A drop in the ocean or a part of a tsunami? How impactful are individual actions on climate change?

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Podcast Episode Description

This podcast episode discusses the importance of individual pro-environmental actions of consumers from different perspectives. Multiple individual actions are being reviewed regarding their impact on carbon emissions, consumers' awareness of these actions and discrepancies between their attitudes and behaviours are being analysed and the role of marketing is being examined.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to the podcast Debating Marketing & Climate Change. I am your host and today we are going to discuss the question: **Am I a drop in the ocean? Do the actions and choices of an individual consumer matter?**

Climate Change is a topic that affects everyone, and sustainability has become a key aspect of marketing and consumption. It influences purchasing decisions and consumer behaviour (O'Rourke and Ringer, 2015) and for many consumers the question arises as to whether their own consumption habits actually have an impact on climate change.

We are now going to discuss some individual actions, but before that, let's play a game: Pause the podcast and try to think of 5 individual actions with the biggest environmental impact. After that I'm going to tell you the solution and we will see if you got one right.

Got your actions? Before we start lets quickly explain the term "carbon footprint". Your carbon footprint is the total amount of greenhouse emissions (mostly carbon dioxide) that you produce through all your activities, consumptions, and general lifestyle choices (WWF, 2024).

Now that we know that let's talk about actions that can reduce your carbon footprint the most. Air transportation is probably one of the biggest (Lacroix, 2018). One roundtrip transatlantic

flight creates 1.8 tonnes of carbon emissions. Just to put that into perspective, that's 20% of the 8.8 tonnes that the average UK person produces in a year (WWF, 2024).

Another action is to reduce the consumption of animal products. If taking a radical change, for example by swapping an extremely meat-heavy diet for veganism it reduces carbon footprint by up to 22% (Lacroix, 2018)! Living car-free can save up to 2.4 tonnes per year (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017). Purchasing green energy saves up to 2.5 tonnes.

The last one has the biggest impact but is rarely mentioned since recommending this action is a major interference in people's personal lives, but having one fewer child saves 58.6 tonnes per parent per year in a developed country (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017).

Did you get one right? If you didn't, or some of those actions surprised you, this is proof of how we often don't know what the most effective ways are to reduce carbon emissions. And that is the problem, because if we don't know it, how can we effectively do it? Did you for example know that 1kg of dark chocolate produces almost four times as much emissions as 1kg of pork (Poore and Nemecek, 2018)? That number definitely surprised me.

Now let's also talk about actions that are often advertised as important to save the planet but have a smaller impact. Reducing food waste surprisingly only saves 0.37 tonnes of carbon per year (Hoolohan, Berners-Lee, McKinstry-West and Hewitt, 2013). This means that four years of drastically reducing food waste saves as much carbon emissions as avoiding one roundtrip transatlantic flight. Hang drying your clothes only saves 0.21 tonnes per year (Attari et al., 2010). Planting a tree mitigates 0.06 tonnes. By telling you all these numbers I don't want to discourage anyone to take these actions. Just imagine if all 67 million Brits hang dried their clothes, that would save more than 14 million tonnes of carbon emissions per year. Moreover, just because something doesn't drastically mitigate carbon emissions doesn't mean it doesn't help the planet in a different way. Planting trees makes a huge difference for the biodiversity, providing shelter and food for many animals important for our ecosystem. Using reusable bags only saves 0.005 tonnes per year, but it can reduce pollution which saves the lives of animals. Moreover, low- and medium-impact actions are often easier to follow through with.

So now *we know* that individual actions have an impact and which ones have the biggest, but do *other people* know that too? People are more willing to take pro-environmental actions if they believe in their effectiveness (De Boer, De Witt and Aiking, 2016). Studies have shown that people severely underestimate the negative impact of air travel and meat consumption

while they overestimate the impact of littering, recycling, or using reusable bags (Wynes, Zhao and Donner, 2020). The impact of personal vehicle use was correctly comprehended.

Despite the misjudgement of their impact, generally people know what actions are eco-friendly and recognise the importance of taking them (Wynes, Zhao and Donner, 2020). They also show interest in climate change and many consumers, especially younger ones say they prefer brands that focus on sustainability, emphasis on *say* (White, Hardisty, and Habib, 2019). Because their behaviour shows otherwise. Climate awareness increases steadily, but so does excessive consumption (Rausch and Kopplin, 2021).

This brings us to the intention behaviour gap. In the context of sustainability, it means the presence or pretending of pro-environmental attitudes that don't translate into actions (Rausch and Kopplin, 2021). The gap is often bigger when products are not easily accessible or if consumers don't believe in the effectiveness of these sustainable products (Nguyen, Nguyen and Hoang, 2018). Another psychological barrier is the single-action bias (Weber, 2010). It describes the tendency to take only one action when responding to threads such as the climate crisis. People think that after taking that single action they now have the moral right to act in a harmful way (Nolan and Schultz, 2013). For example, someone might think "I already brought my reusable bag to the supermarket, now I can buy the cheap meat. I already did my part". Moreover, when trying to behave eco-friendly, people tend to pick the easiest changes that often don't have the biggest impact (Gifford, 2013). Instead of reducing their flights, they buy the bamboo toothbrush.

But often it is not only a lack of knowledge or laziness that leads to the intention behaviour gap. Sometimes we are manipulated by marketing strategies. Many of you have probably heard of the term "greenwashing" before. It describes a company misleading their consumers into believing that their practices and products are sustainable and eco-friendly when they are not (De Freitas Netto, Sobral, Bezerra Ribeiro and Da Luz Soares, 2020). As this practice has become more and more known, it facilitates the intention behaviour gap. Many people become wary of sustainable products, often suspecting greenwashing even with genuinely climate friendly products (Rausch and Kopplin, 2021).

So how can we reduce the intention behaviour gap? A powerful method is green marketing. It benefits companies by attracting new costumers and shaping their brand image but also the environment by pushing people towards more sustainable alternatives and actions.

A great example is Patagonia's campaign "Don't buy this Jacket", released on Black Friday, a day centred around consumption (Patagonia, 2011). The campaign actively encourages people not to buy their product and to use what they already own. It reminds people of the environmental impact their purchases have. Another Patagonia campaign called "Worn Wear" encourages people to trade in and buy used Patagonia products (WornWear, 2024). Another marketing campaign is Adidas' Futurecraft.Loop shoe, a fully recyclable running shoe completely made from ocean plastic (Adidas, 2019). In the past years, countless of companies started sustainability lines, for example Zara, H&M or Ikea (Davis, 2019).

Apart from changing our behaviour, we can also use or voice to help the environment through activism. One person might just be a drop but if many people come together, it creates a wave. Criticising governments or boycotting businesses might seem pointless to some, as there is a huge power imbalance. But governments are dependent on re-election, just as companies are dependent on customers (Greenpeace UK, 2023). Do not underestimate the power you hold as a potential voter or customer. This was shown by the wave (pun intended) that the Fridays for Future demonstrations caused, starting a global movement. Climate advocates such as Greta Thunberg or David Attenborough already met some of the most influential people in the world, proving that activism can change the world (Makortoff, 2019; United Nations, 2019).

Nestlé was fighting a huge PR battle with Greenpeace after they exposed Nestlé's deforestation of the Indonesian rainforest, forcing them to change their suppliers and making pro-environmental decisions (Tabacek, 2010).

Especially in the day and age of social media individuals can go viral and can start a movement, for example the cancellation of a brand. The term "cancel culture" is the act of withdrawing support for companies or people because of their actions or beliefs, often on social media (Bakhtiari, 2020) and 64% of consumers are willing to boycott companies for those reasons (Edelman, 2018). A survey showed that 50% of Gen-Z believes cancel culture to be necessary when trying to take down unethical businesses (Cook, 2022). The pressure that consumers as a crowd can exert on a company is therefore immense.

So, to answer our question from the beginning: **am I a drop in the ocean?** Yeah, probably. You alone cannot stop climate change and in the grand scheme your impact is very limited. But without any drops the ocean would be empty and if many individuals come together, we can create a tsunami and change the world

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