
CONSUMERS' SELF-EXTENSION AND EXPERIENCES OF SWITCHING TO MORE SUSTAINABLE FOOD-RELATED PRODUCTS

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental challenges increasingly shape everyday consumer behaviour, particularly in relation to food, packaging and household products. Chemical exposure, plastic pollution and climate change have moved sustainability from a specialist ethical concern into mainstream consumer culture¹. Food-related choices are therefore no longer guided solely by price or convenience; they are also connected to environmental responsibility, personal health, ethical positioning and consumers' understanding of themselves.

Sustainable consumption is especially relevant in food-related contexts because food quality, packaging materials and product transparency are directly connected to both individual well-being and environmental impact. Consumers may seek organic products, reduce plastic packaging, choose reusable containers or prefer minimally processed food not only because these practices are perceived as environmentally responsible, but also because they are associated with safety, health and a preferred way of life². Sustainable consumption can therefore be understood as a practice through which consumers express values and construct coherence between their everyday choices and their self-concept³.

Despite growing awareness of environmental and health-related issues, the transition to sustainable food consumption remains complex. Consumers often encounter tensions between sustainability values and practical constraints, including price, convenience, availability, established habits and uncertainty

¹ Bengtsson M., Alfredsson E., Cohen M., Lorek S., Schroeder P. Transforming systems of consumption and production for achieving the sustainable development goals: moving beyond efficiency. *Sustainability Science*. 2018. Vol. 13, No. 6. P. 1533–1547. DOI: 10.1007/s11625-018-0582-1.

² Ахмаді А., Светлічна М. І. Таємниці довголіття шведів: спілкування, спорт та насолода життям. *Молодий вчений*. 2024. № 4 (128). С. 14–16. DOI: 10.32839/2304-5809/2024-4-128-31.

³ Belk R. W. Possessions and the extended self in consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 1988. Vol. 15, No. 2. P. 139–168. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2489522>.

about product information. This tension is commonly described as the attitude-behaviour gap: consumers may express positive attitudes towards sustainability while their actual purchasing decisions remain shaped by practical and contextual factors. Sustainable consumption should therefore not be treated as a simple consequence of environmental awareness, but as a negotiated process in which health concerns, sustainability values, social influence and everyday constraints interact⁴.

Existing research has shown that sustainable consumption may carry symbolic meaning and contribute to consumers' identity construction⁵. However, much of the literature focuses on behavioural intentions, purchase outcomes or quantitative patterns of adoption. Less attention has been given to how consumers personally experience the transition towards sustainable food-related products and how they interpret these practices in relation to health, sustainability and self-extension. In particular, there remains limited qualitative research on how concerns about plastic packaging, processed food, artificial ingredients and product materials become connected to consumers' values, everyday routines and sense of self.

This study addresses this gap by examining how consumers experience the transition towards more sustainable food-related consumption. It focuses on everyday practices, including choosing organic food, reducing plastic packaging, using reusable kitchen solutions and preferring natural or minimally processed products. The study applies Extended Self Theory and Self-Congruity Theory to examine how sustainable consumption becomes connected to identity, personal values and self-perception.

The aim of this study is to explore how consumers experience the transition towards more sustainable food-related consumption and how health concerns and sustainability values contribute to self-extension and identity construction.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

(RQ1) How do consumers engage in self-extension through sustainable food consumption, including organic food choices and reduced use of plastic packaging?

(RQ2) How do health concerns and sustainability values shape this process of self-extension and the construction of the extended self?

The study also relates to Sustainable Development Goal 3, "Good Health and Well-being", and Sustainable Development Goal 12, "Responsible Consumption

⁴ Johnstone M.-L., Tan L. P. Exploring the gap between consumers' green rhetoric and purchasing behaviour. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 2020. Vol. 132, No. 2. P. 311–328. DOI: 10.1007/s10551-014-2316-3.

⁵ Chwiałkowska A. An interplay of the consumption values and green behavior. *Business Strategy and the Environment*. 2024. URL: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1823835/FULLTEXT02.pdf>.

and Production”. These goals provide a broader context for examining how food-related consumption practices can be associated with healthier everyday choices and reduced environmental impact.

1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review. Self-Congruity Theory

Self-Congruity Theory explains how consumers evaluate and select products in relation to their self-concept. Consumers are more likely to prefer products, brands and consumption practices that correspond with how they see themselves or how they wish to be perceived by others. Product choice is therefore not only functional; it may also communicate personal values, desired identities and social positioning.

In the context of sustainable food consumption, self-congruity helps explain why consumers may choose organic food, reusable containers, glass packaging or products with perceived natural ingredients. These choices can reflect a consumer’s desire to act consistently with values related to health, environmental responsibility and ethical consumption. A consumer who considers themselves health-conscious may prefer products perceived as less processed or less harmful, while an environmentally conscious consumer may seek to reduce plastic use or choose products with sustainable packaging.

Self-congruity also includes social dimensions. Consumers may select sustainable products because these choices correspond with the image they wish to present to family members, colleagues, friends or wider social groups. Sustainable consumption can therefore become a symbolic practice through which individuals communicate that they are responsible, health-oriented, environmentally aware or aligned with particular lifestyles. At the same time, the relationship between values and purchasing behaviour is not always consistent, because consumers also face price constraints, limited availability and convenience-based decisions.

Consumer decision-making is shaped by social norms, reference groups and cultural expectations⁶. Family members, friends, colleagues, social media content and educational experiences may influence what consumers regard as normal, desirable or responsible. Sustainable practices can receive social validation when they are visible within reference groups, while consumers may also experience discomfort when their choices diverge from perceived social norms⁷.

⁶ Confente I., Scarpi D., Russo I. Marketing a new generation of sustainable products: The role of brand symbolism and consumer values. *Journal of Business Research*. 2020. Vol. 112. P. 203–215. URL: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0148296319306186>.

⁷ Светлічна М. І., Светлічний І. В. Enigmatic realm of global tourism production system. *Молодий вчений*. 2023. № 12 (124). С. 111–114. DOI: 10.32839/2304-5809/2023-12-124-18.

This social dimension is particularly relevant to sustainable consumption because consumers often evaluate their food-related practices not only in relation to personal preferences but also in relation to the expectations and visible behaviours of significant others.

Extended Self Theory provides a framework for understanding how possessions, objects and everyday routines become connected to identity. According to this perspective, the self extends beyond the physical individual to include objects, habits and practices that carry personal meaning. Consumption is therefore not merely a practical activity; it can become part of how individuals construct, reinforce and express who they are.

In sustainable food-related consumption, repeated practices may gradually become incorporated into the extended self. Choosing reusable kitchen products, reducing plastic packaging, purchasing local food, composting, avoiding highly processed products or using glass containers may initially be practical decisions. When these actions are repeated and associated with values such as responsibility, health, safety or environmental care, they may become part of consumers' everyday identity. Sustainable practices are thus not necessarily isolated purchasing decisions; they can form routines through which individuals express broader moral priorities and preferred ways of living⁸.

From a practice-oriented perspective, sustainable consumption is maintained not by isolated purchasing decisions but by repeated routines involving shopping, food preparation, storage and waste management. Repetition can transform initially practical choices, such as carrying reusable bags or selecting glass containers, into familiar elements of everyday life. When these routines are consistently linked to values of health, responsibility and environmental care, they may support the incorporation of sustainable practices into the extended self⁹.

The extended self is not fixed. Consumers may adopt, adjust or abandon practices as their circumstances, values and social environments change. Sustainable consumption is consequently best understood as a gradual and negotiated process rather than an immediate identity transformation. Consumers may identify with sustainability while still choosing less sustainable alternatives when price, convenience, availability or familiar routines become more influential. This tension does not invalidate sustainable values; instead, it illustrates how identity construction through consumption is shaped by competing priorities in everyday life.

⁸ Shove E., Pantzar M., Watson M. The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes. London : SAGE Publications, 2012. DOI: 10.4135/9781446250655.

⁹ Светлічна М. І. Global tourism production systems: topical issues. *Гуманітарний і інноваційний ракурс професійної майстерності: пошуки молодих вчених*. 2023. DOI: 10.36059/978-966-397-357-9-53.

However, identity-related values do not automatically result in consistent sustainable behaviour. The relationship between self-image, environmental intentions and everyday consumption may be disrupted by price, product availability, convenience, established routines and uncertainty about product claims. This discrepancy, often described as the attitude-behaviour gap, indicates that sustainable consumption should be understood as a negotiated process rather than a direct expression of individual values.

2. Health, Social Influence and Barriers to Sustainable Consumption

Sustainable food consumption is increasingly motivated by both environmental concern and personal health. Consumers may associate plastic packaging, artificial ingredients, highly processed food and chemical exposure with perceived health risks, while organic food, natural materials and reusable products may be associated with safety, cleanliness and well-being. Health-related motivations can be particularly immediate because they concern the consumer's body, family and everyday routines.

Environmental and health concerns should not be treated as separate or competing motivations. In food-related consumption, they frequently overlap. Reducing plastic packaging may be understood as a way to limit environmental waste and reduce perceived exposure to harmful substances. Choosing fresh or minimally processed food may be associated with personal health as well as lower environmental impact. Sustainable food consumption therefore often reflects an integrated set of values in which self-care and environmental responsibility reinforce one another.

However, health-related and sustainability-related choices are shaped by uncertainty. Consumers are exposed to information from social media, advertising, family members, schools, health professionals and online platforms. These sources may provide useful knowledge but may also create confusion when claims about food, packaging and health risks are inconsistent or difficult to verify. Consumers must therefore interpret competing information while making routine decisions under practical constraints.

At the same time, sustainable consumption is constrained by structural and practical barriers. Price, product availability, convenience, limited time, habits and lack of trust in sustainability claims can prevent consumers from acting consistently with their values. These factors help explain the attitude-behaviour gap, in which positive views about sustainability do not always lead to sustainable purchasing behaviour. Sustainable food consumption should therefore be conceptualised as a complex process shaped by individual values, identity-related meanings, social influence and everyday constraints¹⁰.

¹⁰ Wijesinghe P. G. S. D., Baduge D. C. N., Светлічна М., Date M., Tusha R. Luxury wellness and medical tourism: A sustainable hospitality concept for Öland. *Grail of Science*. 2025. DOI: 10.36074/grail-of-science.23.05.2025.153.

Extended Self Theory and Self-Congruity Theory together provide an appropriate framework for examining this process. Self-Congruity Theory explains how sustainable choices may align with consumers’ self-image and desired identity, while Extended Self Theory explains how repeated consumption practices may become integrated into everyday routines and the extended self. Together, these theories support an analysis of sustainable food consumption as an identity-related process shaped by health concerns, sustainability values, social meaning and practical realities.

Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach to explore how consumers experience and interpret the transition towards more sustainable food-related consumption. The approach focuses on subjective meanings, personal experiences and socially constructed understandings of the relationships between food choices, health, environmental responsibility, identity and everyday life.

The research uses focus group discussions as the primary method of data collection. Focus groups were selected because they allow participants to discuss their experiences, compare views and respond to the perspectives of others. This interaction is particularly relevant for sustainable consumption because consumer choices are influenced not only by individual preferences but also by social norms, shared knowledge, family practices and peer expectations.

The study included three digitally conducted focus groups involving a total of nineteen participants. The first and second groups each included six participants, while the third group included seven participants. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The sampling strategy focused on consumers who had an interest in sustainable food-related consumption, personal health or environmentally conscious practices, including the use of organic food, reusable kitchen products or reduced plastic packaging.

Table 1

Overview of focus group discussions

Focus group	Date	Platform	Participants	Duration	Participant profile
Focus Group 1	25 April 2026	Microsoft Teams	6	80 minutes	Participants from Ukraine and Sweden; aged 18–78
Focus Group 2	26 April 2026	Microsoft Teams	6	90 minutes	Participants from Sri Lanka and Sweden; aged 18–58
Focus Group 3	28 April 2026	Google Meet	7	120 minutes	Participants from Ukraine, France, Sri Lanka and Sweden; aged 19–48
Total	–	Online	19	290 minutes	Four countries; mixed-gender sample; age range 18–78

Source: compiled by the authors based on focus-group discussion records.

In total, the study generated 290 minutes of group discussion across three online focus groups, involving nineteen participants from Ukraine, Sweden, Sri Lanka and France.

Semi-structured discussion guides were used to ensure that all groups addressed the central research themes while allowing participants to introduce additional experiences and reflections. The discussions focused on personal health, sustainability values, food and packaging choices, identity, social influence, future aspirations and barriers to sustainable consumption. The digital format enabled participation by individuals from different backgrounds and locations.

The discussions lasted 80, 90 and 120 minutes, respectively. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. Because some participants preferred not to be audio-recorded, the empirical material consisted of detailed discussion notes and anonymised summaries prepared by the moderators rather than verbatim transcripts. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as contextual thematic insights rather than verbatim representations of participants' wording.

The material was analysed through thematic analysis. This approach was used to identify, organise and interpret recurring patterns across the focus groups. The analysis focused on themes related to self-extension, health concerns, sustainability values, symbolic meanings of food and packaging, social influence, practical barriers and the gradual adoption of sustainable practices. Extended Self Theory and Self-Congruity Theory informed the interpretation of how participants connected everyday consumption practices with identity, self-perception and desired lifestyles. Table 2 summarises how participants connected particular food-related practices with symbolic meanings and identity-related processes¹¹.

Empirical Findings and Analysis. The thematic analysis identified recurring patterns concerning health-related motivations, environmental responsibility, symbolic meanings of materials and food, social influence, and practical barriers to sustainable consumption. Table 2 presents the relationship between the practices reported by participants, the meanings attributed to them, and their relevance to identity and self-extension.

These thematic patterns provide the empirical basis for the conclusions presented below.

Overall, the focus-group discussions suggest that sustainable food-related consumption was experienced as a gradual rather than a uniform transition.

¹¹ Nowell L. S, Norris J. M., White D. E., Moules N. J. Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2017. Vol. 16, No. 1.

Participants connected sustainable practices with health, environmental responsibility and preferred identities, but their ability to maintain these practices was shaped by price, availability, convenience, habits and social context. These findings are not statistically generalisable; instead, they provide context-specific insight into how participants interpreted sustainable consumption in everyday life.

Table 2

Sustainable practices, symbolic meanings and identity processes

Sustainable practice	Meaning attributed by participants	Link with identity and self-extension
Avoiding plastic packaging; choosing glass, stainless steel or ceramic	Cleanliness, safety, reduced perceived chemical exposure and environmental care	Repeated use of alternative materials may embody a health-conscious and environmentally responsible self-image
Buying organic, local or minimally processed food	Naturalness, authenticity, quality and care for personal well-being	Food choices align consumption with a preferred health-oriented identity
Reusing bags, jars and kitchen containers	Responsibility, thrift, waste reduction and routine care	Repetition transforms practical actions into normalised everyday practices
Cooking at home and reducing food waste	Control over ingredients, self-care and responsible domestic practice	Household routines become part of an individual's lifestyle narrative
Using reusable items in workplaces or public settings	Professionalism, social responsibility and role-model behaviour	Visible choices support social recognition of a sustainable identity

Source: compiled by the authors based on focus-group discussions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined consumers' experiences of the transition towards more sustainable food-related consumption and the role of health concerns and sustainability values in processes of self-extension and extended self-construction. The findings suggest that sustainable food consumption is better understood as an ongoing identity-related process than as a series of isolated purchase decisions. Participants described gradual changes in everyday routines, including reducing plastic packaging, choosing organic or minimally processed food, using reusable kitchen products and preferring materials perceived as safer or more natural. These practices were not described solely as functional choices; they were also connected to how participants understood themselves and the lifestyles they wished to maintain.

The findings address RQ1 by indicating that sustainable food-related practices may contribute to self-extension when they are repeated, personally meaningful and incorporated into everyday routines. Participants associated glass, wood, stainless steel, local food and minimally processed ingredients with cleanliness, safety, naturalness, authenticity and responsibility. In contrast, plastic packaging and highly processed food were often associated with perceived risks, artificiality and discomfort. These associations suggest that participants evaluated food-related products not only according to practical utility, but also according to their fit with a desired self-image. Sustainable consumption therefore emerged as a form of identity-related practice through which repeated actions could gradually become part of the extended self.

The findings also address RQ2 by showing that participants frequently described health concerns as an immediate motivation for changing food-related consumption practices. Participants referred to perceived risks connected with plastic food packaging, food storage, artificial ingredients and highly processed products. Environmental concern often coexisted with these health-related considerations. Rather than functioning as competing motivations, health and sustainability appeared to operate as complementary values: sustainable practices were understood both as forms of self-care and as ways of reducing environmental harm. This relationship was particularly visible when participants discussed reducing plastic packaging, choosing reusable containers and preferring fresh, organic or minimally processed food.

Social influence also played an important role in how sustainable consumption was interpreted and adopted. Participants referred to family members, colleagues, social media, online information and educational settings when discussing what they considered normal, responsible or desirable consumption behaviour. These influences could encourage sustainable practices by providing role models, information and social validation. At the same time, participants described uncertainty and pressure arising from conflicting information, expectations and perceived social norms. The findings therefore suggest that sustainable consumption is not solely an individual process; it is also socially negotiated through reference groups, visible practices and shared understandings of responsible behaviour.

The transition towards sustainable food-related consumption was constrained by practical barriers. Participants referred to price, limited availability, convenience, established habits and uncertainty about sustainability claims as reasons why their everyday decisions did not always correspond with their sustainability ideals. These findings are consistent with the attitude-behaviour gap, whereby positive attitudes towards sustainability do not necessarily result in consistent sustainable behaviour. Within this study, the discrepancy did not simply reflect a lack of

commitment. Instead, it reflected the need to negotiate between personal values, economic conditions, product availability and routine practices¹².

The findings are relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 3, Good Health and Well-being, because participants linked food quality and packaging choices with everyday health-oriented practices. They are also relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 12, Responsible Consumption and Production, because reusable products, reduced packaging and lower food waste were interpreted as practical expressions of responsible consumption.

Overall, the findings frame sustainable food-related consumption as a gradual and context-dependent identity process. Sustainable practices may become part of the extended self through repetition, symbolic meaning and social validation, while their adoption remains shaped by health concerns, environmental values, social influence and everyday constraints. Sustainable food consumption is therefore not only an environmental practice or a purchasing decision. It is a way through which consumers may connect personal well-being, moral responsibility and everyday consumption choices.

SUMMARY

This chapter investigates consumers' experiences of transitioning towards more sustainable food-related consumption, with a focus on identity and self-extension in everyday practices. Drawing on Extended Self Theory and Self-Congruity Theory, the study examines how practices such as using reusable kitchenware, purchasing organic food and reducing plastic packaging become connected to consumers' self-perception, values and identity. The study uses a qualitative interpretivist research design based on three focus group discussions with nineteen participants who expressed an interest in environmentally conscious consumption.

The findings suggest that participants did not perceive sustainable consumption solely as a functional activity. Instead, they often associated sustainable food-related practices with personal identity, health, responsibility and preferred lifestyles. Participants frequently described concerns about perceived health risks related to microplastics, chemicals and highly processed food as immediate motivations for changing their consumption practices. Environmental concerns commonly complemented these health-related motivations. However, price, limited product availability, convenience and established habits sometimes constrained participants' ability to act consistently with their sustainability values, reflecting an attitude-behaviour gap.

¹² Johnstone M.-L., Tan L. P. Exploring the gap between consumers' green rhetoric and purchasing behaviour. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 2020. Vol. 132, No. 2. P. 311–328. DOI: 10.1007/s10551-014-2316-3.

The study concludes that sustainable food consumption is an identity-related and socially negotiated process shaped by health concerns, environmental values, social norms and everyday constraints. The findings have implications for marketing, policy and regulatory initiatives aimed at supporting the normalisation of healthy and sustainable consumption practices.

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