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*School of Education and
Communication*

The Critical Consumer of Today's Inauthentic Messages

A qualitative interview study on how young people
make sense of communication promoting
sustainable food consumption

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Abstract

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In Swedish society, food is the fourth most prominent area of consumption. The number of large grocery shops is increasing, and today a consumer can choose between several different brands for the same product. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about defining sustainable food consumption as well as a lack of knowledge about how the consumer receives communication about sustainable food consumption. By using semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews with students from a Swedish university, this study investigates whether sustainable food consumption is relevant to young people living with limited resources and how they define the concept. The study also examines how the interviewees make sense of communication promoting sustainable food consumption. Results illustrate that sustainable food consumption is not as relevant for students due to today's expensive food prices. However, these students were also motivated and informed. They knew how to consume sustainably but were constrained by the economic situation. In addition, the students had difficulty defining sustainable food consumption, while they had no problems defining the more general concept of sustainability. Secondly, the public opinion about communication to promote sustainability was negative because the messages were either misleading or not transparent enough; the recipients became confused and critical. The messages were therefor interpreted as inauthentic.

Key Words: communication, sustainable consumption, food, reception theory, consumer culture theory

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List of Abbreviations

SCB	Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SCC	Sustainable Consumption Communication
EU	European Union
CSN	Centrala studiestödsnämnden, <i>Swedish Board for Study Support</i>

1 Introduction

Swedish household expenditure has increased steadily since 1993 (Swedish Central Bureau of Statistics [SCB], 2016). Figures show that food was the third largest expenditure of Swedish households in 2018 (SCB, 2020). Sustainable consumption and production is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the United Nations (UN) is working with. This raises the question of sustainable food consumption and how unsustainable consumption relates to household expenditure on food. SDG 12 calls for responsible consumption and production with the aim of "doing more and better with less" to ensure the quality of life and "leaving no one behind" (United Nations, 2015, p. 14). However, the question remains about who is responsible for implementing this goal.

According to the Swedish Ministry of Agriculture [Jordbruksverket] (2012), the food industry is the fourth largest industry in Sweden and is growing due to the overflowing number of products available in every grocery store. A customer can choose between several different brands of the same product. The grocery industry has changed in the last decade, and the decrease in the number of available shops is due to the general changes in the Swedish retail sector, where mainly smaller shops have closed while the number of larger shops has increased (Orth & Maican, 2012). Changes have also occurred within shops, e.g., there are now more opportunities to buy larger food packages at a lower price (Dong & Stewart, 2012, p. 702). Although the number of shops in Sweden is decreasing, food consumption is increasing (SCB, 2020).

Many studies have looked at consumer behaviour in the food industry. Researchers have focused on different target groups and investigated what factors influence their consumption behaviour. For example, some studies focus on parents whose children influence purchasing behaviour (Nørgaard et al., 2007). Other studies focus on older people and their consumption behaviour and investigate whether there are differences in consumption between genders (Moschis et al., 2004; Helgesen & Nasset, 2010; Mortimer & Clarke, 2011). Helgesen and Nasset (2010) found that certain factors differ between the sexes, with women paying more attention to price than men. Mortimer and Clarke (2011) found that women find all the factors studied more important concerning price than men. Furthermore, women are more sensitive to environmental issues than men, and the typical profile of a buyer of eco-labelled products is young, educated women (Dietz et al., 2002; Brécard et al., 2009).

There are few, if any, studies that focus on the target group of students, communication, and their consumption behaviour. By studying the specific target group of students and see how they interpret and receive visual communication promoting sustainable consumption that they encounter as consumers, can contribute to the research field of consumer culture with specific and narrower insights. Also, using Stuart Hall's (2006) reception theory, this study can find out if a new and more developed theory on the reception and interpretation of messages needs to be developed. Students who have moved out and started studying at a university or college can be defined as adults, according to Carle and Sjöstrand (1994). These adults also have new consumption patterns as they may live alone for the first time and are responsible for their household (p. 20). Therefore, students' consumption reflects their lifestyle and social background, affecting their behaviour.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 What is Food?

In this study, food refers to edible goods that one can buy in a grocery shop. The Swedish Food Administration uses the word *livsmedel*, which can be translated as food and nourishment. Food is defined in EU law as any substance or product intended to be, or reasonably expected to be, consumed by humans (Livsmedelsverket, 2022). Furthermore, the Swedish Food Act equates *snus* or *snus*-like products and chewing tobacco with food (Livsmedelsverket, 2022). In this study, *snus* is considered a product that cannot equate with food.

1.1.2 The Current Economic Situation

Europe, including Sweden, entered a recession in the last months of 2022, which according to the Swedish government, will last until 2025 (Finansdepartementet, 2022). Inflation rates have affected food prices and led to price increases, with milk, cheese, eggs, meat, bread, and other cereal products being the most affected (SCB, 2022). The current economic situation of rising prices, which started in late 2022 and the first months of 2023, has continued to affect industries, markets, and most importantly people across Sweden. Inflation and rising interest costs are hampering the activity in the Swedish economy, where consumption, house prices and construction activities have declined (Sveriges Riksbank, 2023). Sweden's deputy governor, Martin Flodén, said in an interview in February 2023 that "inflation is way too high, and the inflation outcome in February was not good at all." (Sveriges Riksbank, 2023). The current

economic situation can thus be hard on people with limited means, i.e., people who have only a small amount of money after paying their monthly fixed costs.

Students can be considered a group with limited economic resources. According to Sparbanken Nord, a student generally has a monthly income of about 12000SEK¹, of which 2950SEK is spent on food (Sparbanken Nord, n.d.). This fact and the current inflation could affect how they respond to sustainable consumption and influence their consumption behaviour. Therefore, investigating how students define sustainable food consumption and whether it is relevant in their everyday life can bring further insights to the research field of consumer culture.

Food prices in Sweden increased by 2.8 per cent in February 2023 (SCB, 2023). In addition to dairy products, consumers have noticed a significant increase in the price of vegetables and fruit, one example being bel peppers, which have increased by 28 per cent (Carlström, 2023). At the same time, pressure has been put on the big food companies. Lidl was among the first supermarkets to implement price cuts on over 100 products in the spring (SVT, 2023). The supermarkets ICA and Coop followed not long after.

1.1.3 False or Misleading Statements About Environmental Benefits

Greenwashing is a concept or term coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986 (as referenced in Miller, 2018). It can be described as something a company or organisation does when it provides misleading information or gives the false impression that its products and services are more environmentally friendly than they actually are (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Miller, 2018). Or that greenwashing occurs when companies use misleading or corrupt methods to portray their products as environmentally friendly, even when the underlying aspects of the product are not (Ottosson & Parment, 2016). Greenwashing can be done in a variety of ways, for example through the design of a website or glorifying advertising for a product (Zhang et al., 2018). Ottosson and Parment (2016) argue that greenwashing is one of the two strategies of marketing communication. Today, companies communicate both consciously and unconsciously through or with the help of greenwashing (Ottosson & Parment, 2016). Greenwashing has different effects on different consumers depending on their prior knowledge about sustainability (Parguel, et al., 2015). People who are generally invested in sustainability

¹ 1SEK \approx 0.0088EURO

are more likely to recognise greenwashing in advertising campaigns and on websites. This can be dangerous, as Chen and Chang (2013) emphasise how customers behave after being exposed to greenwashing. When a consumer is confronted with greenwashing, their green confidence decreases and their willingness to rely on a product or service based on its environmental performance is reduced (Chen, 2010).

2 Research Aim

This study departs from a communication perspective on sustainability and food consumption. The aim is specifically to explore how young people studying at a university in Sweden make sense of sustainable food consumption as a concept and how they reason around their own consumption behaviours in grocery stores. A particular focus is also paid on how this specific target group receives messages in communication material on sustainable food consumption to explore how communication strategies deployed by Swedish grocery stores can be developed.

2.1 Research Questions

RQ1: How do students make sense of sustainable food consumption?

RQ1.1: Is it relevant in their everyday life?

RQ2: How do students receive communication that informs them about sustainable food consumption?

The study contributes to the theoretical field of reception theory, and how a receiver interprets messages that, in the form of visual communication, promotes sustainable food consumption. With the inclusion of consumer culture theory, the study further makes sense of how the individual identify themselves in relation to sustainable food consumption. As previous research has mainly focused on parents or people in general, this study focuses on students currently studying at a Swedish university. The sample provides the research with specific insights into an underrepresented target group and further insights to whether grocery shops in Sweden need to change or develop their communication.

3 Literature Review

This chapter presents previous research in the field of sustainable consumption communication, with an additional, more specific focus on green communication to promote sustainable food consumption. Next a theoretical definition of sustainable consumption is presented. Finally, the research areas of consumer culture and consumer behaviour are presented. These two areas contribute similarly to understanding consumption and are therefore presented together. The concept of the ethical consumer is also presented here, as this term is more widely used in cultural and behavioural sciences than the sustainable consumer.

3.1 Communication as Constructing Sustainable Consumption

Researchers have paid much attention to sustainable consumption communication (SCC) in the last five to ten years. Despite the growing research in sustainability communication, the link between sustainable consumption and communication is still poorly understood (Fischer et al., 2021). In general, achieving SDG 12, Sustainable consumption and production depends on sustainability and sustainable development (Brown, 2012). However, there is still a problem with the complexity of sustainable consumption and the fact that overconsumption is not accepted as a problem, making it challenging to communicate the concept to the general public (Krause, 2009). As SDG 12 is a policy issue concerning the Sustainable Consumption Goal, the question of who should bear the primary responsibility for change to achieve the goal has been raised (Fischer et al., 2021).

The field of SCC is an emerging area of sustainable consumption and communication where the definition of sustainability varies from scholar to scholar, with some focusing on, for example, environmental impacts versus social or economic impacts (Geiger et al., 2018). In SCC, there are three different types of communication: communication *of* sustainable consumption, communication *about* sustainable consumption, and communication *as* constructing sustainable consumption (Fischer et al., 2021). The first type of communication is used to convey information to change attitudes and problem awareness to "generate more sustainable consumption choices" (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 6). The second type focuses communication is a tool to create a better understanding among the public of the conditions, causes, and strategies of consumption patterns (Schatzki, 2001). The third type, communication *as* constructing sustainable consumption focuses on tracing how meaning is shaped to create sustainable consumption in different social arenas and discourses (Sattlegger & Rau, 2016). For

example, the social arena can be that of students and their ideas about sustainable food consumption. However, research and practice show that consumers can feel misled if communication is not differentiated and culturally adapted (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Sustainability communication concerning consumption should therefore be considered as complex.

3.1.1 Green Communication

Sustainability communication, as a foundation of SCC, can be seen as a transdisciplinary field between other disciplines (Adomßent & Godemann, 2011). One of these additional fields is marketing and advertising, referred to as *green advertising*, with a narrower perspective on the environmental aspect of sustainability (Kilbourne, 2004). The literature also highlights the need for broader sustainability communication (McDonagh, 1998). In this section, the focus lies on literature in which scholars have examined communication to promote green food products or green food consumption.

Sharma's (2021) findings illustrate how *green labelling* can influence attitudes and satisfaction, even among sceptical consumers. Even if consumer opinion or behaviour regarding sustainable food consumption is not uniform, green labelling can help change it over time (Sharma, 2021). Chen (2010) argues that consumers often see green labelling as a direct link to “environmental commitments and concerns” (p. 312). Specific colours can in fact represent particular messages, concepts, objects, and experiences (Labrecque et al., 2012). For example, yellow is often associated with lemons based on everyday experiences and green is often associated with environmental friendliness and signals sustainability (Lim et al., 2020). Such colours are often used in communication to influence consumer behaviour (Bellizzi et al., 1983; Singh, 2006) or when labelling something as green or environmental-friendly. These findings and the literature on green- or eco-labels show that colours can be both effective and misleading.

Regarding green communication aimed at promoting a particular product or convincing consumers to change their everyday habits, *eco-labelling* has emerged as one of the leading techniques (Brécard, 2014). Such communication or campaigns have also been shown to use visual elements to improve consumer perception (Parguel et al., 2015). The colour green has also been used in such campaigns. As mentioned above, this is common in communication to promote sustainable consumption as it can trigger implicit ecological inferences (Schmuck et al., 2018). However, if consumers are confronted with too much information regarding green

communication, they become overwhelmed. When overwhelmed, the amount of knowledge the consumer absorbs also decreases, and with it the ability to make sustainable consumption choices (Acuti et al., 2022). At the same time, uncertainty increases when the consumer evaluates the alternatives, e.g., between different products (Hassan et al., 2013).

3.2 Sustainable Consumption in Theory

Sustainable consumption is one of the concepts for which there is no single definition. This part shows how different scholars and other international organisations define *sustainable consumption*. First off, the United Nations Environment Programme (2015) describes the concept of sustainability as "the use of services and related products that meet basic needs and provide a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources. . . as not to compromise the needs of future generations" (p. 10). A more straightforward definition is proposed by Dahl (2011), "sustainable consumption refers to the need to stay within the framework of global resource sustainability". Furthermore, Marchand and Findeli (n.d.) argue that sustainable consumption is "a goal with uncertain boundaries" that is "neither clearly defined nor its implications well understood" (p. 1). This is similar to sustainable development.

A common denominator is that several definitions reflect mainstream definitions of sustainable development, which one might say is a problem itself (Jones et al., 2011). However, the existing or non-existing definitions of sustainable consumption are accepted by society because they do not describe what sustainable consumption is, only what it should be (Dolan, 2002). The general public can therefore say for themselves say that they understand the concept of sustainable consumption. However, existing conceptualisations of sustainable consumption must incorporate the social and cultural components that consumption fulfils (Schaefer & Crane, 2005).

As can be seen, the various definitions have some commonalities, but one commonality that could be said to be missing is the mention of the social foundation and planetary boundaries. According to Raworth (2017) and her thinking on *doughnut economics*, we have a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below and the ecological ceiling of planetary boundaries that we should not go beyond. This way of thinking can be seen as a compass of the twenty-first century, where the space in between, the social foundation and the planetary boundaries, is a safe and just space for humanity (Raworth, 2017). Considering this, Cohen

(2005) suggests that sustainable consumption is the most difficult challenge for the sustainable development agenda. When it comes to the role of business in sustainable consumption, more emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of communication influencing consumer decisions and behaviour (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2008). This is because, as Durieu (2003) suggests, large retailers significantly influence changes in production processes and consumption patterns. Food retailers have the opportunity and responsibility to change consumer behaviour, e.g., through impact in their shops (Durieu, 2003). Other actors, such as governments and politicians, and local communities and individuals, also play a role in circulating information about sustainable food consumption (Nițoaia & Camară, 2018). But, before a solution to the problem can be found, a clear definition of the issue must be established.

3.3 The Culture of Sustainable Food Consumption

Sustainable consumption is primarily understood as an individual decision, especially when buying food, but the collective and cultural aspect still contributes with important attributes (Jacobsen & Hansen, 2021). The communication aspect here can explore, for example, how design and messages promote change in everyday life. Sustainable consumption encompasses different types of consumption, from clothing to furniture, but one of the predominant areas of consumption is food (Connolly & Prothero, 2003). However, food consumption is not defined here, and the food industry is significant. *Food* can be defined as edible goods bought in a grocery shop, excluding products such as detergents and the fast-food industry. Fischer et al. (2021) emphasise the need to consider the communication context in further research on sustainable consumption. An example of this is the role of the household in consumption related decision-making processes (Paddock, 2017), where the household can be the one in which a student lives either alone, with a friend or partner.

As Reisch et al. (2009) emphasise, consumer behaviour is complex. They point out that consumers do not make their decisions in a social vacuum but are part of families and peer groups, such as their colleagues at work or school. These groups act as *communication buffers* when evaluating information, thus influencing individuals' attitudes and consumption decisions (Reisch et al., 2009, p. 193). On the other hand, these groups can also serve as sources of conflicting or supportive information and social pressure. Furthermore, the practice of food consumption is always determined and shaped by a broader range of routines of social and family obligations, with Paddock (2017) arguing that this act cannot be based solely on

individual choices. That is, food consumption or sustainable food consumption is an act based on the individual and collective actions of the people around us. Hence, even if people experience specific communication campaigns with an individualistic mindset, the foundation lies in the collaborative culture of the respondent's family and friends.

It is also difficult for many consumers to know which products are better for the environment. Welch (2020) advocates *promoting sustainable consumption*, which can be achieved through information about brands, sustainability, and consumption. This concept can be seen as similar to communication *as* constructing sustainable consumption presented earlier concerning SCC. For consumers to shift to sustainable consumption patterns, they need clear and unambiguous language and imagery, e.g., with simple, meaningful, and comparable aspects (Jones et al., 2011). One way to inform consumers is through media campaigns, which have successfully mobilised the public since the 1990s (Bartley et al., 2015). Such campaigns can help individuals to choose between the choices available in a grocery shop. A message needs to be adapted to a person's age, gender, or social sphere, along with options and promises that can differentiate one product from another in an individual's everyday life, to create a relationship between the individual and the product (Miller & Rose, 1997).

Even though communication can promote sustainable food consumption, some consumers overlook the environmental aspect, while others incorporate it into their daily habits. According to Halkier (2009), food consumption can be more or less environmentally friendly depending on how much consumption is constructed as a sustainable activity. To fully understand this process, one needs to know how consumers evaluate goods and what attributes *quality* has for consumer goods (Harvey et al., 2004). For example, consumers look at safety, taste, ethical status, and food consumption prices. To evaluate these, people often negotiate with others, such as their family (Connors et al., 2001; Holm and Kildevang, 1996; Miller, 2013). Findings have shown that people with more social capital are likelier to look at taste and ethical status than price when justifying their food consumption (Stamer, 2018).

3.3.1 Consumption and Identity

Spaargaren (2003) and Bengtsson et al. (2018) consider that consumption is not only an individual act, but a socially and culturally shaped one that can only be understood and changed in its collective attributions of meaning. The research field of consumer culture originates in social research with the *cultural turn* (Warde, 2014). With the emergence of cultural studies in

the 1970s, the sociology of consumption received new input. Researchers found that mass-produced goods and services not only broadened the cultural experience of many people but also led to self-expression and, as the example of gifts shows, strengthened social relationships (Warde, 2002). Consumption is a means by which individuals and groups express their identities through the symbolic display of tastes and lifestyles, emphasising symbolic rather than material rewards. Identities are also created through consumption patterns; according to Beck et al. (1992) and Giddens (1991), these are formed independently of a person's social relationships. The term *the expressive individual* became part of consumer culture research, which assumes that a person's activities and judgements are directed towards the symbolic communication of identity through lifestyle (Warde, 2014).

3.3.2 The Ethical Consumer

In consumer culture, the term *ethical consumer* often refers to a consumer who consumes sustainably. Ethical consumers can be defined as individuals whose consumption choices are guided by various social, political, and environmental concerns, including animal cruelty and human rights (Low & Davenport, 2007; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). The ethical consumer exists in today's grocery shops, but according to Spaargaren et al. (2011), the number of ethical consumers may increase when there is more significant concern about animal welfare or food safety, often in response to animal killing outbreaks or media attention to health risks. These events and consumer responses can trigger technological innovations in the primary sector, such as improving livestock housing conditions and in the processing industry, e.g., new slaughter methods for cattle (Spaargaren et al., 2011).

When conducting a study on ethical consumer identification through interviews, researchers found that participants often rejected the term *ethical* as "excessive and demanding" (Papaoikonomou et al., 2016, p. 215). However, participants commit to certain principles in their purchases, such as locally sourced and fair-trade products, aligning with ethical consumption (Papaoikonomou et al., 2016). Instead of the label *ethical consumer*, participants preferred to describe themselves as active and responsible, with a critical eye on consumption (Papaoikonomou et al., 2016). These findings illustrate how a particular label or claim of action can exemplify something the actions of a person, but not how they view themselves.

In addition to the ethical consumer, there is the motivated consumer who, unlike the ethical consumer, wants to make a more sustainable consumption choice but may not be able to. Even

if grocery shops offer sustainable options, Seyfang (2004) argues that *motivated consumers* want to change their consumption behaviour but might be limited in their choices. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the consequences of their purchasing decisions regarding environmental and social sustainability (Grunert, 2011; Mohr & Webb, 2005; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). However, consumers do not always feel that there is a sustainable option, partly due to the globalisation of food production and consumption. And due to the many choices people have to make in their food consumption, which means there are always conflicts about the right or good choice (Miller, 2013; Wilk, 2001). As Yates (2008) points out, consumers are asking retailers to do more, and it is not just up to customers to change their behaviour. For example, retailers could make it easier by introducing minimum standards in certain product areas, e.g., only selling free-range eggs or fair-trade bananas (Yates, 2008).

When it comes to what the customer values most, it can be said that price is always an essential factor, especially in a recession. But as Shell (2009) argues, discounted prices can prove unsustainable as they depress wages, stifle innovation and lead to irreversible environmental damage. Toussaint et al. (2021) also argue that consumers choose products based on various factors, although the price is often essential. Therefore, it is necessary to find the right balance between price and product and to educate the consumer about the *true price* of a product. The *true price* includes more than just the cost, it also includes the production of the product, e.g., how much water was used and the working conditions for the farmers (Kaczorowska et al., 2019). If the final price is more expensive, consumers may not be able to afford these products even if they want to buy sustainable products because they may have other priorities and/or commitments on what they spend their money on (Toussaint et al., 2021). But with adapted and appropriate green communication that educates the consumer, the *true price* of a product might seem more important than the price on the label.

3.4 Research Gap

Regarding the research field of communicating sustainable consumption, scholars have looked at food consumption. However, the term *food* has not been defined. Furthermore, there is no clear definition of either *sustainable consumption* or *sustainable food consumption*. This study thus aims to fill this research gap by focusing on a specific area of food, the one of edible goods in a grocery stores, and research how students make sense of sustainable food consumption. But, since the conducted study is of qualitative matter the results will not be generalised to the

general public, instead shed light on the problematisation regarding defining such a complex area. The insights provided by this study is particularly relevant in this historical moment of economic recession and ecological crisis where our choices possibly matter more than ever. Economics plays a role, if not the most important role, when it comes to people's consumption patterns. Even though people strive to consume food sustainably, the question of price and cost seems to be more important.

Based on the aim and research questions, this study will mainly focus on communication *as* a construction of sustainable consumption. In other words, this study investigates how students receive communication about sustainable food consumption and whether it influences an already constructed sustainable consumption culture. The relevance of this study lies in the social environment of students or young people living with limited resources and their perception of sustainable food consumption. It will provide new insights into how students receive and make sense of green communication. Research on consumer culture illustrate how young people make their consumption decisions based in part on their culture, i.e., they have a similar consumer culture as their friends and family. By focusing on a specific social sphere, that of students at a Swedish university, this study brings new insights into the broad research field of consumer culture about individual or collective food consumption decisions.

The literature review addresses the complex and scientifically confusing discourses on sustainability and sustainable food consumption. By examining a sample of students who have an interest and generally high prior knowledge of sustainability, the study contributes to the research field by demonstrating the need for further development. It also shows that discourses on sustainability and sustainable food consumption are intertwined with other discourses on economics, identity, and culture. The sample of students in this study generally has a more constrained economy, which can be considered specific along with their identity and culture in relation to food consumption. Therefore, this study fills a research gap by showing the importance of remembering that even when companies send messages aimed at changing behaviour, the recipient is not always willing or able to act upon to such messages. The lack of a clear conceptualisation of the discourses on sustainability and sustainable food consumption is also highlighted in this study by illustrating what students lack as consumers when it comes to communication to promote sustainable food consumption.

4 Theoretical Framework

The following chapter presents the theoretical framework of the study. Initially, reception theory is presented and positioned with the aim of the study. Following is the interdisciplinary theoretical framework of consumer culture theory, presented with a focus on two out of four directions of the theory. Lastly, the concept of identity is presented. Since consumer culture theory also includes aspects of consumer identity, the last information on identity is presented with further contributions.

4.1 Reception Theory

Reception theory is concerned with analysing the moving relationships between what is shown in the media and people's reactions. The focus is on the encounter between the object and the subject (the audience) (Ekström & Larsson, 2010). This theory is used in this study to increase knowledge and understanding of the interpretations, as it partly involves how young people receive and make sense of green communication that promotes sustainable food consumption or a sustainable food product.

The classical communication model with sender-message-receiver is the basis of reception theory. However, the transmission communication model reaches its limits when examining how a message is interpreted. Stuart Hall (2006) argues that the sender-message retriever process is more complex and developed the classical communication model into something more useful for future reception studies. According to Hall (2006), there is no guarantee that the viewer will interpret the message the same way the sender wants. Therefore, he presented three ways the receiver can interpret or decode a message. These possibilities are the dominant, the negotiated and the oppositional (Hall, 2006). *The dominant* refers to the audience accepting and interpreting the message in the same way as the sender desire. *The oppositional* means that the receiver understands and interprets the message implicitly and explicitly but rejects the purpose or goal of the message. Finally, *the negotiated* variety combines the dominant and oppositional interpretations. Here, the viewer accepts the message to some extent but may perceive other meanings (Hall, 2006).

Hall believes that the decoding or interpretation of a message is influenced by the recipient's cultural background, personal values, experiences, and demographic characteristics. Reception theory thus states that the message of a text can have several different meanings based on these

subjective characteristics (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). This contributes to the recipient's ability to interpret media messages differently, which sometimes lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the sender's message (Hall, 2006). Reception theory can be applied in two different ways, one by examining how texts create meaning and the other by examining how the receiver makes sense of the message (McQuail & Deuze, 2020); Rydin, 2003). This study focuses on the latter, i.e., students are seen as both recipients and interpreters who create meaning.

Within Hall's (1973) theory of reception, semiotics plays a central role because communication takes place through language, together with various signs, codes, and symbols (Hall, 2006). A symbol can mean different things to different people; the receiver's cultural experiences and background determine which meaning surfaces (Rydin, 2003, p. 80). Therefore, it is easier for people who share the same language and culture to interpret messages similarly than for people from different cultural and social backgrounds (Hall, 2006, p. 19). Furthermore, from the perspective of reception theory, all texts, images, and messages are incomplete as they consist of gaps that need to be filled by the audience (Rydin, 2003). The audience is, therefore, an active agent in the communication process, playing a crucial role in how a message is interpreted. The recipient or the public is never passive as they interpret media messages using prior knowledge and understanding (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). When it comes to the meaning-making process, the researcher must consider that there are always gaps in a message (Tønnessen, 2003). These gaps are then filled by the experiences of the receivers, who thus create their meaning in the story. This means that the meaning intended by the producer of the text is not necessarily the meaning created by the recipient (Tønnessen, 2003). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990–2002) states that in addition to prior knowledge and understanding, language is an important concept that affects how one understands, interprets, and receives a message. One component is language and the word used with the sender's intention (as referenced in Gilje & Grimen 2007). However, depending on how the language is understood, different words and phrases can evoke or emphasise certain aspects of a phenomenon. So, when the public or a person reads and interprets a text, image, or message, the meaning is recognised and given (Gilje & Grimen 2007).

As mentioned earlier, culture plays a vital role in interpreting a message. Culture can also be referred to as *communities of interpretation*, which are diverse, overlapping and potentially contradictory (Jensen, 1991). By incorporating interpretive communities in studies such as this,

can locate a source of meaning-making. Jensen (1991) refers to such strategies as *codes of understanding*, where the retriever is identified by what they do rather than what they are. The audience is not defined by, for example, a demographic category (Barbatsis, 2004). Barbatsis (2004) suggests that the retriever generally has three different interpretive strategies. First, the audience applies multiple interpretive tools to the same message to make sense of it. Secondly, interpretive communities overlap; therefore, a group of retrievers may share some strategies with other communities. The third point that Barbatsis (2004) makes, perhaps the most important, is that the strategy used by a group, or an individual, may be inconsistent or contradictory because they come from different contexts or represent different orientations from other social spheres.

4.2 Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework identifying different approaches to understanding market trends. The framework explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the many overlapping cultural groupings in today's globalisation framework and the capitalist market. CCT has produced empirical findings and theoretical innovations relevant to the global level of social science, public policy fields and fringe areas (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In its early days, CCT focused on the factors that lead to buying behaviour. The theory then evolved into exploring consumption patterns at a more general level that also considers what happens before and after a purchase (Solomon, Barmossy, & Askegaard, 2001). Arnould and Thompson (2005) suggest that consumption is influenced by how markets present symbols. These presentations are made through images and texts or with the help of other people using these symbols. Everywhere in today's market, there are symbolic values, and these values are mainly seen through marketing communication, which customers interpret. Goods that are purchased contain various symbols that consumers choose to build their identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

This study uses parts of the CCT to understand how consumers experience communication strategies and how one's identity plays a role in food consumption. A central idea of the theory on consumption patterns is that emotions guide consumers and try to find meaning when encountering different messages. This is an ongoing process to create and maintain one's identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). According to CCT scholars, consumption is rarely just about buying a product, they instead believe that socio-cultural aspects play an active and

essential role in what we consume. With this perspective, identity and consumption are interconnected and constantly changing (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

4.2.1 A New Type of Consumption Culture

Douglas Holt (2002) is a scholar who has contributed with his aspect of CCT. Holt (2002) suggests that mass-produced products create a sense of personal choice (as referenced in Arnould & Thompson 2005). In the context of consumption, it should be possible to develop communal identities by adapting different symbols and objects to a particular group to create additional meaning. CCT explores how consumers transform symbolic meaning in marketing communication, brand and production for their social role, identity, and lifestyle, creating an individualistic and collectivistic identity.

In Holt's (2002) contributions, he describes how consumers have become more aware of a brand's communication or marketing strategies, and how these strategies only aim to encourage the consumer to buy more of a branded product and the scepticism that follows. The scepticism leads consumers to reject products from companies that they perceive as inauthentic. Therefore, new strategies are needed (Holt, 2002). The postmodern brand paradigm becomes a prerequisite for brands to become more valuable when they are presented not as cultural designs but as cultural resources for consumers. To be perceived as cultural resources, brands and their marketing must be seen as authentic, which is a challenge for companies (Holt, 2002). In order to be perceived as authentic, they need to be created and shared by consumers as being created by parties that do not pursue economic goals and are motivated by genuine values. Postmodern consumers perceive modern brands as inauthentic because they have a clear commercial purpose (Holt, 2002). With postmodern branding, companies place their brand in a different consumer culture than the commercial one (Holt, 2002). Therefore, green communication or sustainable consumption communication can be considered as strategies used by companies targeting a specific consumer culture. Based on this theory, the critical or positive attitude of the respondents towards sustainable food consumption communication can be understood, which helps to understand the concept from the consumer's perspective.

4.2.2 The Two Directions

In general, consumer culture theory examines how consumers transform the symbolic meaning of communication, brands, and products for their social role, identity, and lifestyle, and thus for

their individual and collective identity. The theory has developed four directions from this, but only two will be used in this study. The first is *consumer identity*. This direction is about recognising and understanding the impact of myths and symbolism created in the marketplace so that consumers can replicate them in their identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Through a money-driven culture, consumers are given the idea of an identity of their own, which is sought by the market. In this context, scholars have looked at the relationship between consumer identity and the structuring influence of the market, arguing that the market produces certain types of consumer positions for which the consumer can choose. The individual can and does pursue personal development goals through their position as a consumer. They do so through personalised cultural scripts that are consistent with their identity and the structural imperatives of a consumerist global economy (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Secondly, the *mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer interpretive strategies* contribute to understanding particular cultural positions when marketing communication assigns a specific consumer to a particular identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The starting point of such communication is often *market myths* and *romantic narratives* disseminated through various types of advertising. Research in this direction usually uses semiotic and literary critical theories to analyse the symbolic meaning, cultural ideals, and ideologies in different popular cultural contexts (e.g., Escalas and Stern 2003; McQuarrie and Mick 1996). In this way, it is possible to examine how specific cultural production systems, e.g., marketing communication in the food industry, systematically predispose consumers to particular identities. Consumers are seen as interpretive actors whose meaning-making activities range from those who tacitly adopt the dominant representation of consumer identity and lifestyle presented in communication to those who consciously deviate from these identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

4.3 Identity

Identity is a concept used in various fields of research. For example, in social research, people are seen as a symbolic project, and their consumption determines who they are in the eyes of others. Social researchers mean that a person's identity is mediated by their consumption and how this is represented through consumption patterns. In addition, consumption shapes the culture and social context in which a person lives (Thompson, 1995). Thompson (1995) describes the essence of identity as part of the theory and as a separate theory or concept.

Bartels and Hoogendam (2011) use social identity theory to identify how consumers reflect their ethical consumption when interacting with others face-to-face or through social media. However, Cronin et. al., (2014) omit the social aspect of the word and use it only as identity. They explain that identity can be formed through consumption for oneself, but also in interaction with others, a social self. The social self often plays in a community or group that uses consumption in its identity to oppose general consumption. In this way, the consumer can distance themselves from the mainstream and form a different identity associated with a group whose attributes match the identity desired by the consumer (Collins, Cronin, & McCarthy 2014).

As part of CCT, identity as a concept is used to contribute with analytical tools to understand how students identify with their food consumption. Whether they identify as sustainable food consumers, i.e., whether they define that this matters in their everyday life. Social identity theory mainly examines how consumers, for example, reflect ethical consumption in their interactions with others, and this is not the basis of this study. Instead, this concept is used to understand whether individuals self-identify with sustainable food consumption. At one point in the analysis, there will be a discussion using the concept of identity. As Thompson (1995) writes, identity requires interaction with others to confirm the identity a person has. Thus, identity is a social phenomenon.

5 Methodology

The following chapter presents the method of data collection, the implementation, the material, the ethical considerations, the limitations, and critique of the method and finally, the method of data analysis. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to conduct this study. Therefore, the method is described first, and then arguments are made for the positive aspects of its use. Finally, the data analysis process is presented, including a table illustrating the three levels of analysis, including the initial codes, the second order of themes and finally, the three areas of the analysis presented later in the analysis chapter.

5.1 Data Collection Method

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather material to answer the questions; RQ1: How do students make sense of sustainable food consumption?, RQ1.1: Is it relevant in their everyday life?, and RQ2: How do students receive communication that informs them about sustainable food consumption?

The chosen method was implemented because it can produce data through thoughts and arguments about why and how students respond to sustainable food consumption communication. In addition, in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to explore and better understand the phenomenon under study (Denscombe 2010). Therefore, the method provides the opportunity to explore and understand the phenomenon of sustainable food consumption from the perspective of young people, but also how they define sustainable consumption and its value during inflation. Interviewees were asked to elaborate or explain an answer to get more clarity and details on a particular topic to capture the deeper aspects of the phenomenon.

In-depth interviews are one of the most common qualitative research methods because, when conducted well, they are an effective method of data collection (Morris, 2015). It can give the researcher access to the interviewee's thoughts, reflections, experiences, memories, understandings, interpretations, and perceptions of the chosen topic, which in this case, is sustainable food consumption. The added aspect of semi-structured allows the researcher to ask spontaneous questions depending on how the respondent answers. Mason (2017) suggests that in-depth interviews are similar to a conversation where two people discuss a topic of mutual interest, and ideally, the discussion is relaxed, open and honest. In addition, the semi-structured design allows the researcher to ask questions not listed in the interview guide.

In-depth interviews are usually appropriate for sensitive topics (Mellor, 2003). This could be the case with sustainable food consumption, as it deals with a person's daily and personal behaviour. The method was used because it offers the opportunity to build a relationship with the interviewee before dealing with potentially personal and difficult material (Mellor, 2003). It also allows the researcher to explore whether communication can promote sustainable food consumption among students.

The aim was not to analyse a student's actual behaviour but the mental process behind their actions. That is their thoughts, arguments and reasoning behind the actual action or behaviour and how they receive and interpret messages that promote sustainable food consumption. And as Morris (2015, p. 8) argues, in-depth interviews are an appropriate method when ". . .the research is about getting a sense of how individuals see their situation and what their experiences have been concerning the research topic". However, the researcher had to be attentive during the interviews to realise the full potential of the method. Otherwise, potentially meaningful conversations and data collection could have been lost. By being attentive during the interviews I was able to pick up answers, which were then further developed through spontaneous questions to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' everyday life.

5.2 Implementation

Interviews were conducted in person using an interview guide (*see Appendix I*), with questions formulated based on the aim and research questions. For example, in collecting empirical material for RQ1, questions were asked about food consumption and sustainability, e.g., how students buy food and whether they have prior knowledge about sustainability. For RQ2, questions were asked about specific advertisements or campaigns and how they are communicated to enable discussion about the images and videos shown. The use of photographs in interviews is often referred to as photo elicitation, defined by Harper (2002) as "the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview" (p. 13). Previous research on green communication was considered when selecting specific campaigns for the interviews. For example, some materials had to include the colour green to explore how students experience this communication.

The questionnaire was intended as a guide, and the questions were not always asked as written in the guide; additional and more spontaneous questions were also asked. However, an important aspect considered is that all questions asked were formulated similarly from interviewee to interviewee to ensure reliability. When creating the interview guide, the focus was on the wording of the questions, as interviewees might interpret and understand the topic differently depending on their previous understanding of the phenomenon and their behavioural patterns concerning the issue (Bryman, 2016). The questions may seem simple, but they were formulated in the way questions are usually worded in a normal conversation, which can lead to a more in-depth conversation or interview.

In addition, information was presented to the respondents during the interviews. The information presented related to the four themes of *introduction*, *consumption*, *sustainability*, and *communication* into which the interview was divided and served as a conversation guide when needed. This ensured that all interviewees understood when the conversation moved to another topic. However, in some interviews, there was a more natural transition between topics, so presenting the information was unnecessary. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, including visual communication in Swedish, and therefore the interview guide was also written in Swedish. Four examples of visual green communication were shown during the interviews, all linked in the guide (*see Appendix I*). One video was produced by the Swedish grocery shop Willys AB. This video promotes one of their new products, a low-waste fish variant. The next video is from ICA. Here the focus is more on behaviour change, and the video promotes sustainable consumption as a concept. The third example is a series of images from Hemköp promoting the consumption of seasonal vegetables and pulses as a *new form of protein*. Finally, the last picture shows the inside of a Coop store. The discussion on this topic revolved around how the slogan *Sweden's greenest grocery shop*, which hangs directly above the entrance, was understood, and made sense.

The first interview conducted was a pilot interview to ensure that the questions were worded understandably and that all questions were relevant and produced results consistent with the aim of the study and the research questions. Trost (2010) suggests that conducting a pilot interview can be a good idea as it can ensure that the questions make sense. After the pilot interview, the researcher did not change or rephrase the questions as the interview provided useful material that ensured that all questions were well phrased from the beginning.

Once the interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed using an AI programme². The programme systematically transcribed each interview, located the two speakers, and did most of the work. However, the researcher manually checked each transcription to ensure a fully finished and correct transcription of each interview. This meant that each interview was listened through at least once after it had been conducted, ensuring the results were precise. When finished, the interviews and all material gathered were deleted from the AI programme. Finally, the transcribed interviews were coded according to themes related to the research objective and questions. A selected coding method was used, more details can be found below (*see 5.6 Method of Data Analysis*).

5.3 Material

The empirical material was collected with a sampling method that ensured that interviewees could provide material to support the aim of the study (Marshall, 1996). Therefore, purposive sampling was used, where the researcher actively selected interviewees to obtain the most productive results (Marshall, 1996). With this method, the researcher selects information-rich cases (individuals) that provide the best insight into the research questions and have specific characteristics that meet the aim of the study (Emmel, 2013). In this study, the sample consists of eight individuals who are currently living as students, studying at a Swedish university, and living with limited resources. In this case, limited resources refer to a student's monthly income through a student loan from CSN (Centrala studiestödsnämnden) or a part-time job. Therefore, students who receive both a CSN loan and a salary were not included in this study, as they are not considered to be of limited means in this case. Besides, most of the respondents belonged to the author's circle of acquaintances, in turn, there was no need to ask questions about living situations or potential partners, as this information was already known. But in some places in the analysis such data were used and then with the permission of the respondent.

Based on the research question, the interviewees do not necessarily have to be interested in sustainable consumption or have much prior knowledge about it. However, to be able to conduct the interviews and ensure that the material was helpful for the analysis, the interviewees must have heard of sustainable consumption before or have some other insight into the topic of sustainability. It was also necessary that the students consume most of their food in grocery

² Transkriptor. <https://transkriptor.com/>

shops, i.e., that they do not eat takeaway food most of the time. Therefore, a table of selection criteria was created to ensure that all interviewees were selected according to the same principles (*see Table 1*).

Table 1

Selection criteria's

Criteria	Explanation
The subject is currently studying at a Swedish university.	To limit the sample of possible interviewees.
The subject masters the Swedish language to the required level.	To discuss the advertising communication presented, the interviewee required to have a certain level of the Swedish language.
The interviewees either live on CSN or have an income from a part-time job.	Centrala studiestödsnämnden (CSN), the <i>Swedish Board for Study Support</i> , awards scholarships to students. This scholarship is awarded to any student who meets the requirements. 70% of the scholarship is a loan that must be repaid and the remaining 30% is a grant that the student receives. You can receive grants and loans from CSN if you study in Sweden or abroad. What you can receive depends, among other things, on what you will study, how old you are and what your situation is.
The person has some interest in or prior knowledge of sustainability.	To discuss the conversation, the subject must have some prior knowledge.
Half of the interviewees define themselves as female, and the other half as male.	Previous research has shown that women are generally more interested in sustainability, so the material does not consist of female interviewees. By using the same number of female and male respondents, the material will be more evenly and accurately analysed. The number of respondents will be set at four per gender.
The subject buys most of their food in a physical supermarket.	This excludes the fast-food market and online ordering of food for home delivery.

The compilation of respondents is shown below (*see Table 2*). Demographic stratification helps in classifying the respondents. Most of the respondents indicated that they were interested in the issue of sustainability. However, two respondents indicated they had limited interest but were willing to increase it. In addition, the name of each interviewee, e.g., F3 or M4, were used in the analysis to ensure anonymity.

Table 2

Sample of interview interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Interest in Sustainability	Date of Interview	Duration (min)
F1	24	Female	Limited	05.04.2023	49:45
F2	25	Female	Yes	05.04.2023	35:06
F3	25	Female	Yes	04.04.2023	41:03
F4	23	Female	Yes	06.04.2023	44:57
M1	26	Male	Yes	06.04.2023	33:39
M2	25	Male	Yes	10.04.2023	49:43
M3	25	Male	Limited	06.04.2023	30:02
M4	28	Male	Limited	13.04.2023	44:29

5.4 Method of Data Analysis

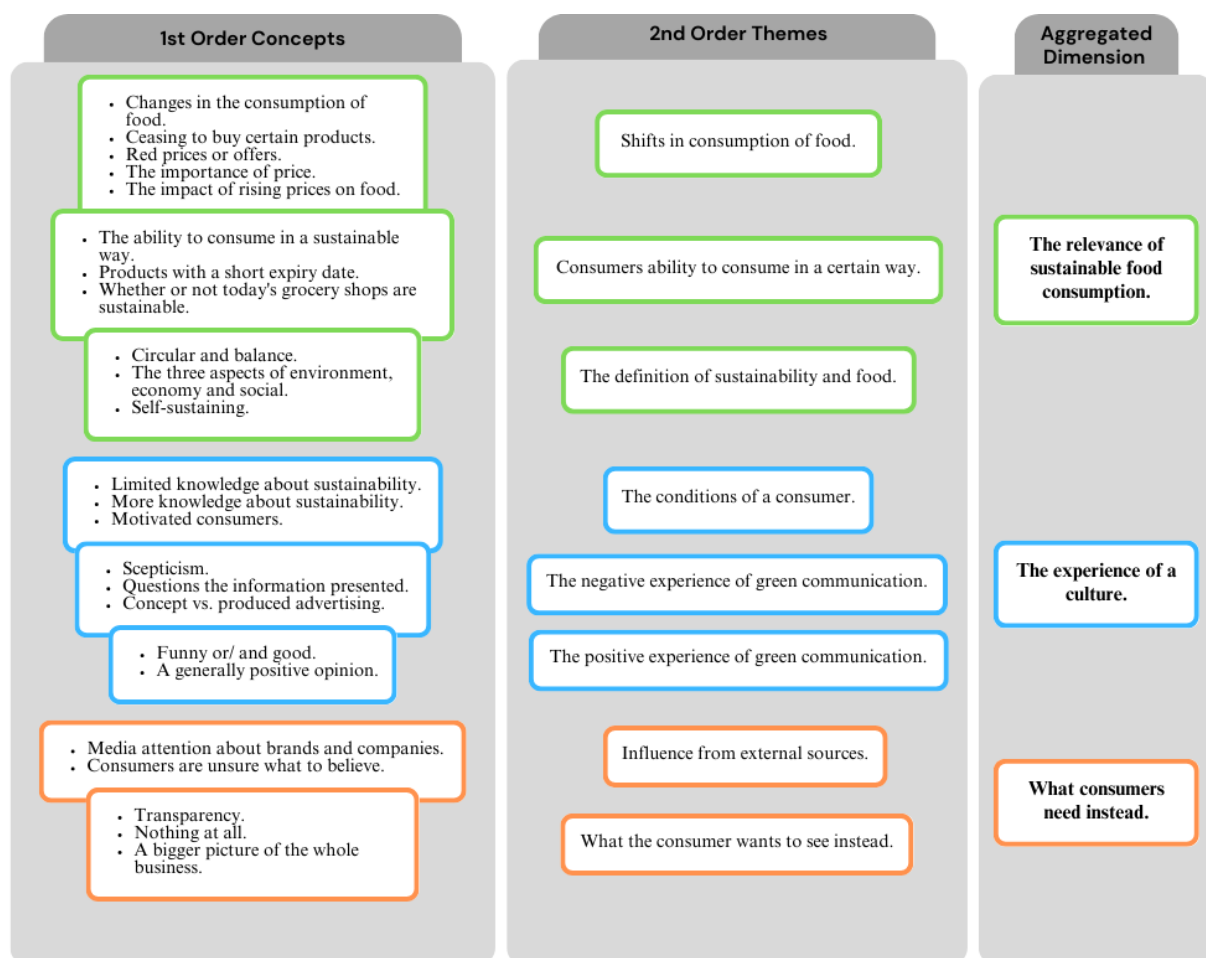
To analyse the interviews, the transcribed raw material was coded with the help of a data analysis method. The chosen process of thematic coding follows Gioia's (2013) thematic analysis method. This method of data analysis, together with an inductive coding approach, was used. Therefore, the codes were developed while analysing the raw material (Saldaña, 2009). Gioia's (2013) method of thematic analysis is divided into three steps: in the first step, the raw text data is marked in the transcribed material; in the second step, the identified text passages are reformulated into common themes, but without specific categorisation; and in the third step, these common themes are defined to identify relevant categories in line with the research questions (Gioia et al., 2013). During the coding process, a latent approach was used to ensure that both exact quotes and how the interviewee's opinions and definitions could be interpreted in the context of sustainability and food consumption.

The coding followed the procedure shown in Figure 1 (*see page 27*). The analysis thus began with categorising and systematising the answers obtained from the interviews. *First order*

concepts were developed in the analysis model's first step. This was done by dividing the responses into different themes based on the expressions and similarities identified in the transcribed material of the interviews. The interview was divided into four themes, but other, sometimes more specific themes were identified during the coding process. In the next step, the themes were analysed to map out what the different responses collectively referred to as *second order themes*. In the last step, the results were further analysed and from this, the final *aggregated dimensions*, the overall dimensions emerged from the analysis. The aggregated dimensions gave an overview of the results of the interviews conducted. Once a comprehensive picture of the primary data was obtained, it was compared with secondary data from previous research and the theoretical framework used in this study. This led to further analysis, which resulted in the study's discussion and conclusion.

Figure 1

Own adaption of Gioia Coding Model.



5.5 Ethical Considerations

Because the material was collected through individual interviews, the study did not face the same dilemma that can arise with group interviews in terms of confidentiality where there is a greater risk that participants will not maintain their confidentiality with other participants (Trost, 2010). This is a risk that is minimised but does not entirely disappear through individual interviews. The study cannot guarantee complete anonymity, but names, hometowns or places of study were excluded so that participants could remain anonymous as much as possible. An ethical aspect that contributed to the decision to keep respondents anonymous was that it could be sensitive to talk about one's university or mention the names of family members. Therefore, the interviewees did not have to go into specific details if they did not want to.

As sustainability often leads to a political view, the study touches on politics, which may be perceived as sensitive by the recipients. However, the study does not aim to explore where the interviewees stand politically. How they think about climate issues is only a small part of the political aspect, but it is still something that should be considered from an ethical point of view.

In addition, the study also touches on emotions and behaviours that might be perceived as uncomfortable by the recipients, as the climate issue can be seen as an anxiety-provoking issue to some extent. Although sustainability can be associated with politics, no sensitive information about political views or other types of personal data was collected in this study. Therefore, no further ethical measures were taken besides those already mentioned. Since participants remain anonymous throughout the analysis, participation in the study poses no risk to interviewees. Their possibly mentioned political viewpoints or the like will not be identified as individuals, etc.

5.6 Limitations and Method Critique

In conclusion, as with any method, some limitations must be considered. In interviews, the researcher must remember that the interviewee may construct a statement, the truth of which is usually difficult to verify (Emmel, 2013). In other words, a person may say they have strong social ties when in reality, they are lonely and feel isolated. Emmel (2013) argues that such statements can only be verified through participant observation or by interviewing people who know the respondent well. However, the researcher must know these verification tools are not always possible or practical.

In addition, the literature review illustrates the importance of how respondents may not consider themselves sustainable regarding their food consumption when asked in interviews. But where they might be, based on their reflections. To counteract the method's limitations, the interview guide included follow-up questions. These questions asked the interviewee's to elaborate on their interpretation and reasoning in relation to their dietary behaviour and to explain how they received the visual communication examples. The questions also ensure that respondents have answers that reflect an accurate picture of their everyday lives. In this way, the answers could provide a more verified picture.

The fact that the respondents belong to my circle of acquaintances could have an impact on data collection. First of all, the respondents might assume that since we are friends, they do not need to elaborate on their thoughts. So, they would assume that I would understand their arguments even if they used fewer words. However, during the two times this occurred during the interviews I asked the interviewee to elaborate on why/ why not they thought so. Secondly, since they knew in advance what the interview would be about, it might affect them in the way that they then during the interviews gave the answers they thought I wanted to hear. For example, some of the first questions I asked were about their food consumption in general. Here, some of the respondents decided to interpret this question or give an answer that had a clear link to sustainability. This was then done by including the word sustainability, environmentally friendly or something similar. In these specific cases, I then asked a follow-up question asking the respondent to think in more general terms. So, by using a more leading question, this limitation was countered.

6 Analysis

The following chapter presents the study's results and analyses them with the help of the theoretical framework and previous literature. The outline is structured using the three aggregated dimensions found in the last step of the data analysis method. All quotes presented are freely translated to English, as the interviews were conducted in Swedish. This chapter aims to show the results and answer this study's two research questions.

6.1 The Relevance of Sustainable Food Consumption

This first section of the analysis presents the first aggregated dimension regarding relevance. Thus, the first three themes are analysed here, the results of which are incorporated into the final dimension. The following themes have similarities and are thereby presented and analysed in this section; *shift in consumption of food*, *consumer ability to consume in a certain way*, and *the definition of sustainability and food*.

When it comes to monthly income, all interviewees live on CSN. As mentioned, students receive about 12000SEK³ every month, of which about 3000SEK is spent on food. Some of the respondents of this study live alone and pay for food and other expenses such as rent. Other respondents live with their partners. One of the respondents lives with a partner who works full-time and thus has a full-time income.

Most of the respondents answered that they have some form of interest in sustainability. However, three of them did not want to use the term *interested*, preferring to say that they think about it in everyday life. M3: “Well, I think it is important. But interest, I do not know. But yes, it is definitely important, and I think about it”.

When it comes to food, I have no interest, to be honest. But in general, yes, I find it interesting. But when it comes to food, I do not have much interest. I am aware of it, I would say, but no interest, no. (M4)

The differences in the results may depend on how respondents interpreted the question and the interview as a whole. Some considered sustainability in general and said they were interested

³ 1SEK \approx 0.0088EURO

in it. Others, like M4, may have wanted to include food and therefore gave the answer they did. However, it is interesting to note that although the respondents did not like to associate the term *interested*, they did express an awareness of sustainability. If interpreted, this could be similar to what Papaoikonomou et al. (2016) found in a study on ethical consumption. Participants often rejected the term *ethical* as excessive and demanding and therefore did not want to be associated with it. However, in this case, students might perceive *interested* as excessive or redundant and therefore reject it because they cannot identify with it, even though they are interested in sustainability in a more general sense, without the focus on food consumption.

When the respondents were asked questions about their food consumption, most of them expressed that nowadays they often look for the cheapest option, the so-called *red prices*, where the shop gives a particular discount on products whose expiry date is within one or two days. Or if a specific product is on sale in a certain week, students tend to buy it just because it is cheaper. F3: "If I see that it is a good offer, I buy it, otherwise I leave it." F1: "Now we react when we go shopping like wow it's twice as expensive as two (2) years ago. You are more careful when you see good prices."

Yes, but if they have an extra price for chicken, I end up buying two instead of buying just one like before. I go to the supermarket when there's a deal, so I might buy a bit more to take advantage of the offer. Knowing that you have it at home. (F4)

Therefore, no one has expressed seeking sustainable grocery shopping options. However, how students consume their food might resemble the one before inflation or the current economic situation. But that is not something this study can answer. Nevertheless, it is important to note that most respondents expressed similar thoughts to F1, namely that food prices have become more expensive. Considering this and the fact that students have limited resources, it could be said that respondents do not care because they cannot afford or are not willing to spend money on sustainable options such as eco-labelled products if they are more expensive than another non-sustainable option. This currently limits the relevance of sustainable food consumption.

However, it is also important to note that students' identification with and relevance of sustainable food consumption can also be seen as limited due to the current market. As Arnould and Thompson (2005) argue concerning consumer identity, the market creates certain consumer positions by offering specific products, such as those in a grocery shop, which the consumer

then chooses between. Due to the economic situation, shops know that people have become more frugal and therefore often look for the cheapest offer. This may have led to shops offering more visible and perhaps a larger quantity of reduced products. Whether these products are seen as sustainable or unsustainable is not clear. However, the red-price products and offers become in some way part of their consumer identity.

When defining what is sustainable or unsustainable regarding food, the students often referred to eco-labelling or locally produced. None of them mentioned, and thereby might not think about, packaging or waste products. When we asked the students to discuss the issue of sustainability, they all said that it was a difficult concept to define because it was complex. About half said they knew about it but describing it in a few sentences was challenging. At the same time, respondents also said that it is even more difficult to put food and food consumption in the context of sustainability, as most do not think about it in their daily lives.

Interestingly, some students brought consumption into the context of clothing consumption, as they saw a more direct link between sustainability and clothing consumption. See, e.g., F4: "I associate sustainable consumption more with the clothing industry in general, compared to food". Instead, three general divisions can be found in the student's definition of sustainability. The first is where sustainability is defined with the words cycle or balance. The second is the definition, where the students talk about the three aspects of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. The last description was only used by one of the students who used the term self-sustaining.

6.1.1 The Harmony

Let us start with the term circular and balance: here, respondents use either the exact word circular or/and balance. Others define sustainability in a way that can be interpreted as circular and balanced. First of all, F1: "Sustainability in this essay should be something that can be done as long as nothing has to change, or it does not destroy anything else". What she means here can be interpreted as circular, similar to the thoughts of the social foundation and ecological ceiling by Raworth (2017). That something can be sustainable if it does not harm you or others. F1's definition is similar to M2's:

I think it's about the fact that we shouldn't, on a fairly large scale I think, or at least it is for me, that we shouldn't wear out the planet. More than we restore it, but the planet

should feel better. When our generations die or what they say when the next generation takes over, we should leave the planet in a better condition than we have now. We shouldn't make it worse because it's a vicious spiral and then we won't have a planet for a while, maybe. (M2)

Again, M2 refers to a circular life or balance in using our planet's resources, since we only have one, we must take care of it. Both F1 and M2 responses show that consumers are aware of sustainability. This is consistent with the findings of Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006), who found that consumers are becoming more aware of the environment and their consumption. With a sound understanding and knowledge of sustainability, students might also be able to consume their food sustainably. Furthermore, their prior knowledge may also be helpful or harmful when confronted with communication about sustainable food consumption. Therefore, it is argued that their culture or understanding of sustainability plays an active role when determining the role of green communication (Rydin, 2003).

In the following example, the respondent uses the words circular and balance in her definition of sustainability, and compared to F1 and M2, F3 also considers the meaning of price or cost.

Well, the first thing I think of is circular and balance, I would say. I am well aware that I cannot make all the decisions. So, if I wanted to make all the wise decisions, it would cost me very, very dearly. . . So, for me it's more about not buying more than I need. (F3)

Here F3 expresses that although she has the knowledge and, to some extent, knows how to make sustainable food choices, she also believes that this comes at a price that she cannot always afford. F3 can be seen as a motivated consumer who wants to make sustainable choices to some extent, but as Seyfang (2004) argues, it becomes limited due to options.

Finally, let us consider the last respondent who fits into this first theme of definitions. F2 defines sustainability in the same way as F1, M2 and F3. But F2 also considers the three aspects of the environment, social and economic. Therefore, F2's definition is on the line between two themes.

It is a balance within our economic, social, and environmental aspects. It is not possible to be sustainable in one aspect if you are not sustainable in all the others, but it is a

balance between all three bases. And I find it hard to imagine how the world could become sustainable. I do not think it will come to that. But you can strive for it in several or all areas. (F2)

F2 uses both the word balance and the three aspects of sustainability. This shows that she knows about the three aspects of sustainability, that none of them is more important than the others, and that she thinks it is about balance. However, compared to M2, who first considered the social and/or environmental aspect, this shows that the economic aspect is somewhat neglected, as M2 did not mention it.

6.1.2 The Traditional

Moving on to the following definition of sustainability, where students talk about the three aspects of sustainability. The students using this definition do so in different ways, with the first example of F4 encompassing all three factors. But, as we will see below, some other students focus more on one aspect than the other.

Yes, no, a very important question. There are several aspects. I think we mostly think of the environmental aspect of sustainability. I think that's what most people hear about. When you talk about sustainability, most people only think about the environmental aspect. Then there is a social and economic aspect that I do not think about that often. (F4)

F4 points out that most people think of the environment when they hear sustainability. This may be due, for example, to the fact that the media most often talk about the environment and sustainability. So, one could say that most citizens know more about the environmental aspect than the social or economic aspect of sustainability. However, although she is aware, F4 admits that she rarely thinks about the social or economic aspect.

Similarly, M4 says he thinks of the social aspect first because he is writing a thesis about it. But generally, it is the environmental aspect that he thinks of or uses to define sustainability.

Since I am currently writing my thesis on social sustainability, this immediately came to mind. But even if I were to ignore my thesis, I would say that when I think of

sustainability, I think of the environment. That's the first thing that strikes me, to be honest. The environmental perspective, so to speak. (M4)

But then he also thinks that the environmental aspect is essential or is the first thing he thinks of. Among the respondents who define sustainability in terms of the three aspects, he is the one who does not mention the economic aspect. Either because he does not see it as an aspect of sustainability or because he has limited knowledge.

Furthermore, M1 thinks the three aspects of sustainability are a simple definition or the basis of sustainability. However, his description focuses more on his impacts on the earth, such as the impact of consumption and production.

I would say that sustainability is an idea of both the environment and especially of society. Then there is the economic aspect, which is the basic explanation of sustainability. But how you apply that to yourself is another question, and you have to think a lot about what impact you have on the world, and yes, what you buy and so on. (M1)

All these different examples include one or more of the three aspects. While some of the students used this definition, they also included other essential aspects, such as the boundaries of our planet. This shows that while the three aspects are a good way to define sustainability, they also have limitations regarding consumption and sustainability. By including other considerations, the examples presented above have similarities with the definition of Dahl (2011), who argues that sustainability refers to the need to stay within the scope of our global resources.

6.1.3 The Combined

The last definition found in the data analysis is *self-sustaining*. This definition is only used by one of the respondents, and it could be combined with the previous one. However, since the respondent used the word *self-sustaining*, which is unique, another theme was created.

I would say that it is a self-sustaining process, so it is about not doing too much damage to the environment or people. So, it's about not doing too much damage to the

environment or people, so there's still compensation in terms of wages and other things.
(M3)

M3 mentions the environment and people, which could be interpreted as the ecological and social aspects of sustainability. And that this process should be self-sustaining, within the social base, but also the planetary boundaries. Or in other words, the process should not harm the environment or other people, as defined by other respondents. M3 also considers wages, which can be seen as part of social sustainability. Thus, self-sustaining can be seen as a combination of the other two definitions above.

6.2 The Experience of a Culture

In this section, the second dimension, the experience of a culture, is presented. When the second order of themes were defined, and the initial preliminary analysis was done, the researcher of this study found similarities between the themes; The conditions of a consumer, *the negative experience of green communication*, and *the positive experience of green communication*. In the following, these results are presented and analysed.

The overall experience of the posts or content shown to respondents was either positive, where respondents felt it was good that the shops shared such information or knowledge. They also found the message trustworthy, funny or something they generally reacted positively to. Or the feedback was the opposite, negative. As explained below, most students only or sometimes expressed scepticism and criticism about the information presented and its delivery. For example, some asked, "How do I know this is true?".

Before presenting examples of green communication, the respondents also gave their general opinion on communication to promote sustainable products or sustainable food consumption as a concept. Of the eight respondents, only one thought that such communication was good. F1: "It's good, often organic products are marketed, which is great." She did not mention that she is sceptical or believes this communication involves greenwashing. Her answer stood out, as all the others either expressed strong scepticism or criticism or said that this communication was just greenwashing, as shown in the examples below. Instead of presenting all the different answers, some examples are given here:

It's difficult because everyone is trying to be sustainable. I am quite sceptical of advertising in general. . .I'm definitely critical. So, I may not be negative in any way, but I just don't want to take them at their word. Because I might also have some insight into sustainability communication, in itself, so I might look at what they say exactly. And think about the fact that it might be a bit of a fancy word. But what exactly is behind it? There I am a little more sceptical. (F3)

I'm quite critical of companies in general so I can get a bit frustrated when I see it. Now instead of thinking that yes, but that was good, I see more perhaps that they do it for a reason such as selling the product. Which in the long run is not sustainable because then you increase consumption. At the same time, food is just such a product that, in a way, you need, but then there is a lot of food that is thrown away every day in different households, so if you push people to buy more, you might end up throwing more away as well, which is not good at all. (M1)

Yes, it is so difficult to know what is good and what is bad. So, in a way it's all a bit of greenwashing. In a way, you would have liked them to be able to do that work without having to actually flash it. Maybe it can be mentioned once in a while, but it's not the biggest thing in the world. (F4)

Apart from the fact that those three quotes illustrate how sceptical or critical the interviewees were of such communication, the quotes also demonstrate the student's prior knowledge. They know about the concepts of greenwashing, but also about the fact that most companies have the goal of making a profit, that most of them generally have the purpose of selling food, but not more than that. Considering this, one could say that their consumer identity is one where they are sceptical of communication as a construction of sustainable food consumption. Alongside this, they could also have the identity of an informed consumer who absorbs most media messages but rejects them, as per the oppositional interpretation in reception theory (Hall, 2006).

Students had difficulty remembering or think of something when asked to give an example of green communication, an advertisement for sustainable food consumption or a sustainable product. Still, after a few questions, almost all of them came up with the same example: The advertising campaign that was distributed online a few years ago by Swedish milk producer

Arla. The company was promoting its *new* products that claimed to have a *net zero carbon footprint*. This campaign no longer exists today, having been accused of false marketing, and the *net zero* labels on these products have been removed. When the respondents gave their verdict on this example, they all had similar thoughts, see example:

One I hate is Arla's advertisements about net zero climate footprint...I mean, please. But when you sat there and maybe not so many people thought about it. But since I know a bit about it, I thought *that's a lie and....that's greenwashing*. And not at all right anywhere. (F2)

F2 does not accept the message, as in oppositional interpretation, one of the three ways Stuart Hall (2006) thinks the viewer interprets a message. She expresses how much she dislikes the whole example but especially thinks it contains lies and rejects the message. Besides that, F2 also interprets other meanings in the message. She recognises that perhaps not everyone sees the message the same way as she does, but F2 sees gaps in the messages that she fills in and interprets as greenwashing or lies. As she makes these recognitions, it could also be said that her interpretation is more similar to the negotiated one, where Hall (2006) suggests that the interpreter may perceive other meanings in the message. Her values and experiences guide F2 and therefore recognise the aspects of greenwashing. This shows again that the receiver plays an active role by filling in the gaps in the messages with their interpretations. Where Arla would have liked a different interpretation or filling of the gap in this case, F2 fills the gaps with criticism, as in her opinion, the need for information is not presented here.

6.2.1 The One That Stood Out

As mentioned above, most of the interviewees expressed criticism towards the visual communication shown during the interviews. However, there were also some positive reactions or feedback to the examples where there were no words of criticism or the like. However, as will be shown, this more positive feedback sometimes included criticism or scepticism. Their response or discussion to a particular example began and ended with a critical point of view or argument. Or they were critical at first and then ended the conversation with a more positive assessment of the green communication.

Analysing the results with the help of Stuart Hall's (2006) reception theory, one can first consider the initial positive reactions to green communication as the dominant interpretation.

I think the *Eat in Season* concept is quite good. Especially if it is local as I think the product will be. . . So, if you want to eat in season this is good communication. And yes, I would associate it with sustainability if it were to be seasonal, it is locally produced. (F2)

This reception of the message is positive, as F2 expresses positive words and arguments about why the message is appealing. She also interprets that the message is related to sustainability, as it refers to local production since seasonal vegetables can be produced here in Sweden, for example. In this sense, her reception is in line with the dominant way of decoding a message, as she accepts the message, but it is difficult to say whether she interprets it the way the sender wants to. Since the message encourages the viewer to eat vegetables that are in season, the sender probably also wants a positive reaction to the message, which could lead to a particular behaviour. However, the purpose or goal of the message cannot be fully identified in this study.

The following quotes illustrate how the respondents interpret the message with the opposite interpretation.

I think it was easy to understand. The messages are short. It's very, very simple. You do not have to read, you do not have to just see it to understand the message. It's very purely aesthetic, not so many things happening. It's a concentration on the text. (F3)

No, but it's a clever concept and so on. Because there's a lot of truth in it. It's a good concept to eat at the right time and then it's quite easy to believe in it. So, if I saw a picture like that in the shop, I might think, yes, that makes sense. (M3)

Both express that the message is easy to understand because it is short. The aesthetics are also appealing. According to F3 and M3, the information contains nothing that could be understood as a lie, perhaps because the message is concise. Interestingly, the quotes above from F2, F3 and M3 are the only ones that strongly align with the oppositional interpretation. These three respondents were also critical of other examples of visual communication during other points in the interview. So, these three quotes are the ones that stand out in the majority of the results. In turn, the opposite interpretation is the one that was found the least. As mentioned earlier, this

study can never fully establish that these quotes are exclusively the oppositional interpretation, as the researcher does not know how the sender intended the messages to be interpreted.

The following quotations illustrate a negotiated interpretation of the messages. Here students express a positive response to the examples, but students also understood or made sense of the message, including a sceptical viewpoint. For example, they think the message's purpose is good but can be questioned because of xxx. According to Hall (2006), negotiated interpretation is a mixture of dominant and oppositional interpretation, where the viewer accepts the message to a certain extent but may also perceive other meanings.

F1: “Yes, but I think it's great. But it's 20 years too late. . .”. Here she expresses an initial positive reaction, thinking that the purpose of the message is good. But then she also adds her negotiated interpretation, feeling that the message is too late or that the information is outdated. She fills an existing gap with her own prior knowledge and personal experience. If she thinks the information is obsolete, it may be because she has seen similar information before. On the other hand, she may believe that it is outdated because the need for such information has existed for a long time and, therefore, it would have produced better results a few years ago.

And the fact that they are now saying, yes, we will also take the slightly uglier pieces and sell them, is great that they are doing that. But I do not know if I think it's right to emphasise that point. (F2)

Here F2 interprets the information as positive, that it is good to promote a product that also contains products that could otherwise be thrown away. But then he goes further and criticises the purpose of the message. Here she has the impression that the sender wants to promote a new product that she thinks is not the best. F2 thus perceives other meanings in the text that she perceives as unfavourable.

The two quotes from F1 and F2 illustrate a consumer culture in which the consumer has prior knowledge that affects how they interpret the messages and makes sense of the existing gaps, which they fill, for example, with the help of personal experience. They also exemplify a consumer identity where they distance themselves from the message by first arguing that it is good to promote this, but that it is either too late or that the purpose of the message is wrong or bad. In addition, their interpretation of the messages may also be consistent with what Holt

(2002) highlights in terms of authenticity. Consumers have become more aware of the brand's communication strategies and know that they are only aimed at promoting the purchase of a branded product. This leads to scepticism and consumers rejecting products from companies (Holt, 2002). Thus, their negotiated interpretation may lead students to reject the advertised products. Instead of buying them, as the company may aim to do.

6.2.2 Questioning The Communication

In the result mainly two themes of negative experiences could be found. The first one is where too little, misleading, or confusing information was presented, according to the interviewees. The second is where the communication is presented using symbols or colours, with more specific usage and focus on the colour green, which according to some of the interviewees was interpreted as greenwashing. Since the messages were interpreted with a negative output, negative feedback or left the interviewees with several questions these results can be seen as an oppositional interpretation. Most of them understood the message, but then also rejected the purpose of the message. When left confused or with questions about the information provided, none of Hall's (2006) given ways of decoding a message, can provide knowledge. Hence, Hall's (2006) reception theory becomes limited as he never mentions the option of decoding a message when the receiver does not understand the information.

First, it's false. Coop is expensive as hell. Then again, according to who? So *Welcome to Sweden's greenest food chain*, according to who? Who has said this? And I mean like this, there is no measurement. Of course, you can say it because there are no actual facts to back it up. (F4)

Here, F4's quotation illustrates a fourth interpretation of the message, leaving the viewer with more questions than if they had seen the communication example before. Her initial reaction can be classified as oppositional. She shows how she understood the message, but then contradicts the facts and states that she thinks they are lies. But then she asks questions about trustworthiness and becomes confused by the message. Another respondent who similarly understood this message is M4: "So, my spontaneous thought is, how do I know if this is true and in what way?". He too asks questions about the facts presented. Based on their perception of the message, some will say that it contains several gaps, which they then try to fill using their cultural background and personal values. This leads them to perceive it as a lie or become even

more confused. Again, the issue of trustworthiness can be compared and is similar to what Holt emphasises about being perceived as authentic or inauthentic.

In addition, respondents also felt that the real responsibility was left to the customer. I.e., to act or not to act when it comes to sustainable food consumption.

Yes, this is another case of leaving a lot to the consumer in that respect, because you don't get much more information and knowledge than that these goods exist. You don't know why they might be better. Then you see that it's a QR code, so you can again seek more information if you are willing to do so. But I can imagine that many people in a store do not stop and look through a website for 10 minutes, but you usually go in, then you go out when you have bought what you wanted. (M1)

Here the interviewee expressed a lack of information or knowledge in the message. He was one of the few who noticed the QR code but stressed that the average viewer would not take the time to find out about it when grocery shopping. Using the code QR in green communication to persuade consumers to buy a particular product (Hemköp's example) brings in the aspect of consumer identity. Here the market (sender) has used different aspects or symbols to influence and create certain consumer positions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In this case, according to M1, the QR code does not work to inform people since it is unusual for people to stop and read during their everyday habits of food shopping.

They have made it a little too easy to be sustainable, they have perhaps simplified the problem a little. Yes, just because you take sustainable food products, you should not *have* to skip the rest of the sustainable habit. Then I think a lot of it is also on the companies, and here they are pushing another agenda like it's the people's responsibility. Which I don't know if I agree with. (M3)

This quote also illustrates how the responsibility is left to the consumer, but M3 also stresses that the example gives the recipient a far too simplistic definition of sustainable food consumption. Based on his response, it could be said that M3 believes that sustainability is a complex concept or problem that cannot be solved simply by buying sustainable food. Here the negotiated interpretation fits well, M3 understands and accepts the message to some extent. However, he also interprets other meanings, such as that the problem cannot be solved by

sustainable food consumption alone. Instead, the responsibility should lie first with producers and the food industry, and then with consumers. As this study proves, Yates (2008) points out that today's consumers are demanding more from retailers, and that it is not just up to individuals to change their behaviour. Instead, retailers should make it easier for themselves by introducing minimum standards in certain product areas.

Two of the examples shown to the interviewers used the colour green. When these examples were shown to the interviewees, most mentioned that this strategy could be misleading.

It is precisely because they use the green colour...In my opinion, green is associated with nature and sustainability. *Everyone* uses green when they talk about sustainability, so it's kind of like fooling people by showing them a certain colour. The same thing as showing nature says something like *I am sustainable, look at our green colour or look at our nature pictures*. But then green is Coop's brand colour too, and I don't know what they mean when they call themselves *Sweden's greenest food chain*. My first thought is that they are the most sustainable. But I don't know if that's true at all. They do not stand out in having the most sustainable alternatives, in my opinion. They have the same goods as all other grocery stores, so I don't really know why they would call themselves the greenest. (F2)

In this case, the colour green becomes confusing to the recipient, firstly because the colour can refer to several different things. One is that the colour is simply Coop's brand colour. Or as a strategy to refer to sustainability. Also, because Coop calls itself the *greenest* grocery chain, recipients are confused about what that means. Semiotic elements such as symbols, colours, and certain words are essential when interpreting messages (Hall, 2006). In this case, however, this is somewhat detrimental to interpretation. Instead of enhancing it, the receiver does not understand the message and cannot interpret it. Since F2 is given too little information, she tries to interpret the message the way she thinks the sender wants her to, or she interprets her understanding of the message. However, cultural background and personal values play a role. For example, F2 interprets the colour green as sustainability based on her prior knowledge and cultural experience. Acuti et al. (2022) emphasise that when recipients are confronted with too much information, they become overwhelmed, which can lead to reduced knowledge and the ability to make sustainable consumption decisions. In this case, viewers are more likely to be confronted with too little information, which also results in negative feedback or consequences.

6.3 What Consumers Need Instead

The yellow/orange aggregated dimension is presented in this final section of the analysis. Thus, the result and analysis of the last two themes are presented. The themes *influence from external sources and what the consumer wants to see instead*, have similarities, and are therefore presented together in this last aggregated dimension of needs.

As mentioned above, most respondents found it challenging to include consumption in their definition of sustainability. However, a few included clothing consumption in their definition, as this is what they first associated with sustainable consumption. Why the students found this more attractive could be due to external factors, namely the media. Sustainable clothing consumption has been talked about in the press for a long time, and the media has paid more attention to this topic than sustainable food consumption. It is not only the media attention that needs to be considered, but also how the public or your family and friends talk about sustainable food consumption and how they deal with it. Demographic background and experiences, as well as cultural background, play an essential role in how you interpret and understand things, as Stuart Hall (2006), and Arnould and Thompson (2005) mention.

So, if we look at two examples of what the students said about external factors that might influence them. Their responses can be seen as coherent with Hall's (2006) conceptualisation. M4: "I think it's probably because you read or hear about it the most. Even though there are several parts. But I still feel that you hear the most about the environmental perspective". Since M4 talks about reading here, this could be interpreted as referring to reading about it in the news or other media sources. Whereas F3 expresses the influence of family and society in general: "But I think the more I have grown up and the more society talks about sustainability, both my family and I have started to think about it". Regardless of where the influences come from, this shows how crucial cultural background, demographics and experiences with sustainability are in understanding and making judgements. Exactly what Stuart Hall (2006) expresses alongside Arnould and Thompson.

Since most interviewees were sceptical about green communication, they were asked to give their opinion. Then, they were asked to explain what they would have liked to see instead. The students also showed different levels of knowledge before and after seeing the examples of

communication promoting sustainable food consumption. This included being aware of greenwashing and that today's grocery shops have a strong interest in profit, which they always want to increase. One of the students raised the first interesting point, the examples shifted the responsibility onto the consumer. It is up to the consumer to make a change and consume more sustainable food or change their food consumption towards sustainability.

I don't think we can do much at the individual level; it has to come from higher up. To get everyone involved. I think it has been made clear that I am quite sceptical of advertising or statements like the ones you have shown. Precisely because I don't know what they really want, what their real motives are. So, probably to get people to buy more because they want to earn as much as possible. (M2)

Here M2 mentions something important. To achieve the SDG goal of sustainable consumption and production, action must be taken at a higher level than just the individual. Individuals can make a difference in their daily lives, but to achieve sustainable food consumption, the responsibility cannot only be shifted to the consumer. Furthermore, M2 focuses on the strategy behind the communication to promote sustainable food consumption rather than what the campaign or poster should look like. This is not something that the other students either mentioned or focused on. Some might say that the earlier literature on using different colours for different meanings, symbols or other aspects that were considered valuable, is not that important. It may not be necessary for the interpretation or development, as the interviewees in this study see a strategic rather than a visual change.

Respondents also expressed that they would like to see more transparency in communication. For example, the information provided should not contain lies or other information that can be questioned. See example:

I don't know, but never that they are lying either. Maybe just show more relationships or be honest and say they know the impact they have. But also, how they are trying to improve xxx, for instance. A bit more transparent in communication I want. (F2)

As some students felt that the examples presented contained greenwashing, F2 here gives a good example of how to avoid the recipient becoming sceptical or interpreting the communication with negative feedback. Therefore, communication should not contain lies but

honesty and transparency about how the company is working towards sustainability, as M1 puts it:

I don't really want to see anything. I just want to see that they highlight what they are good at and then you as an individual can decide for yourself. I think I'm a bit tired of all the "claims" in general that things are green and that companies are the best. So, I just think I would have liked to see less of that almost really. (M1)

Some parts of F2's and M1's arguments may also reflect what other students have expressed. That they do not want communication that focuses on *this is sustainable* or *these are the sustainable measures we are taking*. Instead, there should be a general focus on how the company is committed to sustainability at the national level. Because as another respondent said, sustainable food consumption is not only the responsibility of the individual or the consumer but also the responsibility of companies or nations. As F3 puts it, "Instead of advertising 'we are sustainable' in the shops, people should be made to become more sustainable in their consumption. This has to do with how you act, not how you consume". Together with what M4 says, this shows that grocery shops may not be the most appropriate sender of communication to promote sustainable food consumption.

I think creating awareness and knowledge is a good thing, just raising it like that. So that people actually understand what it means, and then I think they take it to heart in a different way. So really increasing knowledge and then maybe it's not the role of the shops. But I think that if people had been more aware and knowledgeable above all, they would absorb the information in a different way. Because now I think many people can see it, but they think no and just shrug their shoulders. (M4)

The fact that students want a strategic change in green communication once again illustrates and reinforces the argument that they were sceptical or critical of communication. In other words, the communication could be seen as inauthentic. Holt (2002) argues that communication can only be perceived as authentic if it is created and disseminated by companies that do not pursue economic goals and are motivated by genuine values. However, based on the reception by students, it could be said that companies communicate this only because of financial goals and not because they are motivated by genuine values. Therefore, sustainability can be seen as

a trend that companies must follow to be perceived as responsible. However, without real motivation, the recipient or customer will give negative feedback.

7 Discussion

This chapter discusses the results and analysis, and a more general discussion is presented based on insightful aspects of the findings and analysis.

As the analysis has illustrated, most students received the communication promoting sustainable food consumption with sceptical feedback and a critical viewpoint. However, it is vital to discuss that even though the students might perceive such communication negatively, they will not stop consuming food, compared to any other consumption category, the one of clothes, for instance. Individuals can stop buying clothes from a specific company or switch to only buying second-hand. But to survive, humans need to eat and thus continue to buy food. In turn, grocery stores will always have customers and profit from this. So, one might say that even though the customer perceives green communication or communication constructing sustainable food consumption as something negative or that it includes lies and greenwashing, they will continue their food consumption.

However, consumers patterns can be changed. As with the example from Arla, F2 did express a definite critical opinion based on how they chose to promote a specific product line, that according to F2, included lies and greenwashing. This resulted in her changing her food consumption pattern and stopped buying from that specific brand. But, as mentioned before, one of the issues (or positive aspects, depending on the perspective) in today's grocery stores is several options for the same product. So, if we say that F2 stopped buying milk from Arla, she will always have the easy way out and can still buy milk but just from another brand. The same goes for the examples shown by the interviewees. As these were produced by grocery stores and not specific product brands, the students can always choose to buy their groceries at another store.

When looking at how students defined sustainable consumption and sustainability in general, some expressed the issue of putting the responsibility on the individual or customer. But they meant it is not up to the sole individual to change their behaviour or patterns. Instead, the change needs to come from higher levels, e.g., the production industry or a more national level, with development changes. On the contrary, by putting the responsibility on the customer, the role of contingency for sustainable consumption also becomes a question. To make sustainable food consumption an everyday pattern for the general public, it is necessary to provide them with

knowledge about this concept and not only focus on sustainable products or have specific labels, such as ecological labels.

Previous research has shown that women are more sensitive to environmental issues compared to men and that the typical profile of a buyer of eco-labelled products is a young, educated woman (Dietz et al., 2002). Furthermore, women pay more attention to price than men (Helgesen & Nasset, 2010). Comparing these findings in the context of this study show that the gender is not the dominating aspect. Instead, this study shows that personal values, culture, and prior knowledge play an important role. Therefore, the findings in this study do not provide clear evidence to support the previous literature. The statements cannot be wholly proven or disproven as the material is a qualitative sample, not quantitative, where the results can be generalised. Despite what previous researchers have said, this study shows that there is not always a clear division between the sexes and that consumer culture and behaviour are more complex than that.

The sample in this study can be seen as biased in two ways. First off, the economic situation of the interviewees is the same as for every student. They live on limited resources and even though the current inflation, students are less inclined to consume more expensive food. Sustainable food products such as eco-labelled are often more expensive, and therefore are products like those that students consume often, regardless of inflation or not. However, important to mention is that even though eco-labelling is a clear and easy option of sustainable food products, the student does have other options to make their food consumption sustainable. Despite this, the study focused on gathering data from the sample of eight students due to that they were a group which previous research has not focused that much on before. Also, because sustainable food consumption should be possible regardless of economic situation.

Secondly, the level of prior knowledge of the sustainability discourse(s) is clear among the sample. Half of the respondents were studying a master's degree in sustainability and communication at the time of data collection. The remaining respondents were studying a business degree programme that included some aspects of sustainability. It can therefore be said that the respondents had more prior knowledge about sustainability compared to the general public. As the respondents mentioned terms like greenwashing during the interview, this shows the high level of prior knowledge. Therefore, the results presented in this study may not correspond to the general students' reaction to similar visual green communication.

However, due to their prior knowledge, they are sceptical of the communication, and it could be said that such a negative reaction is necessary. This shows once again that we need to evolve and change in terms of who should be the sender and who should bring about the necessary change. If this study had chosen to collect data from other respondents, such as students without the same prior knowledge, the results would also reflect that they do not have the same expertise. As some of the students in this study had difficulty understanding the messages in the visual communication at some points, they interpreted them using their prior knowledge. If the sample had instead consisted of students without this prior knowledge, this could have resulted in no responses. Instead of trying to interpret the message, they could have simply taken the message word for word without critical thinking. However, we can only speculate about this. Therefore, in order to conduct this study, it was necessary for the students to have some prior knowledge, regardless of their interest in sustainability. And the sample of students and the results also allowed the study to highlight the limitations of Stuart Hall's (2006) reception theory and address the need for further development of the sender-message-receiver transmission model, with more specific development regarding how the receiver interprets messages.

8 Conclusions

The students had no problems with the definition of sustainability, finding three subdivisions. In one definition, the students used the words cycle or balance, emphasising that humans should act and think more circularly. We have limited resources and need to consider this, for example, by not consuming too many products. The second point was the mention of the three aspects of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic. This definition is most similar to the theoretical descriptions presented in the previous literature. However, some of the students elaborated their explanations further than the previous researchers and were able to include other important aspects, such as balance. However, the economic part of sustainability was not mentioned or focused on. The last definition, used by only one of the respondents, included mention of self-preservation, which can be compared to the first definition. The student here focused more on our social foundation and planetary boundaries, similar to Raworth (2017).

When including food consumption in the definitions, the interviewees struggled. Instead, some expressed their thought regarding clothing as a consumption category since they had more knowledge about this category of consumption. This can illustrate how necessary knowledge is to define a complex issue. Here the importance of media attention was analysed, together with friends, family, and the general public's understanding of a specific topic. One might say that the limited knowledge regarding sustainable food consumption can be due to the limited space this discussion has gotten in media and amongst the general public. This also illustrates the relevance, where their limited knowledge and aspects of the current inflation have resulted in limited relevance. The interviewees did express prior knowledge, but that price was a more critical factor. Their consumption choices often resulted in the cheapest option despite its impact on the earth or people. Therefore, the interviewees can be defined as motivated customers, but their choices become limited due to cost.

Furthermore, students' general experience with communication promoting or informing themselves about sustainable food consumption was negative. Respondents were critical and sceptical of the examples shown. On the one hand, they thought the messages were inauthentic or not transparent enough. On the other hand, the communication or information also contained greenwashing or lies, according to the students. The colour green, which according to previous research, can be helpful, was perceived with a negative argument. For example, the sender used green to emphasise sustainability or draw attention to the messages. In turn, this led to negative

feedback from the students who linked it to greenwashing or did not understand the purpose of its inclusion.

To summarise, the oppositional and negotiated reading of Stuart Hall's (2006) reception theory was most prevalent in the analysis. However, the analysis also shows some positive experiences with the messages. The problem was that the feedback was positive initially but then led to misunderstandings, or the recipient gave negative feedback, or vice versa. For example, F1 expressed: "Yes, but I think it's great. But it's 20 years too late. . .". Even if the initial reaction was generally positive, the message left room for the recipient to interpret other meanings. The analysis also showed that communication to promote sustainable food consumption needs further development and change. Here, respondents argued the need for transparency and that responsibility should not be left to the customer. Furthermore, some felt that this type of communication is not necessary. Instead of promoting specific products or a concept to consumers, a behavioural change amongst the public is needed. The communication to encourage this change should be developed nationally or internationally.

In conclusion, the use of Stuart Hall's (2006) theory of reception has been useful in conducting this study. But, as mentioned earlier, the theory needs to be developed and the study shows that the theory comes to nothing if the students do not understand the messages. The study also makes contributions to the research field of consumer culture, where the culture of food consumption among students does not always match that of sustainability. Respondents express that they do not consume products with eco-labels because of the high price, but instead choose the cheaper option without a sustainable label. Regardless of inflation, this consumption pattern might change when they are no longer students and have an income from a full-time job. This is because if they have a higher monthly income, other expenses such as higher rent and the like could also increase. In turn, it could be argued that individuals will continue to consume their food in similar patterns. This may highlight the need for a sustainable identity in food consumption. If a person has such an identity, they will consume their food in a certain way. But if this identity is not a part of them, it will most likely never arrive either. Sustainable consumption as a discourse and the communication surrounding it demonstrably try to put the consumer in charge, but as this study shows, it is unclear to whom the responsibility should be put. But one thing is clear: the inauthentic messages sent to today's critical consumers are not the way to go.

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List of Appendices

Appendix I: Interview Guide

Tema: Introduktion		
Intervjun kommer börja med några grundläggande frågor om dig och ditt vardagsliv.		
	Huvudfråga	
	Hur gammal är du?	
	Vart kommer du ifrån?	
	Vad för inkomst har du? CSN eller inkomst från ett deltidsjobb?	
	Hur ofta brukar du köpa mat?	
	Har du något intresse för hållbarhet?	
Tema: Konsumtion		
Nu kommer jag ställa frågor som berör hur du köper mat. Jag ställer dessa frågor för att kunna se en generell bild av hur du köper mat.		
	Huvudfråga	Potentiella uppföljningsfrågor
	Vart köper du oftast mat?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I din närmsta matbutik eller finns det någon annan som du föredrar?
	Hur ofta brukar du handla mat?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Är det en gång i vecka, månadsvis eller när du har behov för det?
	Kan du alltid köpa den maten du vill?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Har du alltså dom ekonomiska resurserna som krävs? Varför/ varför inte?
	Skulle du påstå att inflationen eller den nuvarande ekonomiska situationen har förändrat något när det kommer till hur du handlar mat?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hur/ på vilket sätt? Kan du nämna någon produkt du inte längre köper pga. inflationen?
	Vad är viktigast/ viktigt för dig när du handlar mat?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Varför? Tror du något skulle kunna påverka eller förändra detta?
	Vad tror du andra människor skulle säga/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Är detta något du värdesätter högt?

	tycka om din konsumtion av mat?	
	Vilka matprodukter har du alltid har hemma?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Om dessa tar slut, väntar du då tills du behöver köpa andra varor också eller tar du dig till mataffären samma dag för att köpa det? • Finns det någon produkt du brukade alltid ha hemma, men inte har det längre pga. inflationen?
	Vilka specifika varumärken föredrar du?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Och/ eller matbutiker?
	Vilka varumärken skulle du gärna förknippas med?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varför/ varför inte?
Tema: Hållbarhet		
Om vi går över till hållbarhet, jag kommer börja med några mer generella frågor. Och om nödvändigt beroende på vår konversation kommer det gå över i frågor som fokuserar mer på hållbar konsumtion av mat.		
	Huvudfråga	Potentiella uppföljningsfrågor
	Vad är hållbarhet för dig generellt?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Och hur skulle du få in eller sätta mat i den kontexten?
	Tror du att dagens matbutiker är hållbara?	
	Vad är det första du kommer att tänka på när jag säger hållbar konsumtion?	
	Känner du att du har tillräckligt med kunskap om hur att konsumera mat på ett hållbart sätt?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vad? • Varför/ varför inte?
	Kan du ge ett exempel på någon matprodukt som är mer hållbar än någon annan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varför anser du att den är mer hållbar?
	Tänker du någonsin på hållbarhet när du köper din mat?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Och/ eller är det en del av ditt hushålls mathandling?
	Skulle du påstå att du någonsin tänker på etiska frågor när du köper mat?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • T. ex gällande djurs rättigheter eller bönders arbetsförhållanden.

	Är hållbar matkonsumtion viktigt för dig eller ditt hushåll?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Om ja, kan du ge ett exempel på en produkt som du själv anser vara hållbar? • Om nej, varför? Finns det något som skulle kunna ändra på detta?
Tema: Kommunikation		
Nu kommer vi till den sista delen av denna intervju, där fokuset kommer ligga på så kallas visuell kommunikation. Alltså där text som presenteras tillsammans med andra visuella element, så som bilder, färger, och ljud.		
	Huvudfråga	Potentiella uppföljningsfrågor
	Har du någonsin sett en reklamvideo eller en affisch från en svensk matbutik som marknadsför hållbar konsumtion eller specifika hållbara produkter?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vilka och ungefär när och var?
	Vad är din åsikt gällande denna typ av kommunikation??	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vad skulle du gärna ha sett i stället? • Skulle du påstå att sådan reklam/kommunikation påverkar dig?
Jag kommer nu visa ett antal av olika kampanjer eller bilder som berör hållbarhet och konsumtion. Innehållet är producerat av fyra olika matkedjor som finns i Sverige, några som du kanske är mer eller mindre bekanta med.		
	Huvudfråga	Potentiella uppföljningsfrågor
Visa videon Fula Fiskar från Willys AB.	Vad tänker du när du nu har sett denna?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vet du vilket företag som står bakom filmen? • Kan du se någon tydlig koppling till hållbarhet? • Skulle du påstå att kommunikationen eller informationen är pålitlig? • Tror du att detta skulle påverka dig och din konsumtion av mat? • Lärde du dig något från videon? Om ja, vad?

Visa video Hållbara val från ICA (2019).	Vad tänker du när du nu har sett denna?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baserat på vad du såg i förra filmen, vad kan du säga om denna? • <i>Liknande uppföljnings-frågor som tidigare.</i>
Visa Instagram kampanj-serie innehållande tre bilder Ät i säsong! från Hemköp (Axfood).	Vad tänker du när du nu har ser denna?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vad la du märke till först? • Vad kan du säga om bilderna?
Visa bilden Välkommen till Sveriges grönaste matkedja. från insidan av en Coop butik.	Vad tänker du när du nu har ser denna?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vad la du märke till först? • Vad kan du säga om bilderna? • Skulle denna information påverka din konsumtion och skulle du påstå att den var hållbar eftersom butiken har utnämnt sig själva som <i>gröna</i>?