

Sustainability and Consumption in Critical Times

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Project Description:

This project will investigate how consumers construct and maintain sustainable consumption identities (Schaefer & Crane, 2005) in the face of the triple challenges of pandemic, economic recession, and climate change.

Consumption is a large part of individual's social identification (Belk, 1988). Consumption holds strong symbolic power (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Thompson & Loveland, 2015). It assists individuals in creating and sustaining an identity and to locate themselves in society (Elliott, 1997; Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1995). There is however an inherent tension in modern consumption as current levels of consumption are causing serious environmental harm (Mont & Plepys, 2008; Mont, Neuvonen & Lähteenoja, 2014). Some consumers are shifting their sense of self towards pro-environmental self-identities, exerting their environmental-friendliness through socially normalized pro-environmental consumption choices (Dermody, Koenig-Lewis, Zhao & Hanmer-Lloyd, 2018, Prendergast & Tsang, 2019) in a shift from self-centric to values-centric consumption (Doran, 2008).

Recent social developments related to the global climate emergency and biodiversity crisis, such as Fridays for Future, paired with changed living circumstances for many under the Covid-19 pandemic, have led to a renewed public debate about the possibilities of sustainable consumption (McKinsey & Co., 2020; Friedland, 2020). Social distancing and lock-down measures as well as the economic implications of the Covid-19 outbreak has meant that individuals' living and working conditions have been impacted drastically (Baker, Farrokhnia, Meyer, Pagel & Yannelis, 2020). The limits on the ability to socialize and travel has led to consumers changing their buying habits, often adopting more sustainable consumption practices, such as zero waste (Cutcher, 2020), veganism (Smithers, 2020) or buy local campaigns (Osbourne, 2019).

To what extent these changes in practice are maintained, diminish or evolve after the pandemic is unclear. While one survey found that consumers intended to purchase from sustainable brands even after the pandemic (Rogers, 2020), previous research suggest that reduced consumption levels after a crisis may be quite short lived (Dutt & Padmanabhan, 2011).

The project will employ a social-constructionist research approach and in-depth, qualitative methods. Possible theoretical lenses of the project include but are not limited to the performative (Goffman, 1959), value (Schwartz, 2012); or embodied (Diprose, 2002) aspects of the construction and communication of sustainable consumer identities. The methodological emphasis will be on in-depth understanding of consumers' own construction of their sustainable consumer identities. Methods may include long interviews, consumer journals, participant observation or netnography. A longitudinal element to the research design would be welcome.

About the Supervisors:

Dr Anja Schaefer is Senior Lecturer in Management. She holds a PhD in Consumer Behaviour and has a long standing interest in sustainable consumption. Her other research interests are in the area of business sustainability and ethics and she has published regularly in these areas. She has supervised several successful PhD projects.

Dr Matthew Higgins is Senior Lecturer in Marketing. He holds a PhD in Moral Philosophy and Marketing and his research and enterprise interests are in the area of consumer culture and ethics. He is currently supervising PhD students in the area of consumption and sustainability and has supervised a number of successful PhD projects which focus on the topics of identity, waste, religion, sustainability and ethics.

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