which the research is tested through observing or analyzing (Easterby Smith et al. 2018). Whereas an inductive approach starts by analyzing empirical data and after construct a theory on the topic. The abductive approach allowed us to gain different perspectives on the theories researched, to get creative insights whilst building on existing theories (Bell et al. 2019).

Moreover, within this study a critical realism approach has been taken. This approach says that people, their actions and choices, create a lot of what happens in society, as well as society affects them back. It is an approach that identified the underlying causes of the observations from Reddit, as we were interested in understanding the broader implications for this community and the other way around (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). The study relies on actual observations from an online forum, focusing on language. By examining the comments that users post, we treat these as tangible evidence (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018).

3.2 Research Design

In this research, a qualitative research method has been chosen, since we want to understand how individuals express themselves about ethical consumption, their experiences and challenges, through text in an online platform (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). An experience is something that happens to an individual and which they express through writing, orally or

their behavior, and therefore it is something that researchers can only access through these three expressions (Carú & Cova, 2008).

We have explored alternative research methods, including observations and interviews. In a previous smaller study, it was found that employing these combined approaches led to limitations in the research. Participants' behavior was influenced by their awareness of the researchers, resulting in altered actions. Therefore, we have chosen a qualitative netnography approach, focusing on the analysis of online discussions and threads related to sustainability concerns. Another motivation for this choice is that using netnography provided us with more insights, which are not as easy to assess when using other methodologies. By using netnography, we can observe without being a part of the discussion, therefore not altering participants by them knowing that they and their discussions are being observed (Kozinets, 2002b).

Additionally, online communities are known to be ahead of the crowd, therefore, more up to date on what is happening online (Kozinets, 2002b). Netnography is a good approach for identifying trends and emerging themes, as we can track how ideas spread, evolve, offering valuable information (Kozinets, 2002b). It also allowed us to investigate identity and self-expression, it revealed how individuals use online platforms to project their personalities, beliefs and values. Netnography also provided a context for understanding broader social and cultural issues, such as sustainability, this way we gained insights into societal attitudes and cultural trends (Kozinets, 2015). Netnography has become popular because of its open-ended approach and the rich insights it provides (Kozinets, 2010).

Coined by Kozinets (2002) netnography refers to a marketing research approach that scrutinized online interactions, particularly within specialized communities, providing a unique window into consumer behavior and sentiments. As a flexible research method, netnography has been employed for more than a century to study and understand the behaviors of people across virtually every race, nationality, religion, culture, and age group. Within netnography, we played a central role in gathering, interpreting, and analyzing the data (Robertson & Kassajiran, 1991).

Netnography, a newer research method, is derived from ethnography. Over the past 20 years, many people have transitioned to interacting through online communities (Kozinets, 2010). This can involve posting photos on Instagram, sharing stories on Facebook, or expressing

thoughts on platforms like X, Reddit, or other online forums. The need for netnography arose in response to this shift, leading marketing experts to consider whether the term "ethnographic research" should be redefined to reflect the unique characteristics of online environments (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography offers an immersive platform to observe and analyze online interactions, tapping into the knowledge and enthusiasm of participants within discussions (Bell et al. 2019).

In this study, we aimed to investigate how consumers express sustainability concerns through online discussions. Recognizing the depth of insights netnography could offer, we had chosen it as the qualitative research method of choice. This approach had been especially suited for delving into a wide range of subjects and uncovering the root causes and obstacles that affected ethical consumption behaviors. Another argument why we have chosen netnography is that it is less time consuming than other research methods (Addeo et al. 2020), where we have a limited amount of time to hand in the research, netnography seemed like a good fit for this research. Moreover, the data that was examined covered a period of seven years, ensuring that the insights shared within this group remained up-to-date and relevant.

A netnographic research project involves a systematic process that can be broken down into five key steps (Kozinets, 2010). We have used this method to maintain a clear direction throughout the paper. Here is a summary of how these steps were implemented in our research:

- Step 1: Define the Research Question and Investigate Topics
To begin, we identified the central research question and outlined the topics we intended to explore. This was achieved by conducting a comprehensive literature review to guide our focus and establish the scope of our study.
- Step 2: Identify and Select a Community
In this step, we examined the existing literature and identified online communities that aligned with our research question and covered the topics of interest. After exploring several potential communities, we selected the one that best matched our research objectives and where relevant discussions were taking place.
- Step 3: Observe, and Collect Data
Having selected our community, we started the observation to gather data. This involved scanning through quotes, comments, and posts within the community and

capturing those that were relevant to our research. These data points were then organized into a document for analysis.

- Step 4: Analyze Data and Interpret Findings

The collected data were subjected to detailed analysis using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. This allowed us to thematize the data, identify the language that they use to express themselves. The interpretation of these findings was guided by the themes that emerged during the analysis process. The comments were coded with colors, with the themes provided by NVivo, facilitating a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the discussions.

- Step 5: Write, Represent, and Report Research Findings

Finally, we compiled our findings into a coherent report. This involved integrating insights from the literature review and our data analysis to form conclusions. We also considered how best to present the information, ensuring that our results were clearly communicated and supported by the evidence we had gathered.

Together, these five steps provided a structured framework for conducting our netnographic research (Kozinets, 2010), allowing us to explore and understand the dynamics of the online community while addressing our original research question.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The collected empirical data was textual and visual, which was taken from one community with multiple relevant threads and active members. In conducting this research, the approach was non-participatory, solely focusing on observing and analyzing online discussions without direct intervention by us (Bell et al. 2019). By delving into these online discussions, we aimed to explore a spectrum of themes, including perceptions and definitions of sustainability, consumer beliefs and values, and the reasons hindering ethical consumption practices. Through these discussions, the goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how consumers express their sustainability concerns and challenges and how they affect ethical consumption. This multifaceted exploration is aimed to shed light on the complexities of ethical consumption and provide valuable insights for informing strategies to promote more environmentally friendly consumer practices.

Data collection for this study primarily involved observing and documenting discussions and interactions within online platforms such as discussions and threads posted on Reddit. Reddit as the platform for observation was chosen since it is a popular online platform known for hosting discussions and sharing content (Reddit, 2024b). Even though we could have chosen platforms such as X, Instagram or Facebook, these platforms are valid for research, Reddit resembles a blog and primarily comprises textual data, making it particularly intriguing for our research purposes (Reddit, 2024b). The anonymity of Reddit facilitates exploratory research by enabling access to users who express their thoughts and engage in discussions within their communities, in which they join because of their shared values and beliefs. Reddit has the choice of anonymity, by using strange usernames, but we assume that these are the users' true thoughts and expressions concerns (Davidson, 2023).

Moreover, Reddit is organized into thousands of communities called “subreddits”, each dedicated to a specific topic, interest, or theme. Reddit allows users to engage in conversations virtually on any subject imaginable. Users can post links, images or text-based content and participate in discussions by commenting on posts or voting them up or down. With millions of active users and a diverse range of communities, Reddit offers an ideal platform for conducting netnography in this research (Reddit, 2024a). First, we selected a subreddit by aligning it with our research question: ***“How do consumers participate in constructing ethical consumption?”*** We also reviewed existing literature to find insights that might support the answers to this question. Second, we sought a group with a high number of active users who frequently posted content, where multiple topics from our literature review were already present (Rageh et al. 2013).

The Reddit community that we decided to observe is called R/Zerowaste, they are committed to reducing their overall waste and impact on the environment and follow the five R's, which are refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot. The community has over one million active users and is ranked in the top 1% of communities on reddit (Reddit, 2024a). Most of the threads that we examined had over a hundred comments and users were commenting frequently to engage and answer each other. Furthermore, we have taken into account the identity, social class, and wealth status of individuals, allowing us to examine how sustainability impacts their purchasing behaviors (Bell et al. 2019). Although the identity, social class, and wealth status of these individuals are anonymous, they often express their social class and wealth status through comments about affordability and accessibility of sustainable products.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we needed to take a step back to assess the information we had gathered and determine the best approach for analyzing it. The Reddit community provided us with textual data to analyze. To analyze this data, we employed critical discourse analysis, a qualitative approach that scrutinizes, interprets, and clarifies social inequalities (Mullet, 2018). In this method, language, narratives, and cultural depictions play a pivotal role in either justifying, creating, or explaining the unequal distribution of power and social hierarchies within society. We use this method by looking at the contextual meaning of the threads on Reddit, so focusing on the social aspects of communication. Additionally, it assisted us in revealing the deeper motivations behind the actions of Reddit users as they strive for sustainable living.

Furthermore, it was brought to our attention and helped us comprehend the disparities existing between corporations and individuals (Cummings et al. 2020). This discourse analysis provides a perspective on where the power lies within relationships (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Looking at text/language as a fingerprint of the individual, by looking at what kind of information does it provide regarding the individual, what consumer segment are they part of, and how are they expressing their feeling on the topic (Berger et al. 2020). The language used in a comment can express who the person is and what they might do in the future. The text that is being used can show the word-of-mouth impact, as the consumers are responding to each other, so it also shows the popularity of the content or the engagement. T

The analyzed threads provided an underlying process, which helped us to understand the consumers better (Berger et al. 2020). The collection of text samples (comments) from the users within the R/Zerowaste community on Reddit presents a complex array of feelings, perspectives, and discussions. Centered around topics like environmentalism, sustainability, consumerism, and capitalism. At their core, these texts reflect a deep concern for the state of the planet and a shared desire to enact meaningful change. They provide a diverse array of perspectives on environmental responsibility, corporate accountability and individual agency in combating climate change and environmental degradation.

As this method revolves around conducting a comprehensive analysis of an online community, a targeted search strategy was devised to collect relevant data. To search within the community there was focused on the following key topics: consumption, ethical consumption, sustainability, and ethical consumption. Each thread identified through this search process and was thoroughly reviewed to assess its relevance to the research objectives. To delve deeper into the selection process, each thread was scrutinized to determine its alignment with the research. Threads that exhibited relevance to the study's focus were further analyzed, while those deemed irrelevant were reviewed but not included in the subsequent analysis. The criteria for relevance included the presence of discussions related to consumer attitudes, behaviors, experiences or perceptions regarding ethical consumption and sustainability.

A total of over 100 threads were identified and opened for examination. Out of these, 56 threads were selected for detailed analysis based on their alignment with the research aim and objectives. This selection process ensured that the analyzed threads provided a rich and diverse insights into the users' participation in constructing ethical consumption within an online community.

Furthermore, we sorted through the information we got from Reddit by coding it into themes (Mullet, 2018). We did this in a systematic approach, making sure to cover everything important. This gave us a bunch of themes that we could use to organize the information better. Afterwards, we examined all those themes to identify the main ideas that repeatedly came up in the discussions. This helped us to identify the focus areas, and to look at the expressions within the texts. Therefore, we have opted to employ NVivo as a tool for the organization and analysis of our qualitative data (Vo Trinh & Kirova, 2018). NVivo stands out for its capacity to streamline the coding process. Through its systematic and structured approach to data analysis, NVivo assisted us in identifying patterns, trends, and relationships that may not be readily discernible solely from the raw data.

The identified threads were characterized into themes based on the feelings or expressions of the users and where after three overarching chapters were set up: Struggle and Resolve; The Call to Action; and Rays of Hope. By categorizing the data into these chapters, the study aimed to offer a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects of the discussion on consumption and sustainability in the chosen online community. By rigorously analyzing and

interpreting the data, the study aimed to extract valuable insights that guided the future research for encouraging more ethical consumption practices.

Through coding with NVivo, we found several key themes to analyze further. With the decision to look at the language that the users are using, we discovered a diverse array of feelings interwoven throughout their discussions. These included feelings/ expressions of frustration, concern, exhaustion, disappointment, skepticism, cynicism, distrust, anger, resentment, urgency, hope, optimism, determination, empowerment, and support, forming a complex emotional landscape within the discussions. These feelings were coded in different colors, to provide a better overview within the large number of threads (Williams & Moser, 2019). We decided to utilize the insights from NVivo to color-code the various feelings within Microsoft word. Drawing from these feelings the research question: “*How do consumers participate in constructing ethical consumption?*” can be addressed by examining the feelings and perspectives expressed in the comments within R/Zerowaste community on Reddit.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

The research ensures its validity through various dimensions, a crucial criterion for maintaining the integrity of its conclusions (Bell et al. 2019). It aligns its understanding of ethical consumption with established definitions in our literature (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Key concepts such as the ethical consumption gap, governmentality, cultural capital, identity, responsabilization, and the role of retailers, are clearly defined and thoroughly examined. In terms of content, the research design conducts a comprehensive investigation into various factors influencing ethical consumption, including the key concepts mentioned earlier. This ensures that the study covers relevant aspects of the gap in sustainable shopping behavior (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018).

The methodology involves researching through the Reddit community R/Zerowaste to examine the threads and capture the complexities of individuals' expressions of sustainability. External validity is ensured through a clear description of the methodology and detailed reporting of the data analysis and collection methods (Yin, 2009). Moreover, the writing

process has been supervised, aligning with Yin's (2009) perspective by evaluating the methodological procedures, which further enhances validity.

Netnography is arguably one of the most effective methods for examining individuals and their experiences since people typically share their experiences online. This post-event feedback is less likely to be influenced by direct observation, making it a valuable source of authentic insights as there are no researchers “present” (Rageh et al. 2013). Ethnographic research, which is conducted in natural settings to observe processes of change, is for example challenging to fully reconstruct the situation (LeCompte & Preissle Goetz, 1982). Contrastingly, in netnography research conducted online, aimed at understanding change processes and the underlying feelings conveyed through individuals' words, the environment allows for a more detailed examination and therefore, easier to replicate. The research's external reliability is maintained via netnography.

In some of the threads we examined, commenting had been closed, ensuring that the conversations we observed remain unchanged. While other threads still allow new comments, the existing ones will stay intact, enhancing the study's replicability (Bell et al. 2019). The data analysis was characterized by transparency, where the documentation and coding were clearly presented. The use of one program facilitated consistencies and, in the findings, which further enhanced the reliability of the research. Acknowledgment of limitations and potential biases contributed to the transparency and rigor of the research process (Thyer, 2010). Furthermore, confirmability holds significant importance in research, despite the inherent subjectivity often associated with qualitative research methods (Bell et al. 2019). The online postings of individuals are fixed in writing, thus limiting the potential for alteration, thereby contributing to a degree of objectivity in qualitative research.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations shape the approach of this study. Traditional netnography permits researchers to passively observe and analyze online interactions without disclosing their presence. While gathering empirical data from Reddit, there was no need for us to register or log in to view the comments. Consequently, the platform was regarded as a public space, eliminating the necessity for consent from community members (Bertilsson, 2015). This

stance finds support in the work of Sudweeks and Rafaeli (1996), who argue that since community members remain anonymous to researchers, explicit informed consent is unnecessary. However, in the book of Kozinets (2015), he argues that while people are aware they are posting on public platforms such as Twitter, web pages, blogs, etc., and understand that these posts can be viewed by marketing researchers or even intelligence agencies, this does not automatically imply that they consent to their comments being used for research. He also raises the question of whether our understanding of public information has shifted, and when comments are being posted online it can be used for research purposes (Kozinets, 2015). This is why we decided to anonymize all quotes in their study.

Furthermore, the key principles in research ethics from Bell and Bryman (2007), were taken in mind whilst the research was being conducted. These points are important to take into consideration, as the first six principles are concerned with protecting the interest of the participants, the last four are intended to protect the integrity of the research (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Only principle three “Ensuring a fully informed consent of research participants” as mentioned previously and principle eight “Declaring affiliations, funding sources and conflicts of interest was not relevant for us and therefore, not taken into consideration.

3.7 Limitations

The study is subject to certain limitations, including the inability to exert control or influence over online discussions, as well as the potential for biased representation within the selected online communities (Kozinets, 2015). Furthermore, reliance solely on publicly available data may limit access to diverse perspectives or demographic groups. It is important to note that this study focuses specifically on the online construction of ethical consumption. While there are other contexts such as offline communities, where discussions and constructions of ethical consumption can occur, as suggested by one thread on neighbors walking together and speaking about their sustainability goals. Our research shows the relevance and significance of online platforms in shaping contemporary understandings of ethical consumption. This means that we ignore/ have not taken into consideration the offline communities.

Online environments have become increasingly prevalent and influential in shaping societal discourses and behaviors, including those related to consumption practices. Communication

and language are recognized as social practices that play a crucial role in constructing meaning and shaping cultural norms (Fairclough, 1993). The online realm offers a unique space for individuals to engage in discursive practices, share perspectives, and co-construct understandings of ethical consumption (Belk, 2013). Therefore, studying online activities provide valuable insights into contemporary consumer behavior and societal values. It is important to clarify that our research focuses exclusively on online activities related to ethical consumption. This approach allowed us to explore the dynamics of online discourse and its implications for the construction of ethical consumption within digital communities. While offline contexts are undoubtedly significant, our research contends that online platforms offer particularly rich and relevant context for understanding contemporary consumption practices and societal norms.

Opting for online environments can introduce algorithmic bias, where each online search prioritizes the user's previous preferences (Baer, 2019). To mitigate this, we have countered by selecting a community aligned to our research and thoroughly scanning all threads within that community. This deliberate selection process further supports our choice for not choosing X, Facebook or Instagram.

3.8 Chapter Summary

In summary, the research approach employed an abductive approach, to establish plausible connections and foster creativity. A critical realism approach was adopted to unveil underlying societal implications from observations on Reddit. Data collection focused on the R/Zerowaste Reddit community, chosen for its active user base and diverse discussions on sustainability. A qualitative netnography method was chosen to analyze online discussions, providing insights into consumer behaviors and attitudes. Critical discourse analysis was utilized for data interpretation, uncovering underlying motivations and power dynamics within discussions. Validity and reliability were ensured through a rigorous research design, transparent methodology, and ethical considerations, including anonymization of quotes. Despite strengths, limitations included the inability to control online discussions and potential biases within selected communities. However, a thorough analysis mitigated these constraints.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter centers on the research analysis findings and their interpretation, delving into the emotions identified among Reddit users. It examines contradictions, contributions, or challenges these emotions pose to existing literature explored in chapter two, shedding light on consumers' involvement in constructing ethical consumption practices and their attitudes towards it. The discussions will be clarified with quotes from the Reddit community, enhancing clarity for the reader and providing real-life examples of the feelings expressed. The chapter is divided into three sub chapters, struggle and resolve, the call to action and rays of hope.

4.1 Struggle and Resolve

In the lively discussions of the R/Zerowaste community, users express their feelings about the challenges they face in trying to help the environment. According to Giesler and Veresiu (2014) in today's world, it is hard to know what the 'right' choices are when it comes to buying things. Some people wonder if others even know what sustainable choices are, let alone if they can act on them (Carrigan & Attalla, 2014). However, users say it is crucial to make choices based on good information, even if it means giving up some convenience or spending more on eco-friendly options. They talk about the importance of taking personal responsibility and expressing knowledge on sustainability. As many users feel frustrated, disappointed, concerned, and exhausted. They see environmental problems getting worse and efforts to fix them falling short. Moreover, the users express that they are human, and can potentially still choose for convenience, even though they want to be sustainable like Reddit User (2024a).

“It can be easy to beat ourselves up for not being 100% zero waste, but knowing these things helps me not get burnt out when I “chose convenience”. Because sometimes choosing convenience also consumes the fewest resource.” (Reddit User, 2024a)

User's express frustration due to the lack of action by governments and big businesses in addressing environmental issues. According to Devinney et al. (2006), responsibility does not just lie with corporations, it is also about individuals working together. Only if the users try to

be sustainable, they feel powerless in the face of entrenched interest and profit driven motives of capitalism. As Reddit User (2019a) expresses:

“This is what happens when people try to save the environment through a market system. Capitalism takes every single thing that motivates people and commodifies it for profit.” (Reddit User, 2019a)

The users further post that they are fed up with the current state of things and the fact that real change is not happening. Some also feel frustrated with the focus on consumerism and the difficulties of promoting sustainable living in a society driven by profit. This frustration stems from caring deeply about the planet and feeling like those causing harm are not being held accountable. That is also why people cannot all agree on this subject, as it can rely on people and their differences. As confirmed by Belk (1988), sustainability can be a part of who they are.

Within the discourse of sustainability among users, a notable emphasis is placed on rational and intentional decision-making processes. Simultaneously, there exists a sense of frustration and urgency stemming from perceived superficial or misguided efforts toward sustainability. Users articulate their discontent with hyper-consumerism and the pervasive influence of capitalism, which promotes product consumption as a solution to problems. Despite feeling powerless in the realm of consumption, consumers have options for expressing their dissatisfaction through political consumerism, as described by Ekström (2010). This entails actions such as boycotting, organizing awareness-raising events, or altering consumption patterns. Even if the users see that they can take actions, they mention that society needs to be restructured like Reddit User (2019b) emphasizes below, advocating for actions to be taken from a 'we' perspective rather than an individual approach.

“The way our society is structured tells us that it is up to individual consumers to use less plastic and basically save the earth...people typically make the most rational choices that are in their self-interest and a lot of time making environmentally friendly choices are not viewed as rational to us. Therefore, we need to essentially restructure society to make those choices more rational.” (Reddit User, 2019b)

The viewpoint of Dauvergne and Lister (2012) on the matter of consumption highlights how businesses leverage sustainability as a means to drive growth and attract new consumers through sustainable marketing strategies. By acknowledging the challenges of breaking free from ingrained consumerist mentalities and the temptation to purchase new products, users critique the phenomenon of sustainable aesthetics and the commodification of sustainability. They advocate for a shift in focus towards substantive actions over superficial appearances. Furthermore, many argue that the emphasis on aesthetic elements detracts from the fundamental principles of sustainability. As mentioned by Reddit User (2019e):

“Constantly buying ‘zero waste’ things that are cute and fashionable is consumerist.”
(Reddit User, 2019e)

Thompson et al. (2019) argue that a lot of products are unnecessarily wrapped in plastic. The users share this feeling of frustration and a sense of helplessness surface as individuals struggle with the enormity of plastic waste generated throughout production chains. The users blame retailers for the overproduction of plastic, highlighting that despite their efforts, there are limited options available for using less plastic. For instance, a Reddit User (2022a) expressed frustration, stating that they are also upset about the lack of plastic-free options in grocery stores.

“Where I currently live, almost all the produce comes prebagged. It’s frustrating and disheartening to me when I tried to make efforts to reduce waste.” (Reddit User, 2022a)

Amidst this frustration, users also voice feelings of being overwhelmed by the prevalence of plastic and the challenges of sourcing sustainable options, particularly when confronted with pre-packaged goods and limited local resources. Consequently, there is a resounding call for a systemic analysis of industries and products to pinpoint areas for reduction and alternative solutions. Language employed within these discussions underscores a desire for practical interventions and an acknowledgment of the multifaceted nature of the issue at hand. As expressed by Reddit User (2024b):

“This kind of makes me feel like most plastic waste is created way before consumers get ahold of an item...an analysis on which industries or products generate more ahead of

time, or even better what alternatives generate less, would be invaluable (or a tax on plastic use).” (Reddit User, 2024b)

Recognizing overconsumption as a global concern (Tollin et al. 2015), Bocken et al. (2014) advocate for the consumption of eco-friendly products as a viable solution. Where Baker et al. (2014) and Gam (2011) mention that individuals raise concerns about companies leveraging this trend for marketing purposes and McDonagh and Prothero (2014), question in their paper if consumption of eco-friendly products can reduce the negative impact of the overall consumption growth. Users acknowledge that companies adhere to customers needs. This is also where users’ express skepticism about the sustainability of eco-friendly consumption as a remedy. Moreover, users’ comments critique the tendency to equate sustainability solely with consumption, challenging the notion that purchasing green products can singularly address environmental challenges, for example Reddit User (2017). The frustration of the users reflects a deeper awareness of the systemic drivers underpinning environmental degradation.

“As it stands today, the belief is that we can consume as much as we want so long as the products were made with the environment, people or animal welfare in mind – this is not a solution to the world’s ills, this is just a way to feel good about bad habits.” (Reddit User, 2017)

Users advocate for a departure from consumption-driven identities, which prioritizes consumption as means of identity and enacting change. The tone of the users’ comments is critical, with a focus on challenging established norms and behaviors related to consumerism. However, responses of the users vary in tone and perspective. Some users agree with the frustration of consumer culture and advocate for more conscious consumption while endorsing systemic changes. Others push back against what they perceive as a condescending tone from other users, advocating for a more inclusive approach to sustainability that acknowledges the complexity of individual choices and the barriers to making fully sustainable decisions. These responses highlight the complexity of sustainability issues, acknowledging the challenges and trade-offs involved in making environmentally conscious choices. They also acknowledge that sustainability is not a one-size fits all endeavor and is especially more difficult with the contradicting messages around them like Reddit User (2022b) mentions:

“Half the battle is reprogramming yourself and resisting cultural norms/marketing messaging that you need to constantly to be buying stuff.” (Reddit User, 2022b)

A prevailing frustration penetrates the discussions regarding the prevalent consumerist mindset in society. Users’ express frustration with overconsumption culture, the emphasis on mass production and the relentless marketing tactics employed by corporations to drive ethical consumption.

According to Guthman (2003), ethical consumption is considered to be for the wealthy white elite. Many users voice frustration and disappointment at the high cost of sustainable products compared to conventional alternatives. Despite the frustration by the users, there is a desire for change. The users aspire towards a shift to more sustainable practices, advocating for reduced consumption, the adoption of eco-friendly products and heightened corporate responsibility. Furthermore, users recognize that certain lifestyle changes are easier for privileged individuals, particularly in terms of affordability and accessibility. As Reddit User (2018b) expresses, this is not a job that can be fixed individually; it should be approached collectively, with the responsibility shared among all stakeholders.

“Conscious consumerism is a privilege, and that’s what’s standing in the way of real change – most people can’t afford to vote with their dollar, not when they have to rely on the cheapest option available (which, more often than not, are among the worst for the environment). We can’t expect the market to fix these problems, and we can’t fix them as individuals – they’re inherently collective, political problems, so those are the ways we need to tackle them.” (Reddit User, 2018)

Users highlight that true sustainability should not be an exclusive club for the wealthy but should be accessible to everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status. They feel conflicted between wanting to make environmentally friendly choices and the financial constraints of doing so. Additionally, they highlight the prevalence of unsustainable practices ingrained in society. They acknowledge the inherent challenges of living a sustainable lifestyle, particularly for those without the means or resources, which Reddit user (2019c) mentions that when a person has less money, sustainability choices are the first to be sacrificed. Yet,

they refuse to let the obstacles deter them, recognizing that even small changes can have ripple effects in the fight against environmental degradation.

“In my honest opinion, affordability is where the environmental movement has failed. Rightfully or not, eco-friendly products are seen by many as luxury goods that could be the first to go when a budget is tightened. And many of the trust fund hipster propelling the movement on social media don’t exactly do it any favors.” (Reddit User, 2019c)

Shaw et al. (2006) writes about the notion that individuals can effect change through their purchasing decisions, it is a concept called ‘vote with your money’. Despite higher costs associated with sustainable products, there is a consensus among users about supporting small businesses and ethical practices. Users reflect on their purchasing choices based on factors such as local sourcing, packaging, and fair-trade practices. Furthermore, there is an understanding of the challenges faced by small businesses in maintaining affordability while adhering to ethical standards. There is also a reflection on the economic implications of rejecting consumerism, particularly concerning the livelihoods of those employed in industries reliant on mass production. Some users advocate for a shift towards more sustainable and ethical practices that prioritize fair wages and environmental responsibility. Which Reddit User (2022c) also confirms in their post, to support local and small businesses instead of corporate chains:

“The things and services you support with your dollar – Support local & small businesses, boycott fast fashion & be more conscious of your consumption and waste patterns.” (Reddit User, 2022c)

Scoones (2016) mentions the ongoing conversations in the politics regarding, recycling and agricultural practices and the environmental impacts. Even though these conversations are happening, the users express profound disappointment with the failure of political systems to enact effective environmental policies and the continued prioritization of profit over sustainability by corporations. This disappointment extends to the perceived indifference of the general population towards environmental issues, further exacerbating feelings of frustration. The disappointment is also expressed by Reddit User (2019d) in how the system is broken. They mention missed opportunities and unfilled promises, struggling with the feelings of disappointment as they confront the harsh realities of environmental degradation.

“I am pretty convinced that our system is so broken, our democracy, our economy, our infrastructure, our processes, our mindsets, everything, is just so far beyond what it needs to be for us to sustainably live happily on this planet, that we need to tear it apart before we can fix it. I really hope I’m wrong but that’s what I see.” (Reddit User, 2019d)

Concern stems from a collective acknowledgment of the urgent need to address pressing environmental issues. Users express concern for the future of the planet and the well-being of future generations, driven by a desire to mitigate the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. There is a prevalent concern for the environmental impact of consumption habits, particularly regarding plastic waste and carbon emissions associated with production and packaging. This concern is compounded by a sense of responsibility to act, prompting users to seek out solutions and engage in a meaningful dialogue within the community.

According to Schor (2021), individuals find themselves in a cycle of work and spending, highlighting the importance of breaking that cycle and effecting change. Users recognize that systemic change is necessary to break this cycle and facilitate meaningful transformation. Furthermore, users express concern about systemic issues such as overconsumption, waste management and corporate responsibility. Amidst these concerns, there is also an understanding of the complexities inherent in navigating the sustainability landscape. In the ongoing discourse, users struggle with the interplay of minimalism, circularity, and consumerism, pondering whether brands labeled as sustainable truly live up to their claims or if it is merely a facade of greenwashing. Research by Kim et al. (2016) suggests that individuals with a more positive outlook may be more susceptible to such advertising. The users express that the impact of consumer choices is significant on driving systemic change. Some users advocate for ethical consumption as a pathway to encourage better practices, and shape corporate behavior, so people with positive behaviour can make the ‘right’ choices. Where Reddit User (2022c) expresses that the individual impact, has an impact on the consumer choices, only the government can make a significant impact.

“Of course, the individual has some impact, and a group of people can have a bigger impact. But at the end of the day, our economy, and lifestyles that are ingrained in our western society need to drastically change before the individual can begin to make a larger impact. It

is much more feasible for corporations to change so the individual can have less of a choice. Which sounds bad if you're looking at it via the capitalist lens. But the dependency on single use or cheap and easy options needs to go. But in the US, the 9-5+ workday with little to no vacations, time off, etc. has made these things necessary just to get by. Government and corporations could change that almost instantly.” (Reddit User, 2022c)

Exhaustion emerges as a natural outcome of the ongoing battle for environmental preservation. Users' express exhaustion with the relentless cycle of environmental degradation and the perceived stagnation in addressing systemic issues. Users struggle with the feeling of exhaustion and burnout, finding it challenging to sustain their activism in the face of ongoing challenges. As expresses by Reddit User (2022d):

“Burnout is something we all need help with, it can feel like your decisions mean nothing when you see the way others live.” (Reddit User, 2022d)

This exhaustion is fueled by a sense of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming challenges and the persistent barriers to meaningful change. Despite their best efforts, users feel drained and disheartened by the enormity of the task at hand and seemingly overwhelming obstacles that stand in the way of progress. Users express feeling overwhelmed by the perpetual pressure to make ethical decisions and minimize waste. Every day presents a challenge as they struggle with the impact of their choices, aiming to cut down on waste and lessen their environmental impact. According to Kozinets (2002a) a major hurdle for consumers is the notion that even if they were to opt out of the market and reject capitalism, they would still require essentials like food and goods. This is confirmed by Reddit User (2021a), that you would always be consuming. This realization makes it seem nearly impossible to fully disengage from the market system.

“The truth in regard to consuming is that we will always need to consume something. When you buy a bar of soap, or you're buying food, you're consuming.” (Reddit User, 2021a)

4.2 The Call to Action

In the realm of sustainability discussions, feelings often run high as individuals struggle with the urgent need for environmental action and the complexities of making meaningful change. The comments highlight the diverse range of feelings present within the R/Zerowaste community. According to Ulusoy and Barretta (2016) a sense of skepticism can arise from the lack of trust consumers have in brands regarding their environmental initiatives. That is one of the feelings shared in the discussions among other feelings like cynicism, distrust, anger and resentment. In the discourse, it is recognized that through open dialogue and embracing diverse perspectives, individuals can effectively navigate the complex feelings surrounding sustainability and collaborate toward solutions. Where Reddit User (2022e) expresses a form of skepticism towards brands:

“For a long time, I have pondered the question “Can we trust big brands with sustainability?” but I’m still uncertain how to feel about it.” (Reddit User, 2022e)

Research by Ulusoy and Barretta (2016) highlights how brands often make unsubstantiated claims regarding sustainability, fueling this skepticism. Furthermore, Moreno and Kang (2020) argue that when such skepticism is voiced, it often marks the beginning of consumer resistance, which has the potential to escalate into a backlash against companies. In ongoing discussions, many users share this skepticism, however they emphasize the necessity of transparency in the market and stricter regulation in labeling standards. As the market claims, are seen as assertions that are often tactics of greenwashing, aimed at exploiting consumer interest rather than making genuine efforts toward sustainability. Consequently, users convey a deep-seated distrust toward corporations' motivations and their sincerity in driving meaningful change. For example, Reddit User (2022d) expresses how angry it makes them.

“Greenwashing. It makes me so angry. The average consumer is tricked into buying a product because it makes them believe they are “helping” but really just added to the issue.” (Reddit User, 2022d)

Users are advocating for authenticity and accountability from companies offering sustainable products. Their skepticism and cynicism are aimed at greenwashing and other misleading marketing tactics, which they criticize for presenting products as more environmentally

friendly than they truly are. Users' express disappointment with these tactics, viewing them as exploiting environmental concerns without taking meaningful action or responsibility. Argued by Baker et al. (2014) and Gam (2014) marketers are attempting to appeal to ethical consumers by making their strategies more attractive to them. In response to this, users in the discussions encourage proactive behavior such as questioning greenwashing tactics. Despite the skepticism, some users acknowledge the efforts made by certain companies toward sustainability, such as introducing eco-friendly product lines, and believe these should be recognized and encouraged. While some see these efforts as positive progress, others remain critical, questioning the sincerity of corporate commitments and calling for greater accountability. The following Reddit User (2022e) expresses a distrust to companies, however, does see their efforts for change.

"I don't know about if you can trust any company, but I think it's a good sign that these companies see market demand for a more sustainable product." (Reddit User, 2022e)

Hearth et al. (2017) perceives consumers as vulnerable compared to the significant force wielded by marketing and corporations. There is a prevailing sense of cynicism toward consumerist culture and the commercialization of sustainability. Many users' express skepticism regarding the superficiality of greenwashing tactics and the belief that purchasing green products serves as a sufficient substitute for genuine environmental action. For example, Reddit User (2021b), expresses that you can fight the force of capitalism, but not with consumption.

"You shouldn't be too hard on you the system is rigged and is built on exploitation. You can organize politically and use activism to help lessen the evils of capitalism. But there isn't much you can do on a personal consumption level."(Reddit User, 2021b)

There is a collective desire to move beyond token gestures and the users address the root causes of environmental degradation. These dynamic sparks ongoing debates within the community, with varying perspectives on the efficacy of corporate sustainability efforts and the role of consumers in driving meaningful change.

According to Cherrier (2009), consumers have the capacity to resist marketing strategies such as greenwashing. Interestingly, Cherrier (2009) notes as well that when consumers resist

consumption, it paradoxically drives them toward overconsumption. There is a strong emphasis on critical self-reflection and self-awareness as users scrutinize their consumption habits and underlying motivations. Additionally, there is an examination of the psychological and societal factors that perpetuate consumerism, ranging from marketing strategies to societal norms. Many users have internalized the notion that consumption equates to fulfillment, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. This sentiment is echoed by Reddit User (2022d), who suggest that even then users aim to disengage from the market, they inadvertently consume their way out of the issue:

“The mindset of most consumers is to consume their way out of the problem.” (Reddit User, 2022d)

Researchers Goodwin et al. (1997), who states that material consumption is the pathway to happiness. The idea of buying and owning more equates to happiness is deeply ingrained in some and breaking free from this mindset requires a significant shift, which can be difficult and slow. Only they do see possibilities out of this pattern, users reflect on the challenge of resisting the constant urge to consume and the need for a shift in mindset at both individual and societal levels. There is a recognition that true sustainability requires not just changes in behavior but also shifts in values and priorities. Where Reddit User (2022f) posts that they have been made to believe this way:

“Consumerism, the idea that we should keep consuming more and more things and that our role in society is to be consumers before all else, is undeniably terrible. It’s not sustainable and, even if it was, it’s not healthy. Too many people have been led to believe that if they can just buy the right thing that they will be happy. It doesn’t work that way.” (Reddit User, 2022f)

Consumption is part of people and their identities, serving as a means of self-expression according to Du Gay et al. (1997). Furthermore, individuals have the agency to actively shape their lives (Ulver, 2023). According to Kozinets (2001), consumption can fill a void in our lives, contributing to our sense of self and our understanding of what holds significance. Consequently, users affirm what these researchers suggest: that true sustainability hinges on individuals taking control of their behaviors and adjusting their values and priorities to embrace a genuinely sustainable lifestyle, which is possible according to them.

Users see big challenges in trying to be ethical consumers. They doubt if their own efforts and institutions are willing to make things better. However, they express that they would still like to try even though their efforts are not noticed, as Reddit User (2022g) and Reddit User (2022c) state in their posts.

“I often doubt if I make a difference, but then I remind myself that I’d rather try when I don’t make a difference than not try when I do.” (Reddit User, 2022g)

“The answer is that personal contributions matter more than many realize. There’s a concerted effort by corporations to make the public doubt their role in reducing environmental impact. If you see anyone saying that we as individuals are powerless and can do nothing, you should probably inform them they have been duped.” (Reddit User, 2022c)

People want to move away from capitalism because it seems to make being a consumer more like a duty than a right (Jacobsen & Dulrud, 2007). However, users feel like capitalism has a lot of problems and that real change needs big shifts in how things work, not just small actions from individuals. Even with these challenges, there is a strong focus on trying to make ethical choices within the current system and pushing for policy changes, as a right not a duty.

Newill (2010) mentions that green capitalism would be a form of capitalism that would be more resistant to crisis and consequent in tackling the climate crisis. There is a consensus within the discussions that consumerism and the culture of disposability are major contributors to environmental degradation. Many users’ express concerns about this “green capitalism”, where they see sustainability becoming just another marketable trend. Which leads to promotion of products and lifestyles that may not truly align with environmental principles. Criticism of capitalism and corporate greenwashing are prevalent throughout the discussions. With users viewing capitalism as the driving force behind environmental degradation and social inequality. Some view capitalism as inherently incompatible with sustainability and advocate for systemic change towards alternative economic models. Others have a problem with the inherent contradictions of a capitalist economic model built with perpetual growth and resource exploitation.

Another strategy that is presented in research by Dauvergne and Lister (2012), is that companies use their power to pressure suppliers in low-cost production. Moreover, as stated by Newill (2010) environmental challenges are rooted in capitalism. Therefore, if corporations within the capitalist system do not change, can a more sustainable world be achievable? The users argue that the pervasive influence of profit driven industries, whose relentless pursuit of growth comes at the expense of the planet. They struggle with the notion of ethical consumption under capitalism, questioning the efficacy of individual action in the face of entrenched systemic injustices. Despite these criticisms, they remain resilient and refuse to give in to despair. As they say do not beat yourself up, but tackle capitalism as said by Reddit User (2021b).

“There’s no ethical consumption under capitalism. Don’t beat yourself up. Beat up capitalism.” (Reddit User, 2021b)

The United Nations set up the UNSDG goal 12 – responsible consumption and production (Sustainable Development Goals, 2024), who argues for responsible consumption and production. Even though, consumers do not agree with capitalism, they channel their frustration into action, striving to make a difference however they can. They recognize the importance of small steps, such as reducing, reusing and recycling, while also advocating for larger systemic changes. They understand that true progress lies not just in personal choices but in collective action and political reform. Reddit User (2022d) expresses that it still a win when someone chooses a more sustainable item and takes their responsibility.

“However, it’s also a win any time somebody grabs a wooden toothbrush, and we can vote with our dollars so to speak. Obviously, regulations and legislation on the macro level are the ultimate goal because companies won’t stop wasting the resources until we make them, but on the ways, we can make them is to show them that sustainable products aren’t just a trend.” (Reddit User, 2022d)

There is a significant burden placed on the consumers, particularly when governments expect them to pay extra for sustainability efforts, such as sustainability fees for plastic and reusable cups (Convery et al. 2007; Dutch Government, 2023). This is where the users start to raise concerns about sustainability approaches that prioritize individual actions and pays, over broader systemic changes. They argue that tackling environmental challenges effectively

requires systemic transformations. Some users agree with this critique, advocating for collective action and systemic solutions instead of relying solely on individual efforts. However, alongside this perspective, there is also a dose of realism and pragmatism. They believe it is crucial to address issues at both the individual and collective levels, acknowledging the broader impact of corporations and government policies again, like Reddit User (2021a) expresses:

“They could accomplish so much more by contacting companies and politicians to take action at the company/government level instead of shaming people for using a straw.”
(Reddit User, 2021a)

A debate arises regarding the environmental impact of different materials, with contrasting views on the sustainability of plastic versus glass or paper. Emotions range from skepticism to anger, emphasizing the importance of considering multiple perspectives in discussions about sustainability. Users express caution against falling into black and white thinking and advocate for informed decisions. This reflects a critical approach for sustainability, emphasizing the importance of understanding the environmental impact of various materials and products. Some responses express anger towards corporations, politicians and the political system for their perceived role in perpetuating environmental degradation. There is a tendency among the users to assign blame to specific entities, such as corporations and politicians, for their perceived failures in addressing environmental issues. Where Reddit User (2021d) who expresses frustration about:

“Remember that the term "carbon footprint" was invented by an oil company. Many changes need to be made at the macro (corporate, government) level as opposed to the micro (personal) level. Corporations want to pass the buck and make sustainability an individual problem as opposed to something THEY should deal with.” (Reddit User, 2021d)

Devinney et al. (2006) argues that even though the users put the blame on the corporations, the responsibility of these corporation’s stem from the acceptance and compliance of the individual. Many users advocate for stricter regulations on corporations and campaign finance reform. Amidst the blame game, there is a recognition of the systemic nature of the problem, with calls for fundamental shifts in societal priorities and governance structures.

Figure 1 below provides a clear picture of how Reddit User (2021c) views the blame game within capitalism, which results in no solution for ethical consumption.

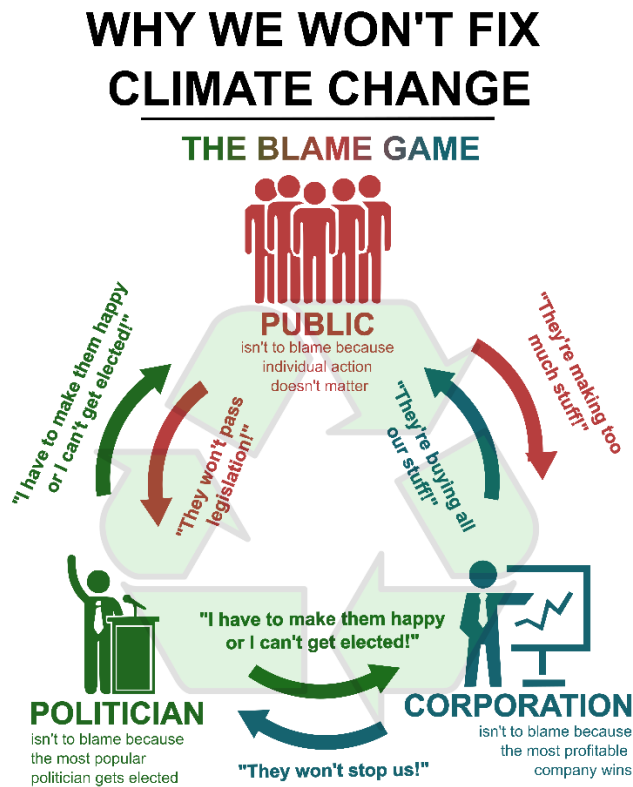


Figure 1: Adapted from reddit thread: what can we do to end this toxic blame(re)cycling (2021c).

The discussion evolves into a cycle of blame where one user initiated a thread within the community, with the image above to prompt other users for their thoughts. The image depicts a powerful scene with fingers pointing accusatorily in multiple directions, symbolizing the complex web of responsibility surrounding environmental degradation. Fingers pointed at corporations for their unsustainable practices, politicians for their lack of action and individuals for their consumption habits. Overall, the image captures the interconnectedness of various stakeholders in the environmental crisis and serves as a call to action for collective responsibility and systemic change. Through the discussions, the users call for bravery in challenging the status quo. Some users argue for shared responsibility, highlighting the role of both individuals and businesses in perpetuating environmental degradation. Reddit User (2019c) confirms this blame game in their post.

“Having overproduction without consumption is meaningless. I feel like consumers and producers are blaming each other constantly, keeping the status quo. Consumers don’t want individual responsibility and want producers to change. Producers say they only fulfill an existing demand.” (Reddit User, 2019c)

People justify their consumption by deeming it sustainable, resulting in no reduction in consumption, with marketers promoting their products as more sustainable, which is a downside according to Shaw et al. (2006). Therefore, the users say that a greater emphasis should be put on corporate accountability, accusing companies of greenwashing and deceptive practices. This recognition of the need for greater transparency from corporations and increased public awareness of greenwashing tactics. Fuels the user’s anger by a sense of betrayal, as users feel that their trust has been violated by entities prioritizing financial gain over environmental preservation. Coupled with anger comes resentment towards industries that prioritize short-term profits at the expense of long-term sustainability. This is also shown by Reddit User (2019c), that the corporations minds are on making profits.

“Corporations have the power, and they aren’t built to think in the long term. Their main concern is how can I make more profit next quarter?” (Reddit User, 2019c)

4.3 Rays of Hope

In the realm of environmental advocacy and sustainability, positive feelings arise through the collective consciousness of individuals dedicated to effecting change. These feelings are urgency, hope, optimism, determination, empowerment and support. Mirroring the complexities inherent in the journey towards a more sustainable future.

The urgency in users’ expressions emphasis a shared recognition of the pressing need for immediate action in addressing environmental challenges. It reflects a sense of alarm regarding the accelerating pace of climate change and environmental degradation. Users’ express urgency regarding the need for global action to address climate change and overconsumption. There is a recognition of the complexities of the issues, including wealth inequality, corporate responsibility, and global distribution of resources. Suggestions for action include voting, supporting environmentally friendly policies, boycotting unethical

companies, and advocating for systemic change. The severity of inaction is highlighted through the discussions. Users voice the need to bridge the gap between awareness and action. While raising awareness is crucial, they stress the significance of tangible solutions and actionable steps. This entails advocating for policy changes, supporting sustainable alternatives, and challenging the prevailing norms of consumer culture. Users reject the notion of being passive bystanders and instead call for proactive engagement in driving change, whether through consumer choices, political activism or adjustments to their way of life. This is also expressed by Reddit User (2024c), who mentions that even though their abilities are limited, they can still do something.

“Well, actually by accepting the fact the influence of one person is limited, but not insignificant and important to take your small part of the responsibility.” (Reddit User, 2024c)

Promotional days, which are significantly promoted by marketers according to Peters and Thomas (2022), such as Black Friday, and those are days where people overconsume a lot. Users express a dislike towards overconsumption, emphasizing actions through empowering words, such as changing their behavior, taking responsibility, and fixing the problem. The discussions revolve around a sense of empowerment in taking individual actions towards sustainability. While individuals are encouraged to take personal responsibility there is a simultaneous call for systemic change. Emphasizing the power of activism and collective action in driving change. Users discuss the importance of advocacy, protest and community organizing as means to exert pressure on governments and corporations. Many users express a commitment to making small changes in their own lives, such as reducing waste, meal planning and utilizing reusable products. These actions are seen as acts of resistance against the prevailing consumerist culture, empowering individuals to reclaim agency over their consumption habits.

Giddens (1984) demonstrates that while individuals can influence each other, personal capabilities play a crucial role in shaping and guiding one's own path. Within the community there is a mention about the ripple effect, where the users talk about influencing others will have a ripple effect on the sustainability movement and the capabilities to spark real change. As mentioned by a Reddit user in (2022c), people can support each other by creating a ripple effect.

“One individual action done by one person won’t do anything for the climate. But many actions, done by many people have the power to create a bigger impact and have a much bigger potential to spark real change.” (Reddit User, 2022c)

Despite transitioning from rational consumerism to irrational consumerism over time (Fu & Clarke, 2019) individuals nowadays are increasingly inclined to revert to being rational consumers. There is a recognition that individual actions, when multiplied across communities, can yield significant impact. As, there is a rejection of defeatist attitudes that downplay the significance of individual contributions, with a call for collective action and empowerment, like Reddit User (2022c) says:

“Stop letting people have a defeatist attitude. If everyone with this attitude stops thinking “I’m just 1 person, I’m not helping at all” all at the same moment, well suddenly you have a vast quantity which actually holds the same power. In reality a moment like that doesn’t spring up out of nowhere, so instead you have to “just do it” and let it spread. Eventually it will.” (Reddit User, 2022c)

A concept described by Belk (1988) where possessions form the extended self and by the states of having, doing and being, are the basis of our existence. Whereas the users demonstrate unwavering commitment to making a difference through their actions, whether it is through personal lifestyle choices, community projects, or involvement in politics. They express a strong sense of determination and empowerment as they navigate the complexities of environmental advocacy. This determination fuels their ability to overcome obstacles, persist in their advocacy endeavors, and motivate others to join the cause. This sense of determination embodies a feeling of agency and responsibility in confronting environmental challenges head-on. It drives users to become catalysts for positive change within their communities and beyond. These fundamentals underscore the actions consumers can take to drive environmental change. Reddit User (2021b) mentioned that by talking with others and raising awareness, you can create a supportive community. This was confirmed by Reddit User (2022g).

“I have also found I am more committed when I talk with others. This online community is a life saver. But connecting with people in close proximity makes a difference. I actually asked

a handful of neighbors if they would take a walk with me so I could ask them questions about how they think about sustainability...They each appreciated talking and, on their own accord, walked away committing to do at least one thing better. We have all been texting about our small wins during the week. It's really motivational to know I did that!" (Reddit User, 2021b)

"Before your contributions hit the world population, they first impact those in your home, those in your neighborhood, those in your city. You influence those around you, you reduce the amount of litter on your street, your actions encourage businesses to keep investing in sustainability. It most definitely makes a difference." (Reddit User, 2022g)

There is a sense of empowerment within the community itself. In the virtual world of Reddit, like minded individuals find comfort and strength. In an otherwise blank landscape, encouraging words and shared experiences stand out, reminding them that they are not alone in their journey. Users encourage each other to continue to make small changes and to advocate for sustainability within their communities. Users use examples from their own experiences to illustrate their points and offer practical solutions. This empowerment gives users a strong sense of determination and purpose, motivating them to make a difference. Despite challenges, there is a determination to find solutions and effect meaningful change. This highlights both the struggles and the determination to effect change at both individual and systemic levels. Where Reddit User (2020a), does confirm it is about episodes of individual actions.

"You can purchase products from local farms that supports local economies to continue sustainable practices, support restaurant that source from responsible suppliers, research and only buy things from companies and organizers that give back to the community. Change doesn't stop at the individual level and not everyone can afford to contribute to the momentum. It is important to think of it as a chain of reaction rather individual episode of actions." (Reddit User, 2020a)

Within the environmental advocacy community, support serves as the backbone, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual assistance among users. This support encompasses encouragement, guidance, and empathy exchanged as users navigate their sustainability journey. Through shared experiences, advice, and emotional validation, users create a supportive community for those striving to live more sustainably. This support network

enhances the resilience of users, equipping them with the resources needed to overcome challenges and remain dedicated to their environmental goals.

According to Arvidsson (2005) and Cova (1997), consumption goes beyond simply purchasing products, it provides a sense of social connectedness and shapes identities, cultures, and communities. Where Beckert (1996) and DiMaggio and Louch (1998) argue that economic decisions are influenced by social environments. Confirmed by Takec et al. (2011), who mentions that decision-making processes are also shaped by individuals' communities, suppliers, customers, and competitors. In the posts users underscore the importance of modeling sustainable behaviors and inspiring others through personal actions. They advocate for leading by example, emphasizing the impact of individual actions in motivating others to make sustainable choices. thereby reinforcing the concept of leading by example in society. Reddit User (2020b) did this by implementing an awareness week at work.

“Regarding “converting” others, one thing I did to have impact was to promote a plastic-free week at work. I encouraged my co-workers to try to go a week without plastic if they wanted to try. The response was overwhelming! At the end of the week everyone talked about how they never realized how much plastic they were using.” (Reddit User, 2020b)

When individuals and corporations observe the government’s actions, they are more inclined to follow this lead (Palm et al. 2019). The users argue that not only individuals should lead by example, but the government should also play a pivotal role. Reddit User (2021c) provides an example of how, when a corporation changes something, individuals tend to follow.

“Bottom line is if people want the shit to stop, they need to stop buying it and acting like the company that provided them with that thing is at fault. Same process for plastic waste. The government could simply ban single use plastic. My city banned plastic bags at the grocery store and huge surprise people use paper bags or reusable ones. People whined at first, but the policy worked and reduced pollution and waste.” (Reddit User, 2021c)

The language of the users is positive and encouraging, focusing on the importance of authenticity and non-judgmental communication. By living authentically individuals can influence social norms and catalyze community engagement around sustainability They stress

the importance of tailoring messages to resonate with different audiences' values and priorities and being patient in guiding others towards sustainable practices. As Reddit User (2024d) suggests taking a more strategic approach, drawing parallels with the concept of inception from the movie with the same name, by changing your own mindset.

“Inception. Did you see the movie? They explained pretty well that for an idea to anchor in your mind the idea must be yours. The brain will reject the ideas of others. You must have found/created the idea yourself to believe in it.” (Reddit User, 2024d)

According to Hwang (2020) sustainability practices can potentially be enhanced by fostering a social sense of belonging. However, the users advocate for subtly guiding others towards sustainable choices by allowing them to arrive at the idea themselves, which will ensure a more sustainable result. There is an emphasis on framing sustainability in terms of benefits that resonate with individuals, such as saving money and time by Reddit User (2024d). The language that is used here is persuasive and calculated, highlighting the importance of influencing behavior indirectly.

“Focus on the benefits or side effects, you know the person cares about. Typically, money and time.” (Reddit User, 2024d)

Linked to this topic are cultural shifts and norms. Discussions emphasize the need for challenging existing attitudes and expectations surrounding consumption and waste. Cultivating a culture of sustainability requires addressing deeply ingrained habits and societal norms. Highlighting the importance of education, awareness-raising, and community mobilization in promoting behavior change. While systemic change is necessary for widespread impact, it begins with individual choices that challenge existing norms and pave the way for broader shifts. Ultimately, every action, whether individual or collective, contributes to the larger goal of creating a more sustainable and environmentally conscious society, as described by Reddit User (2019d), it is up to you.

“It's up to you and me to figure it out. Nobody will save us but us. Get out and build sustainable movements for a sustainable society—in your workplace, in your neighborhoods, and in your other communities—and steamroll over whatever barriers are put in our way,

including and especially "rule of law" crap. It's time. It's an emergency. Treat it like self-defense, because it is!" (Reddit User, 2019d)

Those with high cultural capital are often seen as early adopters of sustainability practices (Holt, 1998), which could be seen as a positive outcome. Moreover, when individuals have more environmental knowledge, they are more likely to adapt to more sustainable behaviors towards the environment (Schahn & Holzer, 1990). Even though people with a higher cultural capital are seen as early adapters, the users stress more importance on the education and awareness in driving sustainable behavior change. By offering quality education to individuals, their knowledge can increase, and this can start at a young age, as described by Reddit User (2019b) below:

"Educating kids is important too - I involve my whole family in making efforts not to be wasteful and to be mindful of the natural world." (Reddit User, 2019b)

Another reason for reluctance for not adopting ethical consumption could be influenced by multiple factors, such as: skepticism, lack of support or consumers perceive it as unfair (Gonzalez-Acros et al. 2021). However, the users advocate for empathy rather than judgment when encouraging others to adopt eco-friendly practices. Like mentioned by Reddit User (2019b), it is about the state of mind of the individuals, to what they believe.

"It might not feel like we're doing anything individually, but the more educated and aware people are about the state of our planet, the more of an impact we'll have. Even though I know it's up to the climate criminals and politicians to make a change, I won't stop doing what I believe is morally/ethically right in my attempts to reduce waste." (Reddit User, 2019b)

Where social connections in a community can impact individuals and their beliefs (Hwang, 2020). The users like to cling on hope, in the midst of uncertainty and adversity, hope for a future where sustainability becomes a fundamental reality rather than a lofty idea. They believe in the power of collective action and the ability of individuals to effect change, one small step at a time. Though the road ahead may be long and challenging, they walk it with courage and conviction, united by a shared vision of a brighter more sustainable tomorrow.

According to Melnyk et al. (2022), norms may offer guidance to individuals, yet their influence is shaped by various factors. For instance, subjective norms represent the societal pressures individuals experience (Botetzagias et al. 2015; Indrianto et al. 2022), potentially leading to less favorable outcomes for environmental actions. Even though it could have a less favorable outcome, users share stories of positive changes they have witnessed, such as the growing popularity of veganism and the increase in sustainable practices in their communities. They support one another in navigating the complexities of sustainability efforts using reflective and open-minded language to share personal experiences and perspectives on the role of individual agency in driving change. An underlying theme of resilience and adaptability emerges among the users. They also share strategies for coping with challenges such as food waste, overconsumption, and the pressure of consumer culture.

There is an acknowledgment of the need to adapt and find creative solutions in the face of systemic obstacles. Engaging in thoughtful discussions, they consider different perspectives and question the effectiveness of individual action versus systemic change. Through this, there is also a call for societal restructuring and a focus on challenging cultural norms surrounding waste and consumerism. As Reddit Users (2022g), confirm that it is about adapting to change and having the knowledge on how to make that change, and by sharing it with each other.

“Over the years I have seen the change around me. When I was vegan, I was seriously the only one, but now I have about 20 vegan restaurants around me. The same goes for plastic use. I used to be the only one carrying the same water bottle with me, now all my friends do it. I used to take my recycling out to a center. Now my city picks it up for everyone.” (Reddit User, 2022g)

“I started sharing tips and brands I liked on my Instagram. I was surprised how much great feedback I got. I think a lot of people want to make changes but aren’t sure how.” (Reddit User, 2022g)

Users express a desire to minimize their ecological footprint and seek solutions to reduce waste and pollution. Whether it involves supporting local farmers or opting for sustainable alternatives, or seeking for help from online applications mentioned by Reddit User (2021b)

“The best solution I’ve found so far...has been apps like Buycott. You can set issues matter to you most, and you can even create your own campaigns for certain causes.” (Reddit User, 2021b)

Even though prices are a constraint for consumers, they do pay a premium price for more sustainable products, which serves as a barrier to adopt a more eco-conscious lifestyle according to Gabriel et al. (2015). There is a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of individual actions with broader social and environmental issues. As well as a recognition of the challenges posed by limited budgets and conflicting priorities. Many users acknowledge the challenges and obstacles they face in adopting more sustainable lifestyles, including budget constraints, limited availability of plastic free options, and the time and effort required for research and conscious decision-making.

Additionally, it could also be influenced by the disparity in power dynamics, where wealthy individuals maintain control due to their ability to spend more on sustainable products, leaving those with less money feeling powerless (Chomsky, 2017). Despite these challenges, individuals remain committed to their values and strive to find creative solutions to minimize their impact on the planet. Like thinking outside the box posts Reddit User (2019d). From local initiatives to global campaigns, individuals unite in a shared commitment to protect the planet and safeguard the future for generations to come.

“We need to start thinking outside the box. To acknowledge that we don’t have all the solutions to the climate and ecological crisis yet.” (Reddit User, 2019d)

Users express hope and optimism as a belief in the possibility of positive change and a sustainable future. This hope fuels their determination to continue to advocate for environmental preservation and drives their efforts to inspire others to join the cause. There is optimism for the possibility of change as users’ express faith in humanity’s capacity to innovate and adapt. They believe that collective action can lead to positive outcomes for both society and the environment. Despite the taunting task at hand, users show a resolute commitment to making a difference. Reddit User (2022g) described that if everyone adopts the attitude that they do not make an impact, then there will be no change.

“If everyone who thought “my impact doesn’t matter so I won’t try” tried then the world would be a better place. If everyone voted who thought their vote didn’t matter the world would be a different place. Doing your best inspires others too. I went vegan years ago and never ever preached it. So many people around me have done it now because I made it look easy and normal. It sounds corny but “be the change you want to see in the world”.”
(Reddit User, 2022g)

In essence, the discussions embrace empowerment, hope and collaboration reflecting the multifaceted nature of sustainability challenges and the diverse approaches to address it effectively. Despite differing viewpoints, there is a common thread of optimism and shared commitment to making a positive impact on the environment. Users advocate for a holistic approach that encompasses policy reform, corporate accountability, consumer education and community engagement. They emphasize the interconnectedness of environmental, social and economic issues and a call for collaborative efforts across sectors and stakeholders to address the multifaceted challenges of climate change and ecological sustainability. By having the ‘right’ mindset towards sustainable change as posted by Reddit User (2021d)

“I do not go out of my way to reduce my consumption and waste in vain hope to save the planet, but I do so out of an ideology that tells me that it’s the right thing to do. At the very least, if you influence your ideas and experiences to others, you could have an exponential impact on a magnitude of people’s perspectives. You never know.” (Reddit User, 2021d)

4.4 Chapter Summary

The chapters present a tale of struggle within the R/Zerowaste community's journey in environmental activism. Even though, it is hard to make the right choices in consumption. The users see it is crucial to have enough information to make the right choices, they want to make the most sustainable choice even if it is less convenient. It is mentioned that businesses leverage sustainability for growth. Only, users mention that they are done with the focus on aesthetical products and advocate for change. Users express their frustration with worsening environmental conditions despite their individual efforts highlights the pressing need for systemic change. They critique corporate greenwashing, emphasizing the importance of authenticity and accountability. Despite facing fatigue, users demonstrate resilience,

advocating for collective responsibility and systemic shifts to address environmental challenges.

Moreover, within, 'Rays of Hope' shifts the narrative more to highlight positive feelings and collective determination among environmental advocates. Users' express urgency, hope, and empowerment in confronting environmental issues head-on. Urgency prompts calls for immediate action, pushing for systemic changes and practical solutions to combat climate change and overconsumption. Empowerment encourages personal responsibility and broader societal shifts towards sustainability. Determination drives users to effect change through activism, community engagement, and lifestyle adjustments. The community serves as a source of support, fostering resilience and mutual assistance. Through empathy and encouragement, users navigate obstacles and inspire sustainable practices. Despite challenges, optimism prevails, rooted in the belief in collective action and human innovation.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we outline our Research Aims and Research Objectives, addressing the research question established in the introduction: “*How do consumers participate in constructing ethical consumption?*” Additionally, we explore the theoretical and practical implications for our research for both scholars and corporations. Lastly, we mention limitations and offer suggestions for future research, drawing from insights gathered from our discussions and identifying areas that justify further investigation.

5.1 Research Aims and Research Objectives

The discourse analysis of the R/Zerowaste community reveals a complex emotional landscape that emphasizes the multifaceted nature of sustainability discussions. The examination of users’ comments has highlighted a spectrum of feelings – skepticism, anger, hope and empowerment to name a few. The feelings indicate challenges and opportunities faced by individuals in their pursuit of environmental advocacy.

The analysis has illustrated the frustrations faced by the users as they witness worsening environmental conditions despite their dedicated efforts. These frustrations emphasize the urgent need for systemic change, with users critiquing corporate greenwashing and advocating for authenticity and accountability in sustainability efforts. However, amidst this struggle, there is hope shining through, highlighting the positive sentiments and collective environmental advocates.

The researchers emphasize the importance of individual change in consumption behaviors for sustainability. Even though, the users agree that consumers should take responsibility and adjust their values and priorities to make the world a better place. The users, argue for the concept of leading by example, where individuals can inspire one another. Corporations can be influenced by consumer demand and government regulations, and governments can set standards for corporations, and individuals. It is about setting an example and engaging in conversations to share knowledge about sustainability, helping others become aware and learn from these behaviors.

To answer the research question, “How do consumers participate in constructing ethical consumption?”, they do so by sharing their thoughts online, demonstrating sustainable practices, and leading by example. This is crucial for understanding their role in promoting sustainability. Consumers emphasize progress is possible through a combination of individual efforts and collective action. They recognize their own responsibility in reducing their impact by adjusting their lifestyles, but also understand the need for systemic changes driven by corporate accountability and government regulations. By taking personal actions and encouraging others, they feel like they should inspire other consumers to do the same, by doing this they contribute significantly to the broader sustainability movement. Even though this sounds all very positive, and they express hope, they also express a form of skepticism and anger towards corporations and governments, about their sustainability practices, and especially the lack of it.

Our findings suggest that collective actions are seen as a solution that balances individualism and collectivism. In online communication, users find it ethical to both work individually and collectively. This perspective could potentially reshape our understanding of governmentality, emphasizing a cooperative approach where individual actions contribute to a collective effort in achieving sustainability.

The research findings are valuable for various stakeholders interested in ethical consumption. Scholars and researchers in the field of environmental studies and consumer behavior can benefit from the insights gained from this research. The findings contribute to the academic understanding of how consumers engage with sustainability issues in online communities. Businesses who seek to align their practices with sustainability goals can leverage the research findings to better understand consumer feelings and perspectives.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The discourse analysis of the R/Zerowaste community provides significant theoretical contributions to the fields of environmental studies, consumer behavior and sustainability discourse. This research delves into the emotional landscape of sustainability discussions, revealing a nuanced spectrum of feelings among community members. These feelings highlight the multifaceted nature of individual experiences and reactions within the

sustainability movement, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the emotional dimensions that drive or hinder consumer engagement with sustainability issues.

A key theoretical contribution of this research is the vital role of online communities in contemporary environmental advocacy. By examining users' comments and interactions with each other within the community, the research illustrates how digital spaces facilitate knowledge sharing, emotional expression, and collective action. This offers a theoretical framework for the impact of online discourse on real-world sustainability practices, highlighting the importance of digital platforms in fostering environmental advocacy.

Insights into consumer behavior and sustainable practices form another cornerstone of this research's theoretical contributions. The research demonstrates how consumers express their commitment to sustainability through online engagement, demonstration of sustainable practices and leading by example. This enhances the theoretical understanding of consumer behavior in the sustainability context, showing how individual actions and peer influence contribute to broader environmental advocacy.

Furthermore, the users emphasize the need for environmental knowledge, suggesting that informed consumer choices can significantly influence market behavior towards sustainability. These insights emphasize the potential of consumer power to catalyze changes in corporate practices and product offerings. It emphasizes the role of consumer awareness and responsibility in driving demand for sustainable products.

Our research identifies both challenges and opportunities within sustainability efforts. The dual focus on the skepticism towards corporate greenwashing and the hope and empowerment among users provides a balanced view of the sustainability landscape. The critique of corporate greenwashing and the call for authenticity and accountability highlight the theoretical importance of trust and transparency in consumer-corporate relationships. This adds to the body of knowledge on corporate responsibility and ethical consumption. Stressing the need for genuine commitment to sustainable practices to build consumer trust and drive meaningful change.

Additionally, is the identification of the tension between individual efforts and the need for systemic change. The frustrations expressed by users, who feel their dedicated efforts are

insufficient in the face of worsening environmental conditions, emphasize the limitations of individual actions. This points out a critical interplay between individuals and systemic changes in sustainability, enriching theoretical discussions about the efficacy and scope of sustainability goals. Responsibility for sustainability lies not only with politicians but also with individuals working collectively.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings of our research offer profound insights into consumer behavior and attitudes towards ethical consumption, with implications for various stakeholders. Understanding the power of individual consumer choices in influencing market behavior can lead to increased consumer awareness. In practical terms, this research suggests that consumers make more informed purchasing decisions, opting for products and services from companies that prioritize sustainability and social responsibility. This trend can incentivize businesses to adopt more sustainable practices and product offerings to meet consumer demand. Businesses can use this research to understand the growing demand for sustainable products and services among consumers. Companies can align their business practices with sustainability goals, investing in eco-friendly manufacturing processes, ethical sourcing, and transparent supply chains to meet consumer expectations, ultimately enhancing brand reputation and loyalty.

Our research emphasizes the importance of informed sustainability campaigns. By understanding the feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of consumers towards sustainable products and practices, organizations can tailor their campaigns to resonate more effectively with their target audience. Through targeted messaging that addresses common concerns that align with consumers values, these campaigns can inspire meaningful behavior change and foster a culture of sustainability. Moreover, our research highlights the necessity of transparent communication strategies. Businesses and organizations can leverage these insights to build trust with consumers by emphasizing authenticity, accountability, and concrete actions in their sustainability efforts. Addressing consumer skepticism and cynicism through transparent communication, organizations can cultivate positive perceptions and strengthen their brand reputation. In addition, our findings have implications for product development. Businesses can use consumer insights to innovate and promote sustainable products that meet the needs and preferences of environmentally conscious consumers. By

understanding consumer motivations, businesses can develop products and marketing strategies that resonate with their target audience, driving demand for sustainable alternatives.

Furthermore, our research informs policy development by providing policymakers with valuable insights into consumer needs and concerns regarding ethical consumption. Policymakers can craft regulations and policies that support sustainable behavior change at both individual and systemic levels. With that they can create an enabling environment for sustainable practices and drive progress towards environmental goals.

Ultimately, our research emphasizes the importance of understanding consumer perspectives and behaviors in driving the transition towards a more sustainable future. By leveraging these insights, organizations, businesses, and policymakers can play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability efforts. Our research suggests inviting consumers into activities rather than focusing solely on the responsabilization of consumers, fostering a more inclusive and participatory approach to sustainability.

5.4 Limitations

As outlined in the aim and purpose in the introduction, this research centers on the ethical consumption practices of individuals. The method employed is netnography, which involves studying an online community. The limitation for this research is that it focuses exclusively on one online community, thereby excluding other communities on Reddit that discuss ethical consumption. We opted for this focus because, among other communities we examined, this one boasted the highest level of activity in terms of both comments and users. Additionally, the decision to focus solely on Reddit, without incorporating other platforms, was made to maintain a clear research boundary. The study is not restricted to any single generation, as the online comments in this community do not indicate the age or any other information of the commenters.

Moreover, the primary emphasis is on consumers' ethical consumption expressions. This approach was adopted to maintain a clear scope while keeping the studies objectives in mind. Despite the scope limitations in this master's thesis, the expectation is that it will offer valuable insights and contribute meaningfully to the discussion on this topic. The findings

aim to add to the existing knowledge in a way that aligns with the study's defined boundaries and purpose.

Further limitations of the research are discussed in the Chapter 5.5 Future Research below. Where limitations of our research are mentioned with recommendations for future research.

5.5 Future Research

Future research could explore several directions to deepen our understanding of the power of individuals in driving sustainability goals. We have not delved deeply into the emotional expressions behind the feelings of the users. Therefore, one promising direction for future research is delving deeper into the realm of behavioral psychology to unravel the underlying factors shaping individual choices and actions related to sustainability. By examining cognitive biases, social norms, and motivational drivers, researchers can identify key tools for promoting environmental behaviors and overcoming barriers to sustainable action.

Additionally, exploring the psychological and social impacts of sustainable living deserves further exploration. Understanding how adopting sustainable practices affects individual well-being, social relationships, and community cohesion can provide a holistic view of the benefits and challenges associated with sustainability. This can help create a more comprehensive and supportive framework for promoting sustainable lifestyles.

Future research could explore the offline or real-life behaviors of individuals engaged in sustainability efforts, complementing the insights from this research. While our research has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of online sustainability discourse, understanding how these discussions translate into tangible actions in the physical world is essential for a comprehensive understanding of sustainability behavior. They could investigate consumer behaviors in physical retail environments, examining how individuals make sustainable choices when shopping for products. Studies could explore factors influencing purchasing decisions, such as product labeling, pricing strategies and the availability of sustainable alternatives.

Due to our time limit a longitudinal study was not possible to conduct, however, it would be interesting for future research to conduct a longitudinal study. This study could track changes

in consumer attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions over time, providing insights into the long-term impact of initiatives aimed at promoting sustainability. Such studies could also assess the sustainability of behavior changes and identify factors that facilitate or hinder the maintenance of sustainable practices over extended periods.

Our study has not taken demographics into consideration. Therefore, another fruitful research area could be a cross-cultural perspectives study, with studies needed to explore cultural norms, social structures and institutional frameworks that influence sustainable behaviors. Comparing attitudes, values, and behaviors related to sustainability across diverse cultures, researchers can identify commonalities, differences, and opportunities. This approach can help tailor initiatives to be culturally relevant and effective in various contexts.

Exploring community-based initiatives and grassroots movements offers another promising area for future research, both offline and online, as our research has been focused only on an online community. Opportunities to study successful projects and the role of local communities addressing environmental challenges. By documenting and analyzing community-driven sustainability programs, researchers can uncover valuable insights into the factors that contribute to their success and scalability. Furthermore, by studying local sustainability movements, workshops and community outreach programs, researchers can assess the effectiveness of community-based initiatives in driving behavioral change.

The conclusion of our research is that sustainable change should be done individually together. That is why, another potential research area is the integration of online and offline channels in sustainability advocacy and activism. Examining how online communities mobilize offline actions, such as protests, clean-up campaigns or advocacy events, researchers can examine the constructive collaboration between virtual and physical forms of engagement. Understanding how online discussions translate into collective action in the real world can inform strategies for maximizing the impact of online sustainability movements.

Further studies could focus on effective messaging strategies and communication campaigns targeting diverse audiences. The focus in our study has been mainly from a consumer perspective, therefore, it would be another approach to look at the marketing perspective. Through such endeavors, researchers can distill best practices for engaging and empowering individuals to undertake meaningful actions toward sustainability. Investigating how different

demographics respond to various messaging techniques can help tailor communication strategies to maximize their impact. Could potentially look at digital approaches, the role of technology and innovation warrants further investigation. Future studies could explore the effectiveness of digital platforms in promoting sustainable behaviors, facilitating collective action and fostering community engagement around environmental issues.

By pursuing these diverse research avenues, scholars can contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how to effectively harness individual and collective action to achieve sustainability goals.

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