

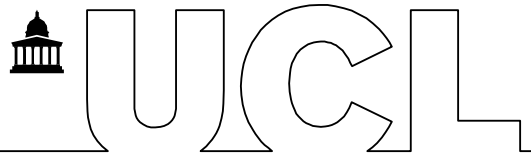
**The Role of Consumers in the Global North: Consumer Agency in the Pursuit of Sustainable Prosperity**

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores what role consumers in the Global North play in achieving sustainable prosperity. This paper aims to contribute to the growing bodies of literature discussing consumer behaviour with regards to sustainable futures and social prosperity by examining the role of consumer agency. The global climate crisis, increasing inequalities, environmental degradation, and growing socio-economic issues are all affected by consumerism. The way in which those in the Global North consume has, and will continue to have, a dramatic effect on the planet and its people. There is a growing acceptance and uptake in attempted sustainable consumption practices in the hope of positively affecting these global issues. Drawing on extant empirical research on consumer behaviour and sustainability practices, I will engage with Geel's multi-level perspective theory of socio-technical transitions, the concept of postmaterialism and institutional work theory to explore the agency of consumers in the pursuit of sustainable prosperity. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with consumers, and supported by secondary data selected from online sources, published academic journals and corporate reports. I conclude that sustainable prosperity requires significant reformation of incumbent systems that are supported by embedded institutional practices. In order to alter these structures, actions of consumer agency play a key role in altering these structures through both individual and collective action. However, given the complexity of achieving sustainable prosperity, it requires a coordinated, multidisciplinary participation of actors and institutions, of which consumers are but one part.

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# Introduction

## Context to Present

*“...business[people] should oversee the operation of an economic system that fulfils the expectations of the public. And this means in turn that the economy's means of production should be employed in such a way that production and distribution should enhance total socio-economic welfare.”*

(Frederick, 1960: 60)

*“Society is faced with a profound dilemma. To reject growth is to risk economic and social collapse. To pursue it relentlessly is to endanger the ecosystem on which we depend for long-term survival.”*

(Jackson, 2017: 210)

Since Frederick's assessment of the role of corporations in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it could be conceived that corporations have not fulfilled the role that Frederick expected of them in his paper from 1960. This is reinforced by the quotation from Jackson that economic growth, primarily driven by corporations, is no longer a suitable model by which to achieve a sustainable and globally prosperous future. The latter half of the 20th century and the digitisation of technological advances in the 21st century have given rise to neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism begets globalisation, favours corporations (Radice, 2005), and does not rely on state intervention in the markets, yet assumes its importance in establishing and maintaining institutional frameworks through which new markets can operate (Dean, 2008). Consequently, this model of capitalism in our time, aptly dubbed the 'Capitalocene' (Moore, 2015), has contributed to an increase in social inequalities and has advanced the climate crisis, undermining ecological ecosystems in the process (Jomo & Baudot, 2007; Jackson, 2009; Rockström et al., 2009; Bourguignon, 2015). Both globalisation and technological advances have contributed significantly to the compromising of social and environmental systems (Coburn, 2000; Davis & Cobb, 2010) in the pursuit of profit maximisation. Growth is facilitated by government policy and driven by consumer demand. As such, we must question what role consumers may play in minimising, mitigating, and managing the negative externalities of their consumption and achieving sustainable prosperity going forward?

In order to explore this topic, it is essential to have a definition of the term ‘consumer’. Walters provides an accessible definition in stating, “a consumer is an individual who purchases, has the capacity to purchase, goods and services offered for sale by marketing institutions in order to satisfy personal or household needs, wants, or desires” (Walters, 1974). We can understand this to mean the subject of consumption as goods or services delivered through market institutions, as opposed to governmental public goods that are enjoyed by all. Rather it is the element of choice that defines a consumer. It is important to acknowledge the encompassing breadth of this definition. Whilst almost everyone is a consumer to some extent, this dissertation focuses on self-proclaimed consumers based in the Global North. The duality of their consumer and professional roles is not the subject of this paper. However, the concept of consumer role duality concerning positions of professional or societal power and personal ethical goals has potential for further research (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2015). Consumers, therefore, do not act within a vacuum; they are inextricably linked to institutions, such as corporations, governments or a network of other consumers.

Whilst the idea of what constitutes an ‘institution’ in the institutional theory school of thought is somewhat regarded as a contested topic (Scott, 1995), we can understand institutions as social structures that range from world systems to interpersonal relationships (Scott, 1995). Whilst institutions are regarded as inherently stable, they are subject to processes of change (Scott, 1995). This dissertation will explore consumer agency in the process of changing institutions to facilitate sustainable prosperity. Agency in the pursuit of change is most applicably demonstrated by institutional work theory, an alternative focus for the macro-theory of organisations discussed above. ‘Institutional work’ seeks to refocus the discussion around the agency of actors in “creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence et al., 2011). It acknowledges that agency should not be singularly associated with ‘successful’ acts of change, but rather the complexity of agency, both successful and unsuccessful that contribute to the dynamics of change within institutions (Lawrence et al., 2011). Institutional change is essential to achieving globally defined targets such as the United Nation’s climate targets outlined in the 2015 Paris Agreement, and nationally-determined policy across a range of social and environmental issues. This paper seeks to explore the agency of consumers in achieving institutional change. It is increasingly acknowledged that consumers consider the way a company interacts with society and the environment when choosing products or services (Lewis, 2001; Marin, 2009). However, this is not necessarily the norm globally or within the Global North – which is the focus of this study. The act of consumer choice – engaging agency

through a complex *mélange* of codified and unwritten rules – demonstrates ethical values, and the extent of personal social and environmental consciousness (McDonald et al., 2006; Szmigin, Carrigan & McEachern, 2009). The activities of corporations produce social and environmental externalities, from wealth inequality (OECD, 2010) to pollution. The consumer demand for corporations' goods and services, despite negative externalities, supports the legitimacy of these consequences. Does being a 'conscious consumer' (Roberts, 1993), as alluded to by Lewis (2001) and Marin (2009), shift the demand for corporations' impact on society and the environment, thus helping to mitigate negative externalities and achieve sustainable prosperity?

In order to answer this question, we have to understand sustainable prosperity. Critiques of traditional, Eurocentric global development models (Hettne, 1995; Pieterse, 1996; Hart, 2001; Horner & Hulme, 2019a, 2019b) have given rise to new ideas of change and prosperity (Legatum Institute, 2015). These ideas helped to establish the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. These 17 goals and 169 targets established desired outcomes and unified the member countries to achieve sustainable prosperity by the year 2030 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). The solutions proposed by the SDGs promote localised solutions that empower local stakeholders and utilise citizen participation to hold initiatives accountable; promote cultural diversity and sensitivity; and reassess the role government and businesses play in pursuing the goals (Moore, 2015). This approach to generating prosperity through locally-based solutions is embodied by University College London's Institute for Global Prosperity in its conceptualisation of sustainable prosperity (Woodcraft & Anderson, 2019). The UN SDGs present a practical framework by which to understand sustainable prosperity. That being said, others academics have sought to define a framework for prosperity. An applicable alternative understanding is presented by Sen (1984), who examined prosperity as a 'standard of living', emphasising the capability to flourish through access to health, wealth and community. The global uptake of the UN SDGs, and the wide range of social and environmental issues they seek to address show these goals to be a more complete indicator of sustainable prosperity. However, it must be acknowledged that institutional change must occur to achieve the targets set by the SDGs.



## **Aims and Objectives**

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on consumer behaviour and sustainable prosperity by exploring the role of consumers through their agency. It contributes by utilising agency as an integral lens to understand consumer participation in a transition towards a sustainable future that integrates a prosperity-focused approach to global development. The traditional literature on consumer behaviour and sustainable development incorporates a wide scope of economic, business, psychology, and sociology perspectives. Additionally, these largely do not utilise a progressive view on prosperity as a facet of sustainable development. Having researched an examination of the extant literature Fischer and Newig (2016), and Avelino and Wittmayer (2015), are most similar in their exploration of agency in relation to sustainability transitions. However, these authors do not specifically focus on consumers as actors, rather question agency as a concept throughout socio-technical transitions. Furthermore, they have conducted research through systematic literature reviews, acknowledging in the process that agency, whilst inherent, is often extrapolated from these papers but not studied empirically (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2015). Additionally, neither paper looks to incorporate sustainable prosperity as a key concept. As such this study aims to both illuminate the presence of and address the research gap by investigating:

*What is the role of consumers in achieving sustainable prosperity?*

In answering the overarching research question, it is necessary to explore the link between consumption, sustainability, and prosperity. In answering this question, I utilise Geel's multi-level perspective as a lens through which to understand how bottom-up socio-technical transitions occur, engaging with institutional work theory in the process to corroborate the nature of consumer agency in achieving sustainable prosperity. Therefore, this paper will explore the following two questions:

*How are consumer habits and sustainable prosperity linked?*

*To what extent do consumers utilise their agency in relation to desired sustainability outcomes?*

This study will seek to define the terms 'sustainable prosperity'. This will include a discussion of the contested nature of this term. The concept of sustainable prosperity is considered in relation to the UN SDGs. This study intends to contribute to the discourse around achieving

sustainable prosperity and the role consumers can play in the socio-technical transitions required to achieve that future.

## **Scope and Structure**

This paper does not purport to encapsulate the full extent of consumer behaviour literature within its remit. Instead, it examines consumer agency as a potential tool for contributing to, and actively engaging in the changing of, institutional structures to achieve future sustainable prosperity. Consumer agency will be examined in conjunction with Geel's (2011) multi-level perspective (MLP) theory and how institutional work theory can contribute to better understanding consumer self-actualisation in the creation of sustainable prosperity (Duckworth & Moore, 2010). In relation to sustainability and socially conscious consumerism, consumer studies have had a broad uptake across many academic perspectives including psychology, economics, marketing, human geography and sociology (Pepper et al., 2009; Princen et al., 2002; Jackson, 2006). This study will engage directly with consumers, exploring consumer relations to institutions and ideas of consumption, in order to analyse consumers as actors within socio-technical transitions and the extent to which they utilise agency to achieve personal and global sustainability goals. Drawing on extant literature that discusses socio-technical transitions and consumption, this paper discusses how these two are inextricably linked and potentially positively correlated within ethical consumption habits.

This dissertation continues with a chapter dedicated to a review of extant literature, which provides a rationale for exploring consumption as a contributing factor to institutional change and socio-technical transitions. I will begin this section with an overview of socio-technical transition and its relevance to achieving sustainable prosperity. Following this, I will discuss concepts of agency within institutional work theory and how this relates to the literature pertaining to socio-technical transitions, before opening the discussion to consumer behaviour with a focus on ethical consumption. These concepts will be related to my primary research question. The following chapter, 'Methodology', will outline the research design and methodologies utilised, providing a rationale for why these have been specifically chosen, including potential limitations and biases. The chapter, 'Findings', presents the empirical data collected from the two primary data collection methodologies and its analysis. The following chapter discusses the findings and analysis in the context of the literature from the second

chapter. Finally, I will conclude by summarising the content of the dissertation, followed by future directions of the literature and a reflection on the findings as a potential tool for the future of sustainable prosperity.

## **Literature Review**

### **Transitions of Change**

Whilst institutional work theory is the theoretical lens through which this dissertation will explore the idea of agency within institutional change, the way by which change occurs is most applicably articulated through Geels' (2011) multi-level perspective theory (MLP). In order to move towards sustainable prosperity, we must acknowledge the complexity of the global challenge. In doing so, it is understood that technological solutions are not sufficient for achieving impactful societal change due to their short-term solutionism and unforeseen consequences (Farla et al., 2012; van den Bergh et al., 2011; Linstone, 1999). Within the discipline of sustainability research, some academics have focused on moving beyond the technological to develop theories of a socio-technical transition pathway, which acknowledges the necessity for a restructuring of societal processes to achieve sustainability goals. Socio-technical transitions describe structural changes in societal systems, networks comprising of institutions and their actors that maintain their own artefacts, boundary objects and tacit knowledge. Changes in these component elements of a socio-technical system can result in economic, political and organisational consequences. Whilst discussion of the variety of models and theories within the discourse on sustainability transitions is beyond the remit of this paper, it is important to articulate the specific relevance of Geel's MLP and why it has been chosen to be explored in conjunction with the concept of sustainable prosperity. The field of sustainability transitions research focuses largely on technological innovation within a network of interconnected institutions and actors (Farla et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2005; Avelino & Wittmayer, 2015). Transitions are discussed through a number of different perspectives including the management and governance of transitions (Meadowcroft, 2009; Loorbach, 2007; Smith, Sterling & Berkhout, 2005) and a focus on technological innovation within institutional settings (Geels, 2010; Freeman, 1992).

This dissertation proposes an alternative to the pure technological innovation that instigates change, arguing instead that a bottom-up approach to transitions is driven by changes conducted by the most actors of the same category. Understanding ethical consumption and consumer agency in the pursuit of sustainable futures as a socially developed form of institutional change means that consumers are best studied through the MLP (Geels, 2011). Geels' MLP theorises that niche actors instigate innovations based on 'visions' and 'expectations', and dissipated through their networks (Fig. 1). These innovations break away from the established rules of the 'socio-technical regime'. The 'socio-technical regime' operates at an increased level of social structuration, representing a dynamic assemblage of culture, policy, industry, technology and market preferences that make up society. When innovations occur at the niche level of society, they are done so out of hope and expectation that they will develop in significance and gain social traction to subsequently attract lock-in mechanisms, thereby changing the socio-technical regime. However, at this level, these new rules must be maintained over a prolonged period of time to subsequently engender change at the 'socio-technical landscape' or 'exogenous context', which governs the contextual values of society.

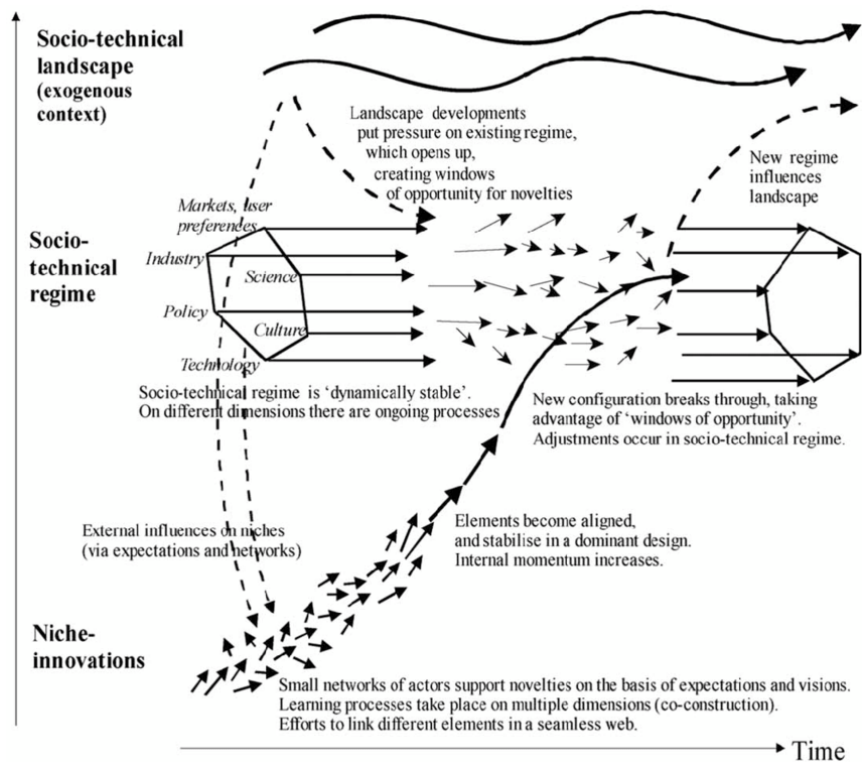


Fig. 1 – The Multi-level Perspective (MLP), (Geels, 2011)

Socio-technical transition theorists referred to consumer behaviour as a 'lock-in mechanism', which reinforces pathways of institutional development (Geels, 2011). These pathways can result in dependency, making them hard to change once embedded (Klitkou et al., 2015). This dissertation proposes that consumer agency is not a limitation to institutional change through lock-in mechanisms but rather a potential driver for innovation, both technical and social, in the pursuit of sustainable prosperity. In discussing the concept of consumer agency and ethical consumption with a view to generating sustainable prosperity, this paper opens the definition of innovation to include social practices such as ethical or sustainable consumption. There is a precedent of theories for bottom-up, agency-driven approaches to socio-technical transitions (Fischer & Newig, 2016; Farla et al., 2012; Clemens, 1998).

Therefore, I will argue that consumers have the potential to be the driving force behind socio-technical change at the socio-technical landscape level over time. However, it is acknowledged that consumer agency, and by extension the power they wield to instigate change, is simplified in a collective and often undervalued by individuals. In other words, the more consumers utilize their agency to pursue sustainable habits actively, the more likely institutions, namely corporations and government, change to accommodate and, ultimately, promote these habits. Agency is an underrepresented area of academic study regarding the MLP model, and the model itself has been the source of critique for its "weak conceptualization of agency" (Farla et al., 2012; Genus & Coles, 2008; Smith, Sterling & Berkhout, 2005) with the roles of civil society within socio-technical transitions lacking substantive research (Smith, 2012). Therefore, a focused study of agency in relation to socio-technical transition models has the potential to positively impact the theoretical and practical movement towards sustainable futures and sustainable prosperity. Sustainability transitions in the context of consumption, specifically through the lens of consumer agency, will benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between consumers and existing institutional structures that influence and govern pre-existing habits. The reflection posited by the semi-structured interviews will help articulate aspects of this agency for analysis in this dissertation and future research.

## Consumer Agency

Addressing the concept of agency, institutional theory and its extant models at this stage is crucial to understanding the interrelatedness of the subsequent subheadings within this literature review. The idea of agency retains a vagueness and contestable definition across sociological theories (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In researching institutional theory, each school of thought is inextricably tied to its pre-theoretical assumptions based in authors' ontological and epistemological backgrounds that advertently or inadvertently contribute to the scope of the research. Agency, therefore, continues to be a term of much debate and the source of academic intrigue. Some of the contextual definitions and theories of agency are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Emirbayer & Mische (1998: 970) define agency as:

*“the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.”*

Therefore, agency is inextricably linked to history, time, and present context, influenced by sociological conditions of culture, structures, and individual consciousness. Institutional theorists have considered actors and their inherent agency as playing a supporting role in the study of institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, whilst agency is integral to institutions, this dissertation proposes that the activity of actors, in utilizing agency for societal and personal goals, can create institutional change that leads to a systematic altering of the socio-technical landscape. In demonstrating this, I will utilize two lenses proposed by Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos (2017). This paper analysed the relationship between actors and institutions through four lenses: ‘the wilful actor’, ‘collective intentionality’, ‘patchwork institutions’, and ‘modular individuals’ (Abdelnour et al., 2017).

In this dissertation, the lenses of ‘the wilful actor’ and ‘collective intentionality’ will be explored in relation to consumer agency in the pursuit of sustainable prosperity. It is pertinent to explain why two of the four lenses have reduced prominence this study. Both ‘patchwork institutions’ and ‘modular individuals’ explore the relationship between “working traditions, skill profiles and competences, actors, formal arrangements, rules and social positions”

(Abdelnour et al., 2017: 1785), thereby demonstrating the many roles a single individual may enact across a range of contextual environments. I have already stated that relationships between professional occupations and the role of the consumer is beyond the scope of this paper, however further research into the duality of the professional and personal roles in the pursuit of sustainable and ethical practices has potential for further investigation. That being said, Hirst and Humphreys (2015) demonstrate the relationship between “agency and social change through the concept of role modularity” (Abdelnour et al., 2017: 1788). In other words, the way in which actors utilise agency in different contexts and locations has potential for exploration in relation to consumers’ domains such as familial, professional, or religious settings. These lenses emphasise the flexibility of roles. However, in seeking to understand institutional change, the idea of flexibility weakens potential for change, especially within the realm of consumption. This can be related to consumer demand. As consumers are presented with the opportunity to be flexible, perhaps in the face of sustainable/ethical versus unsustainable/unethical choices, their contextual domain and role determines their consumption (Szmigin et al., 2009). Whilst this may be the case, the vision and expectation of institutional change with the aim of sustainable prosperity is the overarching innovation within the socio-technical system. These concepts are most applicably supported by the lenses of ‘the wilful actor’ and ‘collective intentionality’.

A consumer may be regarded as the typical ‘wilful actor’. They are conceived to be the smallest constituent part of society, yet has increased in significance due to the rise of modern capitalist frameworks (Abdelnour et al., 2017; Giddens, 1991). Whilst it can be argued that “organizations, and the individuals who populate them, are suspended in a web of values, norms, rules, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions, that are at least partially of their own making” (Barley & Tolbert, 1997: 93), modern, agency-centric approaches such as that of institutional work theory (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2011) view actors as having a capacity to influence, manipulate and change institutions (Abdelnour et al., 2017). Therefore, institutional work theory breaks away from traditional institutional theoretical models in seeking to explore purposive action enacted by actors to affect, institutions through their creation, maintenance or disruption (Lawrence & Suddaby; 2006). Whilst traditional theories focus on the ways in which institutions govern the lives of individuals embedded within their immediate network and wider sphere of influence; institutional work theory acknowledges the power of agency to affect the actors’ environments and institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009). Institutional work theory does not purport that actors engaging their agency to alter institutions is a definitive

process with definable outcomes, rather it acknowledges that quotidian examples of agency represent a complex relationship with institutions, some actions of which will be successful and some not, and all imbued with a degree of emotion and ontological influence (Lawrence, Sudabby & Leca, 2011). As such a consumer may be considered an example of the ‘wilful actor’, exercising agency to through their purchases, contributing to the demand for goods and services which ultimately change the way in which the institution operates as per traditional economics of demand and supply. However, I argue that the degree to which institutions are changed by ‘the wilful actor’ is greater when engaging with a consumer who aims to utilise their agency to fulfil a vision or expectation as per the niche level of Geels’ MLP.

In understanding that actors have the power to influence, shape and change institutions, institutional theory must acknowledge that ‘the wilful actor’ can utilise their agency strategically in an attempt to orchestrate a desired outcome. This is supported by Beckert (1999: 778), who states that, “if, however, we assume that in many situations agents ‘make a difference’, it becomes a weakness of institutional theories if they cannot account for the role of strategic agency in processes of organizational development”. A further issue arises in questioning how actors acknowledge the institutions of which they are a part, challenge them, and ultimately decide to change them. Whilst the process by which this occurs is not the focus of this dissertation, understanding the embeddedness of actors within institutions is and is the subject of constant academic debate (Seo & Creed, 2002). Therefore, to some extent, actors are complicit in upholding institutions, leading to a phenomenon known as ‘the paradox of embedded agency’ (Garud et al., 2007; Abdelnour et al., 2017). Institutional work theory offers a solution to this paradoxical idea of agency by theorising that its power is rooted in the purposive activities of actors in ways independent to or subversive of institutions. Garud et al. (2007) articulate that actors utilise resources to create new or alter existing institutions. For example, knowledge or new systems of meaning, disseminating these over their social networks within which they are embedded. The authors state that “institutional structures do not necessarily constrain agency but, instead, may also serve as the fabric to be used for the unfolding of entrepreneurial activities” (Garud et al., 2007: 961-2). The role of institutional structures as a ‘fabric for entrepreneurship’ is reiterated by Giddens (1991), who demonstrates the inherent reflexivity of institutions, articulating their constant reassessment of principles. Reflexivity, therefore, is the continual activity of actors who constitute the institution relating the organisation back to the concurrent socio-cultural, political, and economic context. It is the act of reflexivity in relation to institutions that affects how those actors that carry purposive



ideas are pitted against institutions, which to varying extents, “define their interest and produce their identities” (Garud et al., 2007: 961).

However, understanding how sociocultural contexts influence actors to develop the purposive ideas that lead to change is an area that requires further exploration. This dissertation hopes to contribute in part to this need for exploration in understanding the role of consumers in achieving sustainable prosperity. This, we have already stated, requires institutional change in order to achieve given the unsustainability and incompatibility of our current economic system. At the niche level of the MLP, Geels identifies that vision and expectations are two key drivers of innovation, which we have discussed as social in the context of consumption habits. This is contradictory to traditional transition models which focus on technological change. Through semi-structured interviews, this paper will explore the purposive ideas of ‘visions’ and ‘expectations’ relating to global sustainable prosperity. These value-based judgements lead wilful actors, or consumers in this context, to enact their agency in the hope of influencing institutional change to achieve their sustainable and ethical goals.

When critically assessing institutional work theory in the context of larger institutions, variations in practices that result enacting agentic activities at a micro-oriented, individual capacity have interesting implications for the study of institutional change (Abdelnour et al., 2017) through innovation at the niche level. Institutional work theory provides us with a mechanism by which we may analyse consumer agency in relation to sustainability. However, institutional work theory has also been criticised by Wijen and Ansari (2007) for its capacity to explain the collective actions of actors in affecting institutional change. This brings us to our second applicable lens, ‘collective intentionality’. These authors focus on the complexity that arises from dispersed actors carrying diverse interests (Wijen & Ansari, 2007). I will argue that ‘interests’, in the context of this paper, refers to the purposive action that is linked to institutional change by the lens of ‘the wilful actor’ and niche level activity in the MLP.

Traditional institutional theory has been further critiqued for its use of the notion of agency as attributed to individuals and extrapolated to collectives, organisations, and society in general (Abdelnour et al., 2007). Therefore, agency is often attributed to individuals and collective actors simultaneously with no explanation of the processes and mechanisms that transition agency from one to the other (Abdelnour et al., 2007). Bitektine and Haack (2015) propose a model by which macrolevel, collective institutional legitimacy consists of microlevel,

individual agency (Fig. 2). In this model, institutional legitimacy is primarily a top-down process. The validity of institutional change is predicated on the microlevel processes, but in being so, it is simultaneously weakened by competing judgements, which could be discussed as the visions and expectations of the niche level within the MLP (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). The value of this model is twofold. Firstly, it works towards dispelling the fallacy that at the collective macrolevel, actor's agency is enacted homogenously; rather, it is a web of microlevel judgements that appear to conform at a macro scale. Thus, the collective consensus around the legitimacy of the institution is the product of both ontologies and value systems, and by emotions (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). The authors describe this as "the theory of institutional suppression" (Bitektine & Haack, 2015: 69). Fig. 2 shows that as institutional change occurs organisational practices compete for the perceptions of individuals. This is important in understanding the socio-technical transition process as both a bottom-up process as shown through niche level activity and 'the wilful actor', as well as a top-down approach to legitimacy as institutional change becomes legitimised.

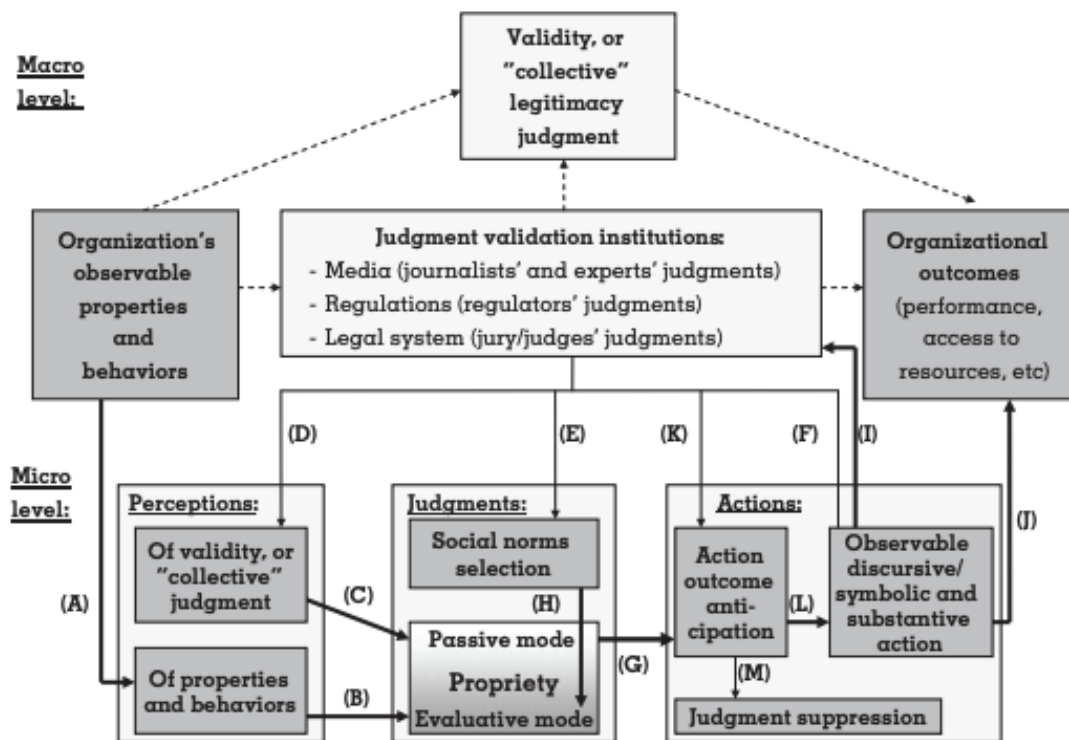


Fig. 2 – A Multilevel Model of Legitimacy Under Conditions of Institutional Change (Bitektine & Haack, 2015)

This nuanced idea of collective agency is reinforced by King, Felin and Whetten (2010), who acknowledge that the way in which collective agency acts is more complex than a culmination

of microlevel agency. However, Wijen and Ansari (2007) contribute to this debate by examining the stratification of actors' structures. They propose that the coordination of expectations is the proverbial glue that binds 'collective intentionality' together (Wijen & Ansari, 2007). The concept of 'expectation' is familiar to us from the niche level of Geels' MLP, and defines the driving mechanism behind the act of institutional change. In this case, the pressing need for sustainable prosperity due to the climate crisis and growing inequality may be considered to be the 'expectations' or 'vision' outlined in the niche level of socio-technical transitions and discussed in this section in relation to actor agency through the lenses of the 'wilful actor' and 'collective intentionality'. Does a question arise as to whether the 'vision' or 'expectations' discussed here contribute to sustainable and ethical consumption habits? In order to answer this question, we must first understand what this essay will refer to as 'ethical consumption'. In doing so it considers the holistic understanding of sustainable prosperity, which will be discussed in conjunction with issues of consumption.

## **Sustainable and Ethical Consumption**

The dominant neoliberal capitalist model within the Global North facilitates consumption through free-market policies, deregulation and reduction of trade tariffs. In promoting consumption, it affirms that economic success is based on the promise of infinite growth (Jackson, 2017). It is asserted that the paradigm of economic growth that we have seen since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century is damaging our planet's ecosystem, atmosphere, and peoples (Jackson, 2017; TEEB, 2012). As such, the extant growth model has been the source of critique from academics (Moore, 2005) and consumers (Verplanken & Roy, 2015). In addition to the sustainable growth argument of consumption, complex ethical dilemmas have also arisen. For example, consumers are increasingly attentive to the treatment of non-humans affected by human practices (Ferrer-Fons & Fraile, 2013), demonstrating the complexity by which consumption has been discussed from a variety of ontological perspectives. Consumers have begun to employ increased reflexivity towards their consumption habits, prompted by an acknowledgement of the various global issues attributed to modern consumption habits (Verplanken & Roy, 2015).

Sustainable consumption is a contested concept with a myriad of working definitions sourced from a number of institutions, organisations, and individuals. Attributed to, and included within, the idea of sustainability is also ethical consumption (Verplanken & Roy, 2015). The

definition given by the Brundtland Report states that “sustainable development...meets the needs the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987: 43). This definition takes an approach that sustainable consumption is related to survival of future generations. This approach, however, lack pragmatism for the common consumer. Deliberating which good or service affects no depletion of resources is impractical considering the demands of modern life. However, there is, as we have seen, scope to change human behaviours in favour of more sustainable or ethical options. Examples of these small changes were proposed as limiting water and energy use where possible, combining travel with others, utilising public transport, and taking part in community-based volunteering projects (DEFRA, 2008). However, issuing advice is limited by a caveat of ideological and technological progress. This advice can offer short-term alleviations but can become outdated or influenced by policy agendas external to sustainability practices. Therefore, sustainable consumption behaviours vary in their overarching contributions to a sustainability agenda (Whitmarsh, 2009).

Consumption behaviour is not necessarily performed with an aim or consideration in mind (Verplanken & Roy, 2015), which we could extrapolate to include the visions and expectations of the niche level consumer we discussed in relation to consumer agency and the MLP. Consumers do not necessarily follow ‘rational’ decision rules (Slovic et al., 2002), often taking ‘short-cuts’ (Payne et al., 1993) and preferring ‘easier’ factors in the decision-making process than sustainability, such as price or comfort (Verplanken & Roy, 2015). This is demonstrated by an ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ or ‘values-action gap’, which indicates that almost a third of consumers who claim to be concerned about environmental issues but do not reflect this concern in their consumption habits (Young, 2010). Many studies on consumption have chosen to focus on cognitive and behavioural models, paying lip service to socio-cultural influences. However, if sustainability is considered to be a significant attribute to the consumer, linked with an importance of value, consumers are more likely to place greater weighting on it as an attribute of a good or service (Honkanen et al., 2006; Honkanen & Verplanken, 2004; White, 2019). The concepts of the consumers’ selves influence ethical and sustainable consumerism also (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). This has been shown to be particularly common when purchasing is associated with status in a public setting (White, 2019). Therefore, through ‘the wilful actor’ lens we can identify consistencies with those who hold sustainability goals as significant and their consumption habits. However, we must acknowledge that behavioural studies have shown that inconsistencies do arise.

If regarding sustainability with importance determines the 'vision' and 'expectations' as discussed in the MLP, we may deduce that encouraging more consumers to believe in this way would result in increased sustainability practices. This idea is partially supported by Carrigan and Attalla (2001) who describe consumer sophistication as "part driven by the fact that consumers are better informed, more educated and awareness is greater of consumer rights and product requirements at least in Western society" (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001: 563). Given the 'attitude-behaviour gap' we know that the relationship between information and education proposed by Carrigan and Attalla (2001) does not necessarily translate into actions of sustainable consumer agency. Research on sustainable forms of consumption have critiqued the concept of agency, favouring instead to recognise the 'bounded rationality' and inherent biases of consumers (Kahneman, 2003). Carrigan (2017) furthers this idea, describing consumers as lacking the ability to process the competing information about sustainable goods, the motivation and opportunity to practice sustainable consumption (Carrigan, 2017). However, this denies that consumers do, in fact, practice sustainable consumption, which has seen significant progress in technological, social and political development in the last few decades (Verplanken & Roy, 2015). Therefore, Carrigan's assessment of consumers is somewhat counterfactual and perhaps overly cynical but does resonate with aforementioned consumer behaviour theories of short-cuts and easier alternatives. Carrigan's perspective is more aptly married with the lens of the 'collective intentionality' and the model of legitimacy outlined by Bitektine and Haack (2015), which demonstrate that the judgements made on a microlevel may deviate at times from a uniform consistency but appear uniform at a macrolevel.

Thus far, the literature review has outlined that the role of the consumer in achieving sustainable prosperity can be analysed through institutional work theories of agency that emphasise the potential for agency to disrupt, change and influence institutions. This has been shown the lenses of 'the wilful actor' and 'collective intentionality' proposed by Abdelnour et al. (2017). However, in the discussion of actor agency at the niche level in relation to institutions and socio-technical transitions, it would be remiss to ignore the role of institutions that govern the rules of consumption in their capacity to affect the aim of sustainable prosperity.

Let us return to the quotation at the outset of this dissertation from Frederick (1960). The author called for corporations to operate to benefit society, which, as we have seen from the global

climate crisis, rising global inequalities, the degradation of the ecosystem and exploitation of workers, is a vision that has been largely ignored in regards to the fundamental protection of the planet. The goal of most corporations is to attain ‘profit maximisation as soon as possible; a goal which is not aligned with the goals of sustainability or interest of society as a whole (Moore, 2018). However, corporations are increasingly introducing ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR), which entails the “policies and practices...that reflect business responsibility for some of the wider societal good” (Matten & Moon, 2008: 405). As of 2012, more than 80% of Fortune 500 companies claim to have CSR initiatives in place, according to their website (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Research has shown that CSR initiatives are beneficial to the corporation in several valuable ways. Firstly, CSR initiatives are a marketable exercise to consumers, investors, and other institutions. By doing so, firms see an increase in reputation that facilitates the realisation of value (Fombrum, 1996). This value includes customer loyalty (Keh & Xie, 2009) through an increased customer identification with the company (Ahearne et al., 2005). This supports the notion proposed by Verplanken and Holland (2002) discussed earlier pertaining to the relationship between sustainable consumption practices and individual values. CSR research also indicates initiatives lead to the firm attracting better human and financial capital (Lii & Lee, 2012), and augmented financial performance (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). Therefore, the use of CSR can be considered to still be largely for the benefit of the corporation. This is corroborated by research that has questioned the impact of these initiatives. Studying CSR impact is a complex task, requiring a question of attribution in order to isolate the effect of the programme from any external variables and selection biases (Khandker et al., 2010). Ultimately, studies have failed to show tangible benefits through social change via quantitative impact studies (Barnett, Henriques & Husted, 2020). This could be due to the tendency of regime actors such as corporations to act as transition opponents (Rock et al., 2009) as they benefit from incumbent social, political, or economic structures. However, an alternative view is that corporations fill institutional voids, rectify market failures, and are more agile in addressing social problems (Besley & Ghatak, 2007). As such, the question is, how can corporations be held accountable and incentivised to do so?

The answer to this question is twofold. The actions of corporations are incentivised by both consumer demand and government regulation. In most cases, their business operations are conducted with the aim of profit maximisation for their shareholders as the main priority. As the largest and most complex institutions, governments are usually slow-moving, bound to a

variety of stakeholders through networks of professional and social ties, and campaign pledges, all the while limited in time in the seat of power. Within political terms of governance, technological change may happen rapidly with slow uptake government institutions and unforeseen events can occur as has been evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing governments to allocate resources away from issues of sustainability. Government policy ultimately facilitates opportunities for niche actors (Fischer & Newig, 2016), an example of which was the UK government's sustainable development strategy which utilised fiscal incentivisation (Young et al., 2010). At a supra-governmental level, organisation of overarching sustainable prosperity goals provide purpose for institutions such as through the UN's SDGs. These goals exemplify how policy must be utilised through more substantial collaborative efforts between governments and corporations (Moore, 2018; Micheletti & Stolle, 2007). Consumers may affect these policies by being politically conscious actors, both through their voting in democratic structures and socially conscious consumers. Socially conscious consumption is synonymous with the terms of 'ethical consumption' and 'sustainable consumption' used throughout this paper. Research has shown that consumers who consider political factors within their market engagement find comfort in their ability to take responsibility for and help to facilitate societal change (Boström et al. 2004). This contributes to the idea of the conscious consumer that this essay has outlined – underpinned by the concepts of agency as outlined by institutional work theory. Atkinson (2012) argues that socially conscious consumption, which to some extent politically engaged, is “a kind of enlightened self-interest whereby concern for the self, as expressed through consumption, facilitates concern for the collective” (Atkinson, 2012: 192). This quotation reinforces the idea of agency that we have explored through the lenses of 'the willful actor' and 'collective intentionality', demonstrating the link between government policy and socially conscious consumption in achieving sustainable prosperity.

## **Sustainable Prosperity**

Sustainable prosperity is a relatively new approach to understanding global social and economic development (Jackson, 2017; Moore, 2018). Traditional sustainable development models fall short of proposing a way to instigate 'progress' without utilising GDP as the definitive indicator (Jackson, 2017). Therefore, sustainable prosperity as a 'post-development' theory, seeks to move beyond the confines and limitations of GDP as our primary indicator of

societal progress (Jackson, 2017). In utilising the UN SDGs as an internationally-recognised framework, supra-governmental and government organisations outline key goals of value to society that expand our horizon beyond GDP into environmental and societal issues that are not reflected in national balance of payments. Sustainable prosperity has been critiqued as a theory that fails to marry the profitability and societal good that had been promised (Bina, 2013). However, the criticisms posited remain rooted in the extant, flawed system that has facilitated rising global inequality and environmental decay (Moore, 2015). Transitioning away from the preoccupation on GDP as a primary indicator of societal progress, sustainable prosperity offers an alternative paradigm based on a tailored approach to social progress, rooted in the values of cultures, and designed to holistically uplift communities by facilitating their ability to flourish within the bounds of planetary limits (Jackson, 2017; Moore, 2015). Sustainable prosperity builds on the notions of Sen (1984), who posited that we should understand that our capabilities are precariously bounded, both by the global population and the finite ecology of the planet, when considering the development of a society within which people can flourish in basic ways (Jackson, 2017). Building on the ideas of Sen (1984) and the indigenous Latin-American principle of *'buen vivir'* (Jackson, 2017; Jimenez & Roberts, 2019), sustainable prosperity promotes inclusivity of values and culture across a diverse spectrum, as well as expression of agency (Moore, 2015; Jackson, 2017; Woodcraft & Anderson, 2019) through a bottom-up approach, built by collective vision and expectations (Moore, 2015). Through acknowledging the diversity of global ideas of thought, including *'buen vivir'*, it is implicit that the neoliberal capitalist paradigm can learn from alternative value systems around the globe. As such, it is acknowledged that there is no set pathway to sustainable prosperity but rather we must utilise collaborative action across a diverse range of actors, institutions, and practices (Moore, 2015).

The pathways to sustainable prosperity can be related to consumers in understanding how the neoliberal capitalist paradigm, that is fundamental to the modern Global North, affects our consumption habits. This essay has shown the link between niche actors as individuals and collectives in achieving sustainable prosperity through sustainable consumption practices. These consumption habits are predicated on the 'vision' and 'expectations' outlined by Geels in the multilevel perspective model. Achieving sustainable prosperity in the Global North can be viewed through the lens of postmaterialism. Initially proposed by Inglehart, postmaterialism is defined as a theory of value change that understands a shift in societal values away from the idea of survival-based consumption, in favour of self-expression (Inglehart, 2018; Mostafa,



2013). It utilises Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory to show materialism as a preoccupation on comfort and safety, as opposed to augmentation of quality of life through aesthetic pursuits and self-expression. In relation to sustainable consumption, Inglehart argues that richer nations have higher levels of postmaterialism as they are more readily able to fulfil basic needs (Inglehart, 1995). This was later qualified with the understanding that those from developing nations could hold pro-environmental intentions having experienced the effects of environmental degradation in their own country (Mostafa, 2013). The debate on the societal antecedents of pro-environmental intentions in the Global North versus the Global South is not within the scope of this paper. However, understanding postmaterialism as a contributing factor when considering consumption within the Global North is an applicable theoretical lens that may be applied to the subjects of this paper's primary research. Postmaterialism inherently contains elements of agency that may or may not harbour intentions of institutional change.

This literature review has articulated the instrumental value of consumers in influencing institutions, through individual and collective action, to achieve sustainable prosperity by connecting theories of agency, consumption and sustainable prosperity. It has shown that agency has a significant role in better understanding socio-technical transitions, which, I have argued are not only technologically focused but social too. This social aspect is crucial to understanding the 'visions' and 'expectations' outlined in Geels MLP model at the niche actor level. These value-based judgements have been explored through two agentic lenses - 'the wilful actor' and 'collective intentionality'. Agency, therefore, is instrumental to achieving institutional change, which has been shown to be crucial to achieving sustainable prosperity, a concept currently unobtainable through our current societal structure.

Additionally, the role of ethical/sustainable consumption has been shown to be valuable to achieving sustainable prosperity. As a choice, sustainable consumption requires active agency, supported and framed by the aforementioned 'visions' and 'expectations'. Consumption has shown to be an agentic tool for influencing institutions, both corporate and governmental. I have outlined the role of these two types of institutions and how they can support the effort to achieve sustainable prosperity. Finally, I have demonstrated the bottom-up link between sustainable prosperity and consumer agency in favour of sustainable practices.

# Methodology

## Research Design

Engaging consumer agency should be further considered as a strategy for initiating and progressing socio-technical transitions through institutional change in the pursuit of achieving sustainable prosperity. As has been shown, sustainable consumption practices have the power to play a role in influencing institutions to behave more sustainably and ethically in order to encourage consumer demand for their product. This is evident from CSR initiatives, which have been shown to engender customer loyalty, particularly amongst those that believe in ethical and sustainable ideals. Within the context of institutional work theory, I will investigate how consumer agency can be understood in relation to socio-technical transitions. Following the work of Abdelnour et al. (2017), I will utilise the lenses of ‘the wilful actor’ and ‘collective intentionality’ to investigate consumer agency. I have chosen to use a qualitative approach to explore the self-actualisation of agency by consumers in relation to sustainable futures. I conducted five semi-structured interviews, the questions for which sought to cover the subject’s relationship with global social and climate issues, sustainable practices of consumption, the concept of sustainable prosperity, and relationship with institutions and their practices. The use of semi-structured interviews for this research facilitated the exploration of the agency, as well as prompting tangential lines of dialogue that permitted the interviewees to provide unforeseen additions and raise relevant and contributory points.

The study of extant literature has shown that sustainable consumption practices are led by a placement of importance on the nature of achieving sustainable future and a concern for the climate crisis at present (Honkanen et al., 2006; Verplanken & Roy, 2015). As such, to gauge the interview participants’ preliminary concerns, they were asked to discuss their feelings about a quotation and statistic taken from the UN International Panel on Climate Change’s 2021 report. Interviewees were asked a follow-up question to qualify who they thought this report would most affect in society. This approach was used for two reasons: firstly, to gauge emotional attachment to the impact of the climate crisis, as a way of determining the extent to which ‘visions’ and ‘expectations’ would impact the subsequent assessment of their sustainable or unsustainable consumption habits. Secondly, the IPCC report question was used to ease the interviewee into the process of being asked questions and providing responses. The subsequent main structure of the interview was based on three sections that were made clear to the interviewee from the outset. These included the interviewee as an individual, the interviewee

in relation to institutional structures, and what the future holds for consumption practices. These three sections were made clear to the interviewee to avoid confusion and to provide structure to the process, providing milestones and objectives for both interviewee and interviewer. The interviews were constructed as a conversational dialogue, facilitated by the semi-structured style, and permitted the exploration of tangential and complementary themes as the interview progressed. Whilst each interview differed slightly, depending on the interviewee's ontologies and lived experiences, all participants considered themselves to be conscious consumers to varying extents.

## **Sampling and Data Collection**

The research participants were recruited through personal acquaintances and responses to an online social media post from my personal account on the LinkedIn website. The sample included a range of ages, ethnicities, gender identities, and professions. Of the participants, three identified as male and two as female. As previously discussed, data pertaining to the professional status of the participant was not included within the analysis and, as such, has not been included in the findings as it has been deemed outside of the scope of this paper. The participants ranged from ages 23 to 62. All five participants were of White British and White Irish backgrounds. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to sign a consent form and provided with an information sheet. The names of the participants have been pseudonymised and any potentially defining characteristics have been censored to ensure anonymity. See Table 1 for a comprehensive list of participants' demographic information.

The shortest interview lasted 52 minutes and the longest 74 minutes. This duration proved to be sufficient within which to posit all of the prescribed questions and any additional avenues of inquiry to be explored. The interviews were conducted over Zoom, an online video-conferencing software with audio and video capabilities. I chose to utilise this method in order to ensure safety for the participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As this research spanned a timeframe wherein the UK was both under government restrictions and not, it was considered best for all parties to ensure consistency of methodological data collection. As such, the interviews were recorded using Zoom's built-in recording function and later transcribed. The interviews were analysed using an alternating emic/etic iterative approach (Tracy, 2019), coding themes based on both emergent data and established theories. I utilised inductive

reasoning methodologies to develop the codes that subsequently resulted in the emergence of three themes, each of which contained sub-themes. I then use the theoretical lenses of ‘the wilful actor’ and ‘collective intentionality’ (Abdelnour et al., 2017) to understand the ‘visions’ and ‘expectations’ established by the niche level of actor in the MLP (Geels, 2011) to understand the consumer agency of the participants in the pursuit of sustainable prosperity.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Identified Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Gabriel	24	Male	White British	Postgraduate Student
Alyssa	23	Female	White Irish	Brand Analyst
Fred	30	Male	White Irish	Digital Content Manager
Anthony	32	Male	White British	Data Manager
Mary	62	Female	White British	Entrepreneur

*Table 1 – Research participant demographic information*

## **Limitations and Reflexivity**

This dissertation has been designed to explore the role of consumer in the pursuit of sustainable prosperity. In engaging institutional theories of agency and prosperity, I am utilising two separate concepts, both of which have contested definitions and scope of research dependent on the researcher’s ontology and epistemology. In utilising a qualitative study, I acknowledge that the results of the semi-structured interviews have no grounds for generalisation. The idea of the Global North is a broad concept that incorporates a much larger geographical area, diversity of ethnicities and political affiliations to which I has access. The sample utilised in this study is entirely based on London, UK situated individuals that have received a university education. As such, the sample size and characteristics of participants contribute to the potential for bias within this study. Whilst socio-cultural differences did not pertain to the scope of this study, further investigation into how socio-economic factors affect consumer agency may be of note. The use institutional work theory as exemplified by the lenses of ‘the wilful actor’ and ‘collective intentionality’ are used in an attempt to reduce inherent biases in my work.

The personal nature of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and the potentially emotive nature of the climate crisis as a contributing factor in the line of questioning may have influenced the participants' responses to the questions. Additionally, whilst participants were given the opportunity to add any comments or statements they wanted to outside of the semi-structured line of inquiry, the inherent nature of language and self-expression will have resulted in the inevitable exclusion of what cannot be said (Frosh, 2007). In my position as the interviewer, I attempted to create a safe space for participants to talk freely. However, my position as the researcher may have compromised this notion to varying extents between each participant and affected the way in which they talk about their consumption habits, articulate their agency, and present their lived experiences. As such, whilst I have made every effort within my capacity as a researcher to present an unbiased study and mitigate inherent biases, aspects of the process may have influenced the results, leading to unrepresentative responses from participants.

## **Findings**

In this section, I will examine the key themes that have emerged from analysis of the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews conducted with consumer participants. These findings will be related to the overarching research question: What is the role of consumers in achieving sustainable prosperity? As has been shown from the literature review, sustainable consumption can act as a driving force behind institutional change, a necessary mechanism in achieving sustainable futures. The link between institutional ethics and a potential movement away from a profit-orientated stakeholder focus, to a society-benefitting stakeholder approach has also been demonstrated through the emergence of CSR and sustainable business models. In answering this paper's research question, I posited two key questions in the opening section: How are consumer habits and sustainable prosperity linked? And to what extent do consumers utilise their agency in relation to desired sustainability outcomes? An analysis of the extant literature has contributed to demonstrating the link between sustainability and consumer habits and how consumers may utilise their agency in relation to their desired outcomes. This section intends to expand on the role of consumers in the context of sustainable prosperity further. In order to do so, further questions will be posed:

*What role does conscious consumption<sup>1</sup> play in the lives of the subjects?*

*To what extent do consumers understand the social and environmental impact of their consumption decisions?*

*How does conscious consumption affect the way subjects interact with institutions?*

The findings of the iterative thematic analysis will be outlined in the following section. These findings represent the different lived experiences of the participants. The analysis concluded in the observation of 3 key themes, which will be illustrated with direct quotations from the participant interviews. The 3 key themes can be defined as regarding individuals, collectives and institutions. Within each of these key themes, are sub-themes that elucidate the complexities of the key themes further.

Drawing upon the extant literature and the thematic analysis, the key themes are articulated through sub-themes. A diagrammatic visualisation of the thematic matrix can be seen in Fig. 3. The driver for socio-technical change at the niche level of the MLP proposed by Geels is ‘vision’ or ‘expectations’. This is presented as a sub-theme for ‘individual’ alongside ‘increased agency’, both of which were discussed in relation to the lens of ‘the wilful actor’. ‘Collective’ is supported by ‘unified vs. disparate’, ‘education’, and ‘activism’ as three sub-themes. Lastly, ‘institutions’ addresses the differed responsibility to the role of ‘governments and ‘corporations’ which were common touchpoints across all of the subjects’ interviews.

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<sup>1</sup> N.B. ‘conscious consumption’ is synonymous and interchangeable with the terminology of ‘sustainable consumption’ and ‘ethical consumption’ utilised throughout this paper.

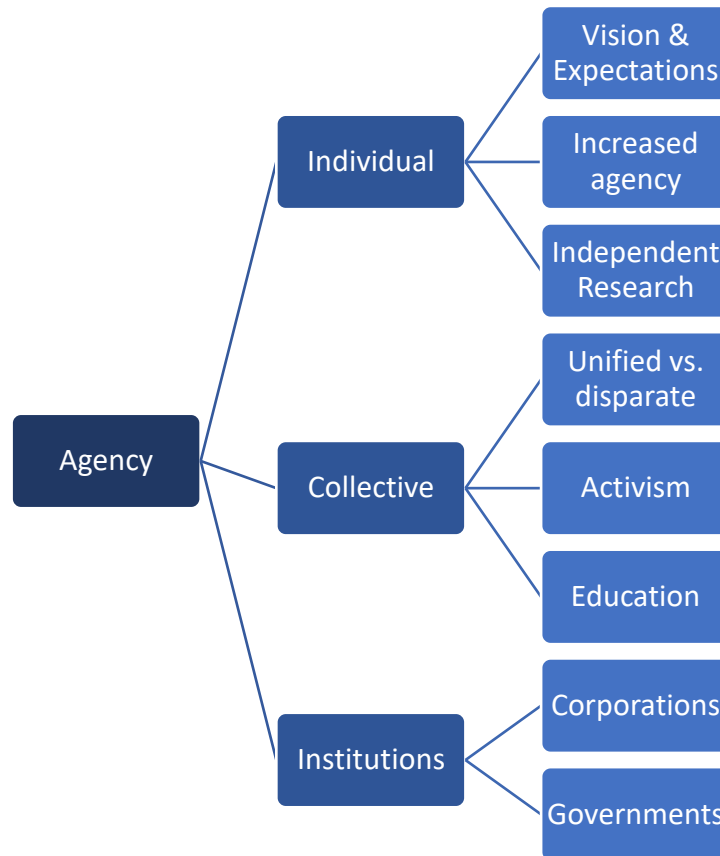


Fig. 3 – Diagram of thematic matrix.

## Key Theme 1: Individual

### Sub-theme 1: Vision and expectations

*Gabriel: "I think people are buying into ideas rather than things"*

*Fred: "There's more of an expectation that the companies will follow some kind of ethical sustainable guidelines"*

*Alyssa: "And I think it's just because I'm interested in it that then that's probably why I've now become disheartened. If I've seen people kind of get so close and there's kind of a hunger for it. But it's not coming at the government level, and it's not kind of coming at the kind of the corporate level that it needs to come out in order for the big changes "*

Across all the participants in this study, there was a universal expectation, both on themselves and others, to contribute to the idea of conscious consumerism. Whilst each participant expressed this idiosyncratically, there was an underlying theme. They each carried an innate

requirement to actively employ agency. As such, the idea of an “*expectation*”, as referred to by Fred, indicates an awareness and committed belief that practices must change in favour of sustainability. The “*ideas*” referred to by Gabriel is of particular importance for its framing of the notion that consumer goods and services are inherently loaded with symbolic meaning to both the consumer as an individual and society as a whole.

### **Sub-theme 2: Increased agency**

*Gabriel: "being plugged in online so much more means a constant barrage of images and marketing, ' buy this and buy that' and because of that, maybe because there's so many products out there, you can afford to be picky too, I guess."*

Participants discussed the way in which modern life facilitates agency in regards to consumption. Most participants indicated that they felt online media permitted them increased choice, increased awareness and increased engagement with corporations than ever before. The understanding of marketing and awareness of its effects on consumer habits was understood to be greater now than it has ever been previously, thereby understanding consumer agency as a more developed concept than historical forms. This was reinforced by Anthony who stated, “*I would easily identify a discrepancy between the marketing message and the product*”, indicating a discerning nature towards online marketing and an increased participation in the process of choice.

*Anthony: "direct messaging with companies, but really marketing teams at companies through platforms like Twitter has massively increased the amount of direct influence I would have on a company...if I can take for some social media and make my voice heard or a petition, then they can attribute more conscientious reasoning to a buy or don't buy decision."*

*Gabriel on conscious consumer power: "as an individual, not really at all, but as a consumer, yes."*

Anthony spoke about the “direct influence” he felt he could have on a company by conversing with them online. The idea of increased agency was echoed by Gabriel who, when asked about his capacity to influence the actions of corporate institutions, he separated himself as an



individual from his capacity or actor role as a consumer. In separating the two aspects of his life, he emphasised the agency and its power of acting as a consumer.

### **Sub-theme 3: Independent Research**

Building off of the notion of ‘increased agency’ through values of discerning choice, interview participants also indicated that, in their search for sustainable and ethical products and services, they engage in brand research. The value of research to the conscious consumer is illustrated by the following:

*Fred: "doing the research when you kind of start buying from a brand and making sure that that you kind of take a holistic view of their sustainable practises rather than just being, like, surface level. Okay, they do something organic. They do an organic line. That means they must be sustainable, you know, or like, they label themselves sustainable, but they don't have a third party that's kind of validating those claims towards sustainable."*

*Gabriel: "I think the way something's packaged and marked it does make a big difference, because that's all you can really know without explicitly doing deeper research into the actual practises of the companies."*

They indicated that their relationship with brands was such that research was necessary to be confident that their sustainable choices were not going to be undermined at a later date. Fred articulates that: *"I kind of thought that they'd made some good steps towards becoming more sustainable. But like, upon reading more about their business model, I just realised that it's just the quantity of clothing that they produce and the number of lines that they produce every single season. Like, like, it's just not a sustainable business model"*. This quotation demonstrates the relationship with corporations and emphasised an increased consumer agency required to pursue their personal expectations.

## **Key Theme 2: Collective**

### **Sub-theme 1: Unified vs disparate**

Research of corporate practices in the pursuit of individual expectation satisfaction (Key Theme 1, sub-theme 3) was seen by participants as a valuable tool for individual expression of

agency. However, it was also acknowledged that this process has limiting factors, making it somewhat inaccessible to the collective:

*Fred: "I am a fairly privileged person who has the time and resource to kind of decide where I'm going to allocate my money. And, you know, and I have a bit more maybe a lot of people don't have time. Kind of I spoke about researching brands and kind of keeping up to date with the impact they have greatly, whether that's like ethics or sustainability or whatever. But a lot of people just kind of they buy something because they need it. "*

Fred's account acknowledges the discrepancy noted in judgements between the individual and collective by Bitektine & Haack (2015) and Verplanken & Roy (2015) discussed in the preliminary literature review. Whilst Bitektine and Haack (2015) refer to the process of institutional change through the differences in collective, Verplanken and Roy (2015) approach this phenomenon from a consumer behaviour perspective. The idea of the disconnect between the individual and the collective was further emphasised by two other participants in the following:

*Mary: "I think I'm quite flexible and adaptable, but I can understand how people who have been used to eating in a certain way, or, you know, need a car more than I do - for like driving the kids to school or something like that - how they would be limited if maybe they had to buy an electric car and they didn't have the place to plug at home."*

*Gabriel: "It's unreasonable to expect people who can't afford that to make huge changes in their life when they can just save money and live a better life by ignoring the sustainable option, going for something that maybe is grown less ethically or created in a more polluting way, but is cheaper and more accessible to them."*

Mary describes herself as “flexible” and “adaptable”, implying that whilst the external variables that are imposed on her life by institutional forces may affect her, she carries individual attributes that allow her to be resilient to change. Mary places this statement within the context of the collective, generalising about families and access to electric vehicle facilities, unconsciously presenting an individualist standpoint in the process. Gabriel also acknowledged

the disparity in access to sustainable lifestyles through the generalised idea of the collective of consumers, noting the complexity of both “mak[ing] huge changes in their life” and the financial cost of sustainable options.

### **Sub-theme 2: Activism**

The role of the political activism was a shared theme amongst a few participants. Common to the participants that articulated their personal opinions, they individually chose to common on a specific activist group called Extinction Rebellion.

*Fred: "political activism helps, you know, we've seen Extinction rebellion and being one of the largest protest groups around environmental action in the past few years, that has an influence on the way that government policy does affect the consumerism and consumers. And I think obviously it has an impact on consumers, which I think is really good. But I think in terms of government policy, it's pretty limited. We may have more impact."*

Fred was of the belief that activism in its physical form has been a driver that has affected government policy, which then subsequently affects consumers. Fred’s comments on political activism underscored the notion of collective action as a driver for institutional change in altering policy. However, the disconnect between individual judgements that make up a collective was emphasised through Gabriel’s alternative opinion on the subject of political activists, Extinction Rebellion:

*Gabriel: "I think they're being more than nuisance than more than help. I think in general, most people agree with the message, but then at the same time, how do you convey the urgency of the situation without resorting to really extreme measures? I think it's massively, massively difficult."*

For Gabriel, this type of political activism is not helpful, despite as he attests, agreeing with the “message”. The idea of the “message” is the ‘expectation’ described in relation to sustainable goals on an individual level. The collective, therefore, are again articulated by consumers to be inherently varied in their understanding of the “message”, demonstrated by diverse capacities for action as showcased by Extinction Rebellion’s “extreme measures”.

An alternative to protest groups and their relationship with the collective was proposed by Anthony. He chose to see collective agency as facilitated by the digital sphere, *“I think things to raise awareness and coalesce support around a cause, such as petitions can be supported by a lot of media, sort of YouTube and channels like that”*. The notion of the internet as a facilitator and legitimiser of sustainability and unsustainable, ethical and unethical practices was a unifying theme amongst the participants. The internet was seen by participants as a politicised space whereby the ‘expectations’ of both the individual consumer and the collective could be exercised. This was outlined in relation to ‘influencer’ media personalities that both Alyssa and Anthony commented to have significant power to affect consumer choice in favour of sustainable choices, but more often than not, were utilised by the most unsustainable institutions to market their products:

*Anthony: “influencers could have a major role to play. For example, Molly May signing with Pretty Little Thing comes to mind. She got a lot of backlash for that because they've been known to have big problems with overconsumption and underpaying workers and all sorts of other on sustainable practises. So I think that's a really interesting avenue where consumers and influences are held to quite a high standard of morality, potentially more than consumers would have to deal with.”*

*Alyssa: I think [online media influencers] should be held accountable. But then it's like, who is holding them accountable?*

### **Sub-theme 3: Education**

Participants mentioned that throughout the notion of the collective, there was a lack of education surrounding sustainable and ethical consumption, the effect of our consumption habits and how this education should itself be consumed.

*Alyssa: "if it's going to come from a young age to actually change the way that people think about things, it's either going to come from people's families or from school. If you think the majority of people are educated in state schools, at which the syllabuses are set by the government, if they change that to teach people about the impact people are having and about consumption and why you should do all*

*these certain things, then ultimately that's going to trickle down and then change consumption."*

For Alyssa, therefore, there was a notion that sustainability and ethics of consumption should be a government mandated part of the state-regulated education system. As such, she saw the government as having a role in educating consumers. Additionally, Fred states that: *"I think as more consumers collectively become educated and make those individual decisions, eventually, they do start to add up to make an impact"*, indicating that consumer education at the collective level is essential to encourage individuals to consume more consciously in relation to sustainable and ethical practices. Alyssa believes that younger people are more likely to act this way: *"I think a lot of people or ages 20 to 25, I think a naturally more like aware and educated about this. So then shop more sustainably"*. This is supported by Mary, the eldest participant, who states: *"young people really care about this and they are the ones that are pushing it at the moment"*.

### **Key Theme 3: Institutions**

#### **Sub-theme 1: Corporations**

When participants were asked questions about their relationship with institutions, whether corporations they purchased from acted in the interests of sustainable prosperity, or how they may have an impact on these corporations, they used touchpoints of references to specific brands.

*Fred – Oatly, H&M*

*Alyssa – Zara, Boohoo, Morrisons, Facebook, Google*

*Gabriel – Amazon*

*Anthony – YouTube, Evian, Twitter, Depop*

*Mary – Marks & Spencer, CocaCola, Gorillas*

In most cases, participants articulated their relationship with these brands. Of these relationships, the majority were framed in a negative light. For instance, *"I always used Oatly. But then this past year I read something about how a Chinese company that's responsible for huge deforestation in Amazon had bought lately. So, I switched to a different brand"* (Fred). Brands were used as references by which to frame their own sustainability choices, articulating

their values and ‘expectations’ in the process – “Zara have their ‘JoinLife collection’. It shows that there is an appetite for change if these massive companies are introducing these collections” (Alyssa).

Participants related corporations to the role they believe them to play in achieving a sustainable future. A significant aspect of this was the concept of ‘greenwashing’. ‘Greenwashing’ refers to the process of presenting misleading information regarding a company’s environmental impact or sustainability initiatives. This term was named explicitly by Fred, Anthony, and Alyssa and alluded to by Gabriel. Antony states:

*Anthony: “The problem being there's so much greenwashing that every company most companies, I should say, claims to protect ethical values, be that human or environmental. And I think it would actually be a challenge to find a modern company that doesn't make some sort of claim like that. Although the reality is most likely they're not all fulfilling first value commitments.”*

In the line of questioning that prompted participants to discuss the way in which consumers understand the corporations with which they interact, consumers were questioned on how their individual and collective impacts can affect change within these institutions. All participants emphasised change based in market dynamics:

*Anthony: "it comes back to making these small decisions with where to buy and how much and where it's come from and so on that are sort of on the individual level, there's small impact, but ultimately as a block, they can have an influence on global prosperity.”*

Anthony articulates that he believes that his small decisions can contribute to sustainability goals, but his type of decisions are amplified and more impactful when appropriated by many consumers. However, he goes on to discuss that the market-based dynamics have limitations to the incentives for corporations that are profit maximising in focus: “I think the only other thing would be to discourage over consumption, but that's pretty antithetical to most companies’ incentive and profit structures”. He states that consumers have insufficient information on which to make sustainable consumption decisions, influenced by his views on

greenwashing. Additionally, consumers are described as beholden to what the companies provide, believing companies need to be incentivised to act ethically.

*Anthony: "the quality of information about the impact of the products available to consumers and also the incentive, the incentives for companies to act in genuinely ethical, be that environmentally or human ways, need to be increased."*

The idea of corporate institutions requiring incentivisation to act sustainably from a top-down perspective is furthered in the participants' discourse on the role of governments in achieving sustainable prosperity.

### **Sub-theme 2: Governments**

Participants were asked as to their perception of government involvement in achieving sustainable prosperity. All participants articulated the necessity for government action in this process to varying degrees. They were questioned on their relationship to government actions in their capacity as consumers. There were differences as to the capacity of governments to influence institutional change related to sustainability practices.

*Anthony: "Governments follow companies unless governments impose sanctions. Maybe that's too strong on companies for environmental or human ethical issues."*

*Gabriel: "While I think governments are probably more influential, I think corporations would be more agile"*

*Fred: "But I think in terms of government policy, it's pretty limited. [Consumers] may have more impact."*

*Mary: "I think there will be pressure on governments legislate against plastic."*

These quotations show the similarities and differences in the role of government in the pursuit of sustainable future. Anthony's belief is that governments are beholden to companies, which aligns with the view of Gabriel, who believes companies are more "agile" in addressing market failures. Fred and Mary share the view that the consumer can influence government, however,

Mary believes the government has greater capacity than Fred attests to, in regards to legislating for sustainable practices.

Participants discuss their agency in relation to three key ideas, themselves as individuals, the idea of the collective, and the institutions of corporations and government. The relevance of these findings in relation to the preliminary literature review and my own analysis of the participant interviews will be outlined in the subsequent chapter. Whilst this section has attempted to provide an overview of the findings as summarised into a matrix of interconnected themes and sub-themes, the limitations of this paper have resulted in me excluding relevant quotations and points of discussion that have stemmed from the primary data collection.

## **Discussion**

In this section I will explore the findings of the semi-structured interviews conducted with 5 consumers. The findings will be related to the primary research question: what is the role of consumers in achieving sustainable prosperity? In answering this question, I will discuss how the role of the consumer can be better understood through the subjects' responses to the semi-structured interview. The responses have shown that the role of consumer actors can be addressed by three clear themes: the individual, the notion of the collective and the relationship between institutions. The agency of the consumers is viewed as essential to deconstructing these themes in relation to achieving sustainable prosperity. This will be achieved through referral to the concepts discussed in the preliminary literature review, using institutional work theory, in particular the lenses of 'the wilful actor' and 'collective intentionality' (Abdelnour et al., 2017), as a way of understanding actors' roles in achieving institutional change. As previously discussed, institutional change is a prerequisite for attaining the socio-technical changes necessary for achieving sustainable prosperity. This is emphasised by the failures of the existing, dominant paradigm of growth-driven, human progress that have resulted in irrevocable environmental degradation and vast socio-economic inequalities.

In Geels' (2011) multi-level perspective model, the niche level actors are said to have 'visions' or 'expectations' that begin a socio-technical transition process. The notion that an 'expectation' of sustainable consumption to be facilitated or become increasingly common place was shared by almost all of the participants both explicitly and implicitly. For example,



*“there's more of an expectation that the companies will follow some kind of ethical sustainable guidelines” (Fred).* Although the ‘expectation’ or ‘vision’ is a key aspect of what makes consumers act sustainably because it acts as a personal, value-laden judgement (Honkanen et al., 2006; Honkanen & Verplanken, 2004), it goes further to imply that conscious consumer actors act in this way in order to further the goal of sustainability and, potentially, prosperity dependent on the contextualities of the good or service, buying into the *“idea” (Gabriel)* as well as the product. It must be noted that the participants were significantly more aware of the idea of ‘sustainability’ than ‘prosperity’. Whilst some did discuss human ethical implications, *“if I found out that he was a big scandal involving some environmental or human ethical wrongdoing, then I would, boycott the brand” (Anthony)*, the discourse was predominantly environmentally orientated. This was made explicitly apparent when asked to articulate the meaning of what ‘prosperity’ meant to them in the context of global development. As such, the role of the consumer thus far has been key in utilising agency imbued with ‘vision’ and ‘expectation’ to instigate institutional change. Therefore, the participants could be considered to be ‘wilful actors’ with varying degrees of strategic agency.

As outlined by Abdelnour et al. (2017), whilst the individual consumer may be the smallest constituent contingent of a market-based society, they have become increasingly significant in modern society with thanks to the rise of modern capitalism. The concept of the individual as separate to their capacity as a consumer was alluded to when discussing consumer capacity to instigate institutional change, *“as an individual, not really at all, but as a consumer, yes”*. This shows the capacity of the ‘consumer’ role to exercise institutional-defining agency. Participants also indicated that they felt more empowered by increased digitalisation of modern life, particularly in regards to marketing and ecommerce. This digitalisation was acknowledged to facilitate both increased transparency about topics of sustainability and discernment amongst consumers: *“platforms like Twitter has massively increased the amount of direct influence I would have” (Anthony)*, leading consumers to feel more empowered in their agentic roles.

Across all participants and the preliminary literature review, the idea of the collective was presented as more likely to be capable of instigating institutional change through the amplification of actions *en mass*. Amongst the interview participants, there was an acceptance that the generalised consumer collective is limited in their capabilities to practices certain sustainable actions due to *“unreasonable” (Gabriel)* variables. However, it was also acknowledged that there are groups that share much similar ‘expectations’ for consumption

habits such as friendship grounds and those from similar socio-economic or educational backgrounds. These ‘expectations’ were perpetuated by digital networks acting as an “*echo-chamber*” (Fred, Alyssa). Education of sustainable prosperity and its links to consumption was seen as a necessary step in achieving the ‘expectations’ of participants. Therefore, we can understand the collective as similar to the notion proposed by Bite and Haack (2015). As consumers seek legitimacy for institutional change towards sustainable prosperity in society, top-down processes, such as formal education, and bottom-up practices such as consumer agency contribute to the establishment of legitimacy.

Institutions, both corporate and government, were seen by consumers as obstacles and potential facilitators of sustainable prosperity. Participants articulated their empowered individual agency and potential for more unified collective agency, but remained passionate about the necessity for institutions to engage with the ‘expectations’ that consumers demonstrate through their sustainable and ethical purchasing. There was a disparity between the literature and the participant’s discourse in that the latter did not explicitly articulate the role of corporate social responsibility. Rather, CSR was implicitly discussed in relation to consumer demand for more sustainable practices, as a marketing tool, and in corporate propensity for ‘greenwashing’, which participants believed would occur less frequently given the digitalisation of media and how it affects consumer discernment: “*consumers are becoming more aware of the greenwashing*” (Fred). However, the participation of corporations was seen as instrumental to achieving sustainable prosperity to limit the overproduction of goods and associated negative externalities of business operations. Participants saw their agency as having actionable effect on corporations over recent years and believed going forward with more collective action, this could be amplified. Corporations were seen as both beholden to and capable of dictating government actions. Government institutions were described as slow by participants but necessary to create and action policy that has more significant effect on business operations than simply consumer demand.

Consumer participants were shown to have increased agency due to the phenomenon of digitalisation and modern market-based dynamics. Participants acknowledged the potential of their individual actions of consumer agency, driven by ‘expectations’ or ‘visions’ of sustainability, to represent a wider collective action. Collective agency towards the ‘expectation’ of sustainable prosperity was understood to be more complex as each individual may employ their individual level agency differently, enacting a variety of micro-level actions

that may or may not contribute towards the overarching ‘expectation’. These differences were believed to be based off of economic, socially, and geographically-determined access to resources. Both corporate and government institutions govern these complexities. Corporations, although driving the growth-based paradigm of neoliberal capitalism, are susceptible to acts of consumer agency. They can be pressured by collective action to employ greater consideration for sustainable and ethical business operations. This includes the dissemination of accurate marketing material that does not purport misleading sustainable practices. Despite this, consumers consider themselves to hold increasing agency to challenge companies for these practices. Government, on the other hand, were understood to be largely unaffected directly by individuals in their capacity as consumers. As participants made the personal distinction between the individual and consumer capacity, it was noted the individual is politically active in voting but the consumer can be politically active in consuming. Therefore, the act of affecting corporations as a consumer collective, unified by ‘expectations’ or ‘vision’ for sustainable prosperity, ultimately signals to slow-moving governments to act accordingly.

As such, I propose that the role of the consumer in the Global North in creating sustainable prosperity is an essential driving force behind the institutional change at consumer network, institutional, and government levels to ultimately achieve the socio-technical changes required to deliver sustainable and prosperous futures. The role of the consumer is more accurately predicated on two concepts. Firstly, the ‘expectations’ of consumers to utilise their agency to dictate consumer demand for more sustainable and ethical practices from companies. This is the first step, however, the notion of the reflexivity of institutional change dictates that positive changes must happen in order to assess progress and make further changes. Examples of sustainable practices include reducing consumption, buying sustainably from researched companies, and facilitating a more circular economy in order to utilise fewer finite resources. Secondly, consumers must hold institutions accountable for their actions or lack thereof. For example, regarding corporations, this entails sustainable purchasing and utilising digital networks to disseminate information. Although consumer political activism may engender negativity towards the ‘message’ of the activists, it may also be considered a useful tool in directly engaging government with the ‘expectations’ of the public, and by extension, consumer collectives.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research**

To conclude the outcome of this study, I have argued that consumer agency in the Global North plays a crucial role in achieving global sustainable prosperity. The current consumption paradigm supports and enables the proliferation of exploitative operations of finite resources and produce damaging negative externalities. Alternative forms of consumption that utilise agency to support sustainability are an essential factor in contributing towards the goal of sustainable prosperity. It has been articulated that sustainable prosperity in the current economic system is unachievable without institutional change. For this reason, I chose to utilise institutional work theory to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding consumer agency in the context of institutional change. This was shown the lenses of ‘the wilful actor’ and ‘collective agency’ (Abdelnour et al., 2017), which subsequently informed the etic aspect of the iterative methodology for the primary data analysis. This paper further utilised the multi-level perspective (MLP), and adapted it to consider the act of sustainable consumption as a social innovation, driven by ‘visions’ and ‘expectations’ at the niche level of society, and argued against its conception as a ‘lock-in mechanism’. These ‘visions’ and ‘expectations’ required for socio-technical transitions to take place in the MLP corresponded to the inspirational, value-laden judgements that consumers utilised when enacting agency to purchase sustainably/ethically and when considering their role within institutional structures. The notion of agency related to socio-technical transitions has been underrepresented in the field of research. As such, this paper has proposed that consumer agency can provide a useful tool for better understanding the conditions necessary to leverage and maintain socio-technical transition processes from the niche level in relation to achieving sustainable prosperity. This study may provide value to academics and practitioners seeking to understand consumer agency in relation to socio-technical transitions and institutional change. It may also provide insight into sustainable prosperity as a contested concept and the value of sustainable consumption in its pursuit.

This study has articulated the nature of sustainable prosperity as a contested and largely misunderstood concept. It has demonstrated that in order to achieve it, we require a fundamental restructuring of existing institutional structures and embedded processes. I have demonstrated the value of conscious consumers in achieving this by exercising their agency, thereby contributing to institutional change in the pursuit of ‘visions’ and ‘expectations’. However, primary research has shown these ‘expectations’ differ between consumers

dependent on their ontologies and priorities. The overarching research question stated: ‘what is the role of consumers in achieving sustainable prosperity?’. Ultimately, the ‘role’ of the consumer cannot be straightforwardly answered. Sustainable prosperity requires coordinated action between a multidisciplinary cohort of actors and institutions. However, the findings of this paper suggest that consumer agency is an integral part of this complex network of actions and processes. Consumer agency can instigate institutional change, particularly at the corporate level, which is the most significant contributor to the social and environmental crisis of the present day. It must be noted that given the qualitative methodology and limited sample size of participants, the results of this study cannot be generalised to be considered applicable to all consumers. Further future research is, perhaps, required to map consumers’ sustainability ‘expectations’ to better understand the unifying aspects of collective action.

The last point to note is that this study has shown the desire amongst consumers to address issues associated with overconsumption. It is acknowledged that the approaches and experiences of participants differ. Participants also contested the processes and pathways taken by institutions. As such, it leads me to conclude that achieving sustainable prosperity requires a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach that addresses the root of socio-economic and environmental issues as opposed to symptoms. This involves engaging with the complexities of human lived experiences, cultural sensitivities, and embedded, historical structures. However, this study has shown that sustainable prosperity should be considered a viable ‘expectation’. Despite complexities of accomplishing such broad-reaching institutional change in practice, this study has shown both a top-down and, importantly, a bottom-up approach are essential in transitioning towards a sustainable and prosperous future.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1 - Dissertation Primary Research: Interview Questions for Participants

#### Introduction:

Thank you for volunteering to take part in this study through this interview. This process will involve me asking you questions about your perspective on topics of sustainability and your consumption habits. Please articulate as best as you can, explaining clearly why you think a certain way. There are no right or wrong answers, you have been selected for your personal perspective on this topic.

Your agreement permitting, this interview will be audio-recorded. Should you wish, I will stop or delete the recording on your request. Please see the Participant Information Sheet for full details.

#### Demographic information:

- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Occupation

#### Opening:

The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made headlines in early August (9<sup>th</sup> August) in publishing its AR6 report on the state of climate change.

The report stated that:

“It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred”

([https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_SPM.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf))

It was proposed that the 2-degree Celsius threshold will be exceeded, causing irrevocable damage to the planet.

*What impact does this report have on you? Do you think the report will instigate change? If so, at what level of society – government, institutional/corporate and/or consumer?*

#### Questions about the individual:

- *To what extent do you believe your choices as a consumer influence societal change?*
- *Do you consider yourself to be a conscious consumer? Can you provide an example this?*
- *Boycott of brands?*
- *Do people around you follow this consumption habit too? Are they supportive of this consumption habit?*

- *What do you understand by the term 'sustainable'?*
- *What do you understand by the term 'prosperity' in the context of global development? (+ quick explanation of sustainable prosperity)*
- *How do you understand your position as a consumer in achieving 'sustainable prosperity'?*
- *What do you consider the most pressing limitations to achieving 'sustainable prosperity'?*

**Questions about individual in relation to institutions:**

- *Who is most responsible for achieving a sustainable future and why?*
- *To what extent do you understand yourself to be influenced by marketing in your consumption choices?*
- *How do you understand this in relation to consumers at large?*
- *How do you understand your consumption relationship with corporations? Do their actions affect your consumption habits?*
- *What influence do you believe you may have in changing corporate attitudes as a consumer?*
- *How do you feel about government action in relation to consumption in your country?*
- *What influence do you believe you may have in changing government policy as a consumer?*
- *What do you understand about collective action in achieving sustainability goals?*

**Future direction:**

- *What does the future hold for consumption habits?*
- *What do you believe you have to do going forward and what we have to do as a collective?*

**Outro:**

We are coming to the end of the interview. Should you have any further questions or comments, please do let me know now.

Thank you for your time today, your participation has been of great value to this study.

## Appendix 2 – Participant Information Sheet

### Participant Information Sheet

**YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET**

**Title of Study:**

The Role of Consumers in the Global North: Consumer Agency in the Pursuit of Sustainable Prosperity

**Department:** Institute for Global Prosperity

**Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s):** Tom Leverick, +447543220938, ycrntle@ucl.ac.uk

**Name and Contact Details of the Principal Researcher:** (Same as above)

#### **1. Invitation Paragraph**

You are being invited to take part in research for an MSc Dissertation. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### **2. What is the project's purpose?**

In an attempt to understand the consumer role in achieving a globally sustainable and prosperous future, I am exploring the consumer agency involved in decision-making and self-actualisation of individual, collective and institutional sustainability goals.

#### **3. Why have I been chosen?**

You have been selected for your experience as a consumer. Your honesty, insight and articulation of your actions as a consumer is of value to this study. I thank you for being interested in participating in this study.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

Taking part in the study is entirely voluntary. You are entitled to withdraw from the study at any point with no negative consequences

#### **4. What will happen to me if I take part?**

This one-off semi-structured interview will last under 1 hour and the results will be later analysed in conjunction with other data sets including a separate consumer survey.

You are entitled to withdraw from the study up to 1 week after the interview has been completed. In that 1-week period you can request to have your information deleted and not to be used as a participant in the research.

**5. Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?**

With your agreement, an audio-recording will be taken of this interview and later transcribed. I commit to stop the recording and/or delete it at any point during or up to 1 week after the interview should you ask. I will record and store the audio file on a password protected device and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. The audio file will be deleted 6 weeks after 20<sup>th</sup> September.

**6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

This interview will not ask you to disclose any sensitive personal information. However, should any question cause you discomfort, please do not hesitate to let me know at the time. You will have to option to skip any question you do not wish to answer.

**7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will contribute to the advancement of the academic and practitioners' discourse on achieving a sustainable future through consumer mobilisation.

**8. What if something goes wrong?**

Should you wish to report a complaint as to the process of this research or the conduct of the researcher, you may contact Dr Onya Idoko, [o.idoko@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:o.idoko@ucl.ac.uk). If a serious issue is needed to be directed to senior representatives of UCL's Institute for Global Prosperity, you may contact Dr Andres Vicente, [a.vicente@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.vicente@ucl.ac.uk), or programme lead Dr Matthew Davis, [matt.davies@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:matt.davies@ucl.ac.uk).

Should you feel that any of your complaints have not been addressed to your satisfaction, you can contact the Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee – [ethics@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@ucl.ac.uk).

**9. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any ensuing reports or publications. Your information will be pseudonymised and the data stored on a password protected device. The data will be deleted 6 weeks after the 6<sup>th</sup> September.

**10. Limits to confidentiality**

- Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.
- Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.
- Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample.
- Confidentiality will be respected subject to legal constraints and professional guidelines.
- Confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached. If this was the case we would inform you of any decisions that might limit your confidentiality.
- Confidentiality may be limited and conditional and the researcher has a duty of care to report to the relevant authorities possible harm/danger to the participant or others.

## 11. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of the research will be made available after 20<sup>th</sup> September 2021 should you wish to read them. The final dissertation will be made available at your request. The dissertation will be submitted for grading on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

## 12. Local Data Protection Privacy Notice

### Notice:

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)

This ‘local’ privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our ‘general’ privacy notice:

For participants in research studies, click [here](#)

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the ‘local’ and ‘general’ privacy notices.

The categories of personal data used will be as follows:

Name  
Age  
Occupation  
Ethnicity

Gender

The lawful basis that would be used to process your *personal data* will be performance of a task in the public interest.

The lawful basis used to process *special category personal data* will be for scientific and historical research or statistical purposes.

*Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.*

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

#### **16. Contact for further information**

For further information you can contact me, Tom Leverick, by email: [tom.leverick.15@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:tom.leverick.15@ucl.ac.uk), or by phone: +447543220938. You will be sent a copy of this sheet and will be asked to sign the consent form.

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this research study.**



## Appendix 3 – Consent Form for Participant Interviewees

### CONSENT FORM FOR *CONSUMERS* IN MSc DISSERTATION RESEARCH STUDY

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

**Title of Study:** *The Role of Consumers in the Global North: Consumer Agency in the Pursuit of Sustainable Prosperity*

**Department:** Institute of Global Prosperity

**Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s):** Thomas Leverick  
(tom.leverick.15@ucl.ac.uk)

**Name and Contact Details of the Principal Researcher:** Thomas Leverick  
(tom.leverick.15@ucl.ac.uk)

**Name and Contact Details of the UCL Data Protection Officer:** Dr. Onya Idoko  
(o.idoko@ucl.ac.uk)

**This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee: Yes**

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

**I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes means that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element that I may be deemed ineligible for the study.**

		Tick Box
1.	*I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction and would like to take part in: - <i>an individual interview</i>	
2.	*I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to <i>1 week after the collection of data via interview</i>	
3.	*I consent to participate in the study. I understand that my personal information ( <i>age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location</i> ) will be used for the purposes explained to me. I understand that according to data protection legislation, ‘public task’ will be the lawful basis for processing.	
4.	Use of the information for this project only  Anonymity is optional for this research. Please select from the following 3 options: (a) I agree for my real name and role/affiliation to be used in connection with any words I have said or information I have passed on. (b) I request that my comments are presented anonymously but give permission to connect my role/affiliation with my comments (but not the title of my position).	

	(c) I request that my comments are presented anonymously with no mention of my role/affiliation.	
5.	*I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the University for monitoring and audit purposes.	
6.	*I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw, any personal data I have provided up to that point will be deleted unless I agree otherwise.	
7.	I understand the potential risks of participating and the support that will be available to me should I become distressed during the course of the research.	
8.	I understand that no promise or guarantee of benefits have been made to encourage you to participate.	
9.	I understand that the data will not be made available to any commercial organisations but is solely the responsibility of the researcher's undertaking this study.	
10.	I understand that I will not benefit financially from this study or from any possible outcome it may result in in the future.	
11.	I agree that my pseudonymised research data may be used by others for future research.	
12.	I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to receive a copy of it. Yes/No	
13.	I consent to my interview being audio/video recorded and understand that the recordings will be destroyed within <i>6 weeks following 20<sup>th</sup> September 202.</i>	
14.	I hereby confirm that I understand the inclusion criteria as detailed in the Information Sheet and explained to me by the researcher.	
15.	I hereby confirm that:  (a) I understand the exclusion criteria as detailed in the Information Sheet and explained to me by the researcher; and  (b) I do not fall under the exclusion criteria.	
16.	I have informed the researcher of any other research in which I am currently involved or have been involved in during the past 12 months.	
17.	I am aware of who I should contact if I wish to lodge a complaint.	
18.	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	
19.	Use of information for this project and beyond  I would be happy for the data I provide to be stored on a password protected hard drive until they are to be deleted.  I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to my data.	

**If you would like your contact details to be retained so that you can be contacted in the future by UCL researchers who would like to invite you to participate in follow up studies to this project, or in future studies of a similar nature, please tick the appropriate box below.**

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes, I would be happy to be contacted in this way	
<input type="checkbox"/>	No, I would not like to be contacted	

---

Name of participant

---

Date

---

Signature

Thomas Leverick

01/09/21

---

Researcher

---

Date

---

Signature

## Appendix 4 – Example Transcript of Participant Interview

Researcher

Okay, so do you think it will instigate any change at any other level other than at the consumer level?

Anthony

I think it has the capacity to the I suppose. I think fundamentally it might help companies that have companies that have a genuine climate starts or mission or value should already be acting in an environmentally conscious way. And those other companies are ultimately run by individuals. And if the individuals can be sway, then the hope is that there will be small changes. But I don't think I don't necessarily think it's going to turn a massive tide.

Researcher

So going back to consumer approach, to what extent do you believe your choices as a consumer influence societal change?

Anthony

I think we will contribute to a collective effect, even if my one small decision with which company I buy from? How much I buy? I regularly even how I buy the things. So does it by as the next day delivery? Or do I go pick it up myself? On an individual level, the impact is limited. But consumers collectively can influence the environmental decisions that company makes. If a company thinks it's going to lose customers because of a certain environmentally unfriendly decision, then that is an example of how consumers have influence.

Researcher

Do you think as a consumer your only relevance is to corporations that sell goods or services. Is that the only capacity in which you act as a consumer?

Anthony

As a consumer?

Researcher

So as a consumer, are you also an individual? How do you understand that relationship?

Anthony

As a consumer? I mean, by definition, you're consuming that which is created by companies, your relation to the company. I sort of crucial to your status as a consumer if you were to be more subsistence or if you grow your own food, if you don't know, I think there's a limit. There's a limit, a reasonable limit in modern life, to the extent to which you can be self-sustaining unless you adopt a really quite unusual lifestyle, especially maybe in the global north. That's more the case. But yeah, I'd say generally, yes.

Researcher

So do you consider yourself, therefore, to be a conscious consumer? And can you provide any examples of this?

Anthony

I would say that in terms of conscious consumption, I am. I think there are two main categories that would be an environmental stance from a company. It might not be what the company is all about, but it might push me over the edge to make punch decision or sort of nudge me in their direction when comparing them. And then there'd be the companies that are really environmentally focused, say reusable water bottles or reusable straws or things like that where they're sort of main reason for existing is the environmental angle. And I'd say I don't engage with the solely environmentally focused companies that much. But I think the influence of a company taking a stance as part of many of its values has swayed me in the past.

Researcher

So does ethical consumption come into this in a within a kind of idea of human life? Or is it purely environmental for you?

Anthony

It's a mixture, I think when it comes to ethical consumption. Yeah, it's a hybrid between those two.

Researcher

Do you to what extent do you boycott brands or not? Depending on your idea of the company?

Anthony

I think boycotting is something I only do to the most extreme offenders. So, if I found out that he was a big scandal involving some environmental or human ethical wrongdoing, then I would, boycott the brand. The problem being there's so much greenwashing that every company most companies, I should say, claims to protect ethical values, be that human or environmental. And I think it would actually be a challenge to find a modern company that doesn't make some sort of claim like that. Although the reality is most likely they're not all fulfilling first value commitments.

Researcher

So do you have any examples of any companies that at the extreme ends of the spectrum that you have Bell counted?

Anthony

And I guess maybe it's not so much the company, but more the product if it's something I think is wasteful. Unfortunately, sometimes that only comes with buying at once. And, you know, it's roped in loads of packaging and its excessive excessively packaged. And you see that it's been shipped from very far away. And yeah, it would make me much less likely to purchase the product. But I can't really think of an all-out boycott off the top of my head.

Researcher

Maybe if you think of it later on, we can always come back to it. But do you the people around you follow similar consumption habits to you, and if they don't, are they still supportive of the type of consumption habits that you do have?

Anthony

I would say that consumption habits a similar I think everyone he ethical clothing consumption and someone else is more focused on transport. Using more sustainable transport could be food related. So, it's one to say that I'm the same as anyone else. I think everyone tries to do that, but in a different way. And I would hope that no one would judge me for the way I tried to lesson my impact. And sometimes if I have had that judgement, I resent it because I think of the ways that I think that I am doing better than air in other areas. And I think the comparison is counterproductive.

Researcher

So whilst comparisons are counterproductive, do you see any unifying factors within those collectives that you've mentioned?

Anthony

I think among my friends there's a lot more awareness about clothing, the impact of clothing and sourcing. That when I was younger, not even that long, really, maybe seven, seven, eight years ago. I think a lot of people my age at that time were not very enlightened about the impact the clothing industry be that water consumption or poor working conditions, big carbon footprints, big miles and so on. And I know a lot of more people now buy second hand clothes and charity shopping and hand-me-downs and Depop and stuff like that. So, I think that's one of the main areas that collectively the consciousness has shifted of people I know, I think potentially travel has not changed that much. I think people still don't really consider the impact of their travel that much.