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# **How Inclusive is Sustainable Consumption?**

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## ***Abstract***

**Sustainability is an immediate must for humankind to rise life quality. It suggests shifting our way of living both in social and environmental terms and changing the existing production and consumption system.**

**One of the issues under sustainability umbrella is sustainable consumption. In this context, consumer occupies a very important place. For the sustainable system to work properly, consumer collaboration and willingness to behave and consume in a sustainable way is highly necessary. Consumer refers here, every one of us, everybody in society. As we all need to consume to be able to survive, our way of doing it effects the environment and shapes the system. Therefore, we all are asked to help the shift towards sustainability by changing our way of consumption, and our preferences.**

**On the other hand, our consumption attitude is linked to many variables. For some people, the priority in their life might be just to survive as not everyone is living in the proper economic and social conditions. Especially low-income people may not have the ability to prefer sustainable options or it may not even be a consideration for**

them in their life. Also, considering that sustainable consumption can still be seen as an alternative to the mainstream, and also the existing non-environmental system is better-organized, it is mostly much easier to access unsustainable options today. Sustainable alternatives might be considered even niche and sometimes luxury. From this perspective, it is questionable how inclusive sustainability in terms of consumption is. Although from social sustainability perspective equity, justice, and inclusiveness are emphasized, from the environmental sustainability perspective, especially for sustainable consumption where human is an important part, these terms are not addressed often and are a missing part in the literature.

In this study, the purpose is to learn how different variables like economic, psychologic and technical background of people have impact on sustainable consumption practices and due to that, to question the inclusiveness of sustainable consumption.

## **Introduction**

Environment where living creatures and non-living things interact has been a concern especially after 20th century. The interactive system between human and nature has shown that the way we interact cannot sustain in the existing way anymore. Especially, the new way of consumption and production system after industrial revolution has caused a big damage. Therefore, a quick and radical moves to change our way of production and consumption is urgent. Searching a more sustainable path inquires far reaching system change and strong approaches to achieve it, not small adjustments. This means a policy for “ecological modernization”

**involving production and consumption systems. (Hobson, 2013, p. 1083 cited in Welch &Warde, 2018; BLue, 2017). That means the consumption pattern as much as production system is also essential.**

**Carrete et al. suggested in their research that from a wider ecologic approach to more specific ones sustainable consumption behavior is influenced by attitude and consumer beliefs (2012). Therefore, sustainable consumption practices has social, cultural, and economic background and motivated by "various external, internal and situational factors" (Welch&Warde, 2018). As these factors change for everybody or for different groups, their behavior would be different. Environmental justice scholarship suggesting "factors such as class, race, ethnicity, gender and age demarcate groups that experience a limited range of alternatives and have unequal access to systems of provision" (Seyfang& Paavola, 2008). Therefore, as society is segmented, they also suggest that sustainable consumption research, can be better organized to understand consumer constraints and opportunities in various groups with stratified view rather than universal (Imhoff et al. 2004 cited in ibid). Regarding this, in this research the different variables that may influence sustainable consumption behavior are analyzed and their impact on sustainable practices are discussed and accordingly inclusiveness of sustainability is questioned.**

**Sustainable consumption is mostly used interchangeably with the major phrases like "green consumption", "responsible consumption", "environmentally friendly consumption" despite some nuances in their connotations (Kostadinova, 2016, p. 225 cited in Welch&Warde, 2018 cited). In this study, it refers mainly ecologically conscious lifestyles as an alternative way of**

consumption to 'mainstream' and 'conventional' one which often implies unsustainable patterns.

Consumption is briefly "the acquisition and use of goods and services for purposes of social, cultural and material enrichment" (Warde, 2022). In other words, it can be a 'good' or a 'service' and can be 'acquired' or 'used' and also can be for 'social, cultural or material enrichment'. That is to say, it is a broader and complex approach. 'Acquisition of goods' involves purchasing activity, therefore it has an economic aspect but not restricted to it. As it has "social, cultural and material enrichment" purposes, it involves motivational and psychological aspects. Lastly, as it is also "use of goods" it involves many activities of daily life like waste management, transportation, cleaning, eating etc. Therefore, for the implementation of these activities infrastructural aspect is important, so it has a technical aspect, as well.

According to the literature the challenges of different consumer groups face are summarized on three topics in this research. They are namely "economic background", "psychologic background" and "technical background".

## **1. Economic Background**

The economic background in this research implies the financial income of consumers, which is necessary for shopping activity and accordingly purchasing decisions.

**Based on Bourdieu's theory of capital, consuming in a greener way and the use of greener items also require mostly the possession of them (cited in Welch &Warde, 2018). Therefore, sustainable consumption involves shopping activity and accordingly implies purchasing.**

**It can be argued that more sustainable alternatives are generally more expensive than mainstream goods. As cited in Carrete et al. (Laroche et al., 2001), green products mostly require some special processes "such as containing less toxic substances" and therefore sold at a higher price. If the brand does not find ways to decrease the price of manufacturing or selling phase to encompass the low-income group with eco-friendly alternatives, this positions the brand at a higher cost market segment and connects with the consumers willing to pay it (Carrete et al., 2012). Therefore, the higher earners as they are better placed financially are more likely to purchase green products. As a result, the prices have an impact on the consumer purchasing decision.**

**According to the research conducted in Mexico in parallel with the some previous research in China and India (cited in Carrete et al., 2012) claims that economic uncertainty may cause low-income groups to prefer conventional counterparts of environmentally friendly products as these groups are not able to afford when there is a high price difference. It is to say, "green behavior was motivated by economical rather than environmental reasons, particularly among lower social classes" (ibid).**

**Sustainability is mostly associated with also wellness. Considering this, according to the guidelines for sustainable food consumption, meat and fish should be consumed less, and “seasonal, local, and, where possible, organic fruit and vegetables” and also “ecologic and fair trade–certified produce wherever possible” should be preferred (Clonan & Holdsworth, 2012). However, as cited in Clonan & Holdsworth (2012), “sustainable and certified produce is more expensive, and the cost is a recognized barrier to accessing a healthy, sustainable diet”. Yet, there is limited research specifically addressing “low-income consumers’ motivations and capacities” toward green behavior (Dowler, 2008). Although some of the advises seems likely to be met by poorer people like eating less meat and fish, and choosing seasonal, local foods rather than processed food or maybe even growing their own food, these advises also “can serve additional constraints on already restricted ways of living” (Dowler, 2008). For example, local food may not be available for every area or growing own food may demand extra time and more effort.**

**The situation is similar for also clothing in terms of sustainable consumption. Fast fashion is the way for affordable and available clothing as large quantities are sold for cheap prices. Some even argue that therefore it democratizes fashion as the latest styles can be owned by anyone (Bick et al., 2018). However, it is both unhealthy and unsustainable, bad for both people and the environment.**

**“From the growth of water-intensive cotton, to the release of untreated dyes into local water sources, to worker’s**

**low wages and poor working conditions; the environmental and social costs involved in textile manufacturing are widespread”(ibid).**

**Therefore, it is offered that when new cloth is needed, high-quality, long-lasting and greener clothes from transparent supply chain retailers should be chosen for the environment. However, new green purchasing seems much more expensive than the fast-fashion, therefore it might be a luxury option for low-income groups.**

**H&M might be one of the many examples to show the price difference of environmentally friendly products compared to regular ones. For example, when “woman puffer jacket” is searched on the website of H&M clothing brand 63 results are shown and one of them is made of recycled nylon (H&M, n.d.). When the results are sorted by the highest price, it is seen that the recycled option is the most expensive one without a discount at 199 euros. Even the sale price of 96 €, is still in the second most expensive price category. We can see the most expensive ones are only three jackets with 136 €, followed by the ones between 100-90 €. The main point is that 48 of the 63 results are priced under 50 € which shows clearly that the environmental option is very expensive compared to the regular one’s price.**

**To decrease consumption level and produce fewer products, rather than buying a new ones, second-hand stores or repairing old cloth is suggested (Bick at al., 2018; Welch & Warde, 2018). This seems quite possible for low-income groups as they are more familiar with secondhand usage even though it is not motivated by**



environmental concerns. However, as discussed before for sustainable food, these options are also restricting life of poorer people. Not giving a brand new purchasing option to economically disadvantaged groups while higher earners have the opportunity to buy high-quality options would not be fair.

Sustainable consumption is mentioned as choosing environmentally friendly options for daily activities instead of the conventional ones by assessing “likely benefits and costs”, also the motivation should be an environmental concern, not “utility maximization, individual profit, and enjoyment” (Welch & Warde, 2018). Elgin (1993) suggests that living with environmental concern is a “sophisticated response” to “deteriorating industrial civilizations” (cited in Welch & Warde, 2018). She also mentioned that “an ecological approach to living invites us to continuously balance two aspects of life – maintaining ourselves (creating a workable existence) and surpassing ourselves (creating a meaningful existence)” (p. 403).

Considering this approach, if sustainable consumption is surpassing ourselves rather than maintaining our existence and the motivation is responsibility for the environment rather than individual profit, one can say that sustainable consumption is a choice, a decision among various options, rather than an obligation. In this case, as food and textile consumption examples explained, the practices low-income groups can do is an obligation as they do not have many options and also they are not motivated by the environmental concern, instead, motivated by economic reasons.

Therefore, sustainable consumption does not seem to be available for the low-income groups truly, as others do.

## **2. Psychologic Background**

**Psychologic Background in this research implies the cognitive process and mental situation of the consumer, which involves intent, concern and motivations for consumption behavior and decisions. These all are also related to social environment, culture, age and education of the consumer.**

**As mentioned previously, sustainable consumption is mainly based on environmental or ecologic concern and involves sophisticated decisions for creating a meaningful existence. That requires "awareness" which is defined as "knowing something" in Oxford Dictionary. Knowing is automatically related to 'information'. Accordingly, here, the question is about the ability of different groups in terms of reaching the information and knowledge for sustainability. Age, education, and culture are some of the main variables influencing awareness, and so consumption behavior. Carrete et al. (2012) mention that for example, younger and/or educated people have a wider holistic view of human activities and their results and therefore, they "have greater understanding" of and are more familiar with the environmental issues.**

**To sum up, the opportunities to reach information and gain knowledge to be aware of environmental issues are not equal for all groups due to their age, education, or culture/geography. Therefore, it will not be fair to expect the same level of sensitivity from everybody for pro-environmental consumption. This situation**

questions the inclusiveness level of sustainable consumption. As not everybody has the same psychologic background it seems sustainable consumption is not all-embracing.

### **3. Technical Background**

Technical Background in this research implies the infrastructural obstacles which are not caused by the consumer's individual situation, but rather by the system s/he belongs to. This refers to facilities and options offered by the government or other organizations like private market initiatives. Therefore, technical background briefly is the possibilities for sustainable consumption in the organization of daily life.

In some situations, even the two variables mentioned above - economic and psychological background- of the individual for sustainable consumption is strong, in other words, even if the consumer has a high income and also is willing to behave in a sustainable way, the technical background can be an obstacle.

Urban life today is constructed based on modern lifestyle, in other words, unsustainable way of living based on fast and over-consumption. The modern economic system has been the base where green practices are missing especially after the industrial revolution. Accordingly, as today we are in the transition zone from unsustainable to sustainable systems, in many regions even though the citizens are willing to change their consumption habits, the opportunities and facilities may not be ready. As convenience is an essential part of consumer collaboration, infrastructure appears to

**be another challenge for the inclusiveness of sustainable consumption (Carrete et al., 2012).**

**For example, 'Returnity' is a brand that gives an option for reusable packages for last-mile delivery (Packaging Europe, 2022). Which offers to use durable packages repeatedly for the delivery of online shopping, instead of disposable packages. However, in many countries, there is no option in this field for sustainable consumption. That means, even environmentally conscious people have to throw the delivery package when they shop online. Not allowing shopping online for sustainability, again restricts the options and this shows the limits of inclusiveness of sustainable consumption due to the technical background of some groups.**

**The responsibility should not be attached to only consumer as the government and policy are other essential parts of the sustainable system. Government's proactive policies is an integral part of the systemic change in terms of regulations or subsidizing the initiatives considering environmental protection (Stevens, 2010). For example, the consumers who do not have the facilities like zero-waste stores with reusable packages, affordable ecologic food options, waste separation possibilities, recycling technologies or efficient public transportation are not fair to be expected to behave ecologically responsible. As Carrete et al. said substantial improvement would only be realistic when efforts of different stakeholders like "consumer, the media, the private sector, and the government" are collaborated. (2012).**

## Results and Discussion

Sustainable consumption encompasses a wide range of practices. For example reduction of waste by for example reusing objects or recycling materials (Carrete et al., 2012). In addition, more specifically, household consumption practices like cleaning, cooking; eating practices like organic or natural; shopping & purchasing and transportation can be some examples. In this study the main variables which have impact on consumer practices are addressed from three aspects. In terms of inclusiveness, how these variables have an impact on sustainable consumption behavior is discussed. 3 main variables are:

- 1. Economic background: Income**
- 2. Psychological background: Age, Education, culture, geography**
- 3. Technical background: Governmental policies and facilities & Private entrepreneurs**

It is seen that all options for sustainable consumption are not available to some groups because of the lack of opportunity due to their economic/psychological/technical background.

From an economic aspect; many of the options especially related to purchasing activity are mostly suitable for the groups with higher income as eco-products are much more expensive than mainstream counterparts. Therefore, as mentioned in the literature there have been some options offered to groups with lower income like repairing, using second-hand, growing own food, etc. are more likely to limit their consumption practices and to serve additional

constraints, even to isolate and exclude them from the rest of the society. Options also imply the past, when more comfortable options have not evolved yet. However, today, options are diverse. Restricting some groups to only a small part of consumption practices does not seem inclusive and fair. This contradicts with sustainable consumption theme. Therefore, the economic background has a big impact on sustainable consumption and accordingly doesn't seem inclusive for lower income groups.

On the other hand, poorer groups are likely to behave greener in many of their daily practices as they use second-hand products for example instead of buying new ones or try to consume less energy and use public transportation for example. However, these all choices are motivated by money saving instead of environmental concern since their first challenge is to survive. As mentioned before, sustainable consumption is defined as a conscious choice motivated by environmental concern, it should be proactive rather than reactive. Therefore, these practices cannot be regarded as sustainable consumption when a family does it because of the obligation due to the limited budget and not with pro-environmental intention. As Seyfang & Paavola mentioned, "although the focus of sustainable consumption policy is over-consumption on a societal level, for many groups in society under-consumption remains a key social justice issue which must not be overlooked" (2008).

From a psychological aspect; demanding an old lady to prefer eco-friendly natural cleaning detergents instead of regular cleaning chemicals might be very challenging for her as she used to use the regular ones for her whole life and has the insight that supports

chemicals are the only way of cleaning. Therefore she might feel the other options can not be clean enough. As knowledge and awareness are based on some variables beyond one's preference like age, education, culture, etc., until the same conditions and the same psychologic background is provided, sustainable consumption doesn't seem inclusive.

Lastly, from the technical aspect; even consumer is motivated by environmental concern and willing to behave greener, the facilitation may not be provided and may stop her/him. Due to some conditions like the policy and the initiatives in that region which is, again, out of one's power is a challenge for sustainable consumption and its inclusiveness.

Inclusiveness is defined in Cambridge dictionary as "the quality of including many different types of people and treating them all fairly and equally" (n.d.). From the results, it is seen that "*the quality*" of sustainable consumption is so low in terms of covering different types of gripus and suggesting the fair opportunities. Therefore it can clearly be claimed that sustainable consumption is not inclusive for all, for now.

To be able to overcome obstacles facilitating learning literacy, developing policies considering different groups with different capacity to act sustainable might help and public service can be supportive.

## Resources

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