

Navigating Tensions: How Consumers Seek to Navigate Contradicting Institutional Logics in Their Consumption

ABSTRACT

Despite research on conscious consumption as a form of balanced consumption, we lack understanding of how sustainability-conscious consumers navigate tensions between hedonistic consumerism and sustainability values. We study this through in-depth interviews and find that consumers navigate this tension through organizational work strategies of decoupling, compromising, and combining.

INTRODUCTION

In their daily lives, sustainability-conscious consumers face the challenge of navigating the tension between hedonistic consumerism and their sustainability values (Schmitt et al., 2022). Just like other consumers, they find joy in consuming and acquiring objects (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). However, because of their focus on sustainability, they are also aware of its impact on the climate (Trudel, 2019). Thus, most of them seek to consume consciously (Szmigin et al., 2009; Williams & Poehlman, 2017) as a form of more balanced consumption. We lack understanding of how sustainability-conscious consumers navigate the tensions between the two opposing logics of hedonistic consumerism and sustainability values and therefore ask: *How do consumers navigate the tension between contradicting logics in their consumption?*

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Navigating tensions

Prior research has studied different forms of how consumers navigate tensions such as anti-consumption (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Varman & Belk, 2009), boycott (Thompson & Arsel, 2004), refusal (Bublitz et al., 2023) or voluntary simplicity (Shaw & Newholm, 2002). In contrast to these more extreme consumer responses, we see that lived consumer reality is often more subtle in balancing tensions. While there exists a growing body of literature on conscious consumption (Szmigin et al., 2009; Williams & Poehlman, 2017) aiming to live a more sustainable lifestyle (Black & Cherrier, 2010), we lack understanding of how consumers seek to overcome tensions between hedonistic consumerism and sustainability values.

Analytical lens: Institutional theory

Institutional theory is a framework for understanding organizations and social structures, wherein institutional logics are the underlying principles or values that guide behavior (Scott, 1995). The logic of hedonistic consumerism is the prioritization of enjoyment through consumption with a focus on pleasure-seeking and indulgence (Babin et al., 1994; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Tarka et al., 2023). The logic of sustainability emphasizes the protection and preservation of natural resources while also considering ethical aspects (Godfrey et al., 2022; Haws et al., 2014). This can be achieved by consuming less (Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997). To manage contradicting institutional logics prior research suggests the following institutional work strategies (Pache & Santos, 2013): *Decoupling* describes the inconsistent implementation of an institutional policy (Crilly et al., 2012), *compromising* means finding a balance between conflicting expectations of diverging logics (Kraatz & Block, 2008) and finally, *combining* enacts a combination of activities from each logic (Greenwood et al., 2011). Given our focus on understanding how consumers navigate the tension between contradicting logics in their consumption behavior, institutional theory provides us with the analytic tool needed to enlighten this.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, we conducted an interview study consisting of 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 14 sustainability influencers, as these are consumers who transparently reflect on how they navigate the tension between hedonistic consumerism and sustainability values. Four informants were interviewed twice to better understand their experiences and processes in navigating the tension over time. The interviews lasted 01:06:35 hours on average with a total duration of 19:58:29 hours. We analyzed our data through the lens of institutional theory (Dolbec et al., 2021; Humphreys, 2010; Scott, 1995) and used an iterative approach (Spiggle, 1994).

FINDINGS

Through analysis of the data in light of institutional theory, we show that consumers navigate tensions between hedonistic consumerism and sustainability values by following the institutional work strategies of *decoupling*, *compromising*, and *combining*.

Decoupling: When confronted with a situation of different consumption interests, consumers don't implement their policies of one logic consistently but adapt them according to their hierarchy of importance, as Yelle describes: "So if I can't get Tofu in an unpackaged way. I still need it in my diet to get protein, so I'm still gonna get it." This shows that to be more sustainable Yelle prefers to get her food without any packaging, however, if this is not available she neglects her packaging policy in favor of other values she prioritizes, such as health.

Compromising: To find a balance between the contradicting logics of consumerism and sustainability, consumers agree on compromises for their consumption. Kate explains: "With clothes I have a rule to think about it for a month before I get it." By postponing the consumption to a later stage, she grants herself to purchase new clothes, however, only if the desire for a certain piece is so strong that it lasts for a predefined amount of time. Just as Kate uses a time frame, Anna uses her wardrobe space as a compromise for the amount of consumerism she tolerates: "I just have a wardrobe in my flat and whatever fits in there is ok, but no more." In doing so, Anna acknowledges her interest in shopping for clothes, even though she does not objectively need anything while still limiting the extent of her consumption. These strategies help them to fulfill both logics, consuming as they wish but at a scale that conforms to their sustainability values.

Combining: To soothe the tension between the contradicting logics, consumers also combine activities derived from each logic. Kristen for example admits that she contradicts her desire to consume less constantly, but when she does she makes sure to at least make purchases from ethical brands: "What I like is supporting companies that I do feel care at some fundamental level and they're not just in it to make as much money as humanly possible." That way she still consumes products she would not necessarily need but at least from an ethical company, thus staying true to her sustainability values.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Our findings show that consumers navigate tensions between contradicting institutional logics within their consumption by following institutional work strategies of *decoupling*, *compromising*, and *combining*. We contribute to the literature streams on conscious consumption (e.g., Szmigin et al., 2009), anti-consumption (e.g., Kozinets & Handelman, 2004), and voluntary simplicity (e.g., Shaw & Newholm, 2002). We also contribute to marketing practice by showing how sustainability-conscious consumers seek to escape

marketing-propagated consumerism to maneuver their consumption to adhere to their sustainability values while still fulfilling their desire for hedonistic consumerism.

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