

Am I a Drop in the Ocean? Do the actions and choices of an Individual Consumer Matter?

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Podcast Episode Description

This episode explores whether individual consumer choices are powerful enough to combat climate change or systemic action is needed. The children advocate for personal responsibility, while the parents argue that mass-market accountability and government policies are essential. Using insights from studies, academic articles, and examples, our discussion navigates the complexities of sustainable action.

Transcript

Introduction

Hello and welcome to tonight's Dinner Table Debate! Ever found yourself in the supermarket, wondering if your choice of plastic, paper, or reusable bags really matters in the fight against environmental challenges? In this episode, we tackle the big question: "Am I a drop in the ocean? Do the actions and choices of an individual consumer matter?"

Join this family—Freddie, the dad; Beth, the mum; and their daughters, Ziyang and Bipsita, as they explore whether small actions can spark real change or if they're just a drop in the ocean.

Freddie (Dad): "Alright, everyone. We've got a hot topic for tonight's dinner table discussion. Are we just drops in the ocean, or do the things we do actually matter when it comes to the planet?"

Beth (Mum): "Why don't you girls take the lead?"

Perspective 1 – Individual Consumer Choices Do Matter

Bipsita (Daughter)

Oh! Ziyang and I were just talking about this today. I mean, I know people say that one person can't make a difference, but we think that's not true. When it comes to individual consumer influence, there's actually research supporting that individual decisions can spark wider trends that companies can't ignore. I came across a journal article, which talks about the Social Influence Network Theory. It argues that in an 'information-loving' society, individuals often look to each other for cues on what to buy or how to behave, rather than making choices purely based on their own preferences (Shah & Asghar, 2023). This means that our choices can directly influence others in our network, leading to similar preferences or trends across social groups (Friedkin and Johnsen, 2011).

And it doesn't stop with just us! Dad, remember when we got those bamboo toothbrushes to try out? That small choice inspired some of our friends to switch too! This way, if people in our networks see

us making conscious decisions like using reusable bags or avoiding fast fashion, they might start doing the same, creating a ripple effect. It's kind of like how when one of us in the family gets into a new hobby—like remember when you started cooking? Suddenly everyone else was experimenting in the kitchen. This way, individual choice and change spreads in social circles, even things like weight gain. Studies show that if one friend becomes obese, their close friends are 57% more likely to gain weight as well (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). Sure, one choice might feel like just a drop in the ocean, but all those little drops add up—and that's how real change starts.

And this isn't just theoretical. Just yesterday, I read an article by Time showing how companies like Nestle and McDonald's changed their practices due to consumer pressure. They phased out artificial ingredients and started using antibiotic-free meat. These companies didn't start off with a "green" agenda, they adapted because consumers demanded healthier, more sustainable products (Mitchell, 2015). So, if people keep pushing for change, even the big guys have to adapt.

I also read an article posted by The Guardian about "conscious consumerism," a mindset gaining popularity. Traditional consumerism pushed people to keep buying, regardless of whether it was necessary. But now, more people are more conscious of what they buy, where it comes from, and its environmental impact (Pranjal, Bansal, & Dutt, 2020). And mind you, conscious consumerism isn't just a trend—it's a mindset. When individuals make choices with intention, like opting for sustainable or ethical products, it sends a message to brands that sustainability isn't optional (Davis, 2011).

Another article I found stated that customer pressure directly affects green innovations within companies. When enough consumers advocate for eco-friendly products, businesses are more likely to innovate sustainably to meet this demand (Lestari et al., 2021). Forbes even mentioned that while systemic change is essential, individual actions play the first key role in starting it (Kateman, 2022). The author argues that personal changes often lead to systemic shifts. If we're not living by the values we advocate for, there's a disconnect (Kateman, 2022). And honestly, if people can't commit to their own beliefs on an individual level, how likely are they to push for change on a bigger scale? In PwC's Consumer Survey, 85% of consumers prioritise brands that focus on sustainability, with many consumers willing to pay a 9.7% premium for sustainable products (PwC, 2024).

Ziying (Daughter)

So true! Let's not forget how our individual choices collectively impact the bigger picture. There's this concept of a "responsible society" where people weigh their own views alongside external information to make decisions (Shah & Asghar, 2023). We're not just going along with the crowd; we're making informed choices that reflect what we believe is best for everyone.

It's true that no single person can tackle climate change alone. Many scholars, like Elizabeth Cripps, in the theory of 'weak collective responsibility' argue that large-scale collective actions are far more effective than individual efforts, and it is group responsibility for reducing emissions (Cripps, 2013). However, more recent scholars have started to challenge this view, arguing that climate change stems from the aggregation of individual members' acts from this group of emitters. This means that individual choices collectively can create or cease climate change, and it is individual responsibility to stop contributing to the harm (Placani, 2024).

Do you know the climate scientist Michael E. Mann? He argues that individual changes, like going vegan, aren't enough to save the planet alone, yet he himself chooses to be a vegetarian (Mann, 2019). And he's not alone in this. If we look at influential environmentalists who advocate for systemic change, like Cory Booker, Jane Goodall, and Bill McKibben, all have made personal lifestyle changes. This isn't a coincidence. These leaders recognize that while we need collective action to tackle climate change, individual actions help set a standard, inspire others, and keep them connected to the values they promote. In this way, individual actions may not solve the problem alone, but can create the momentum we need for real, lasting changes.

Mum and Dad, have you noticed that many people in our neighbourhood are switching to electric cars? I found that in 2024, 17.8% of new cars being registered are fully electric, with a bunch more being hybrids (Zapmap, 2024). And it turns out that electric vehicles emit 17 to 30% less greenhouse gas than gasoline cars (European Environment Agency, 2024). See? Such small individual efforts end up bringing change on a larger scale! Plus, individuals can really inspire significant societal shifts. I read the European Social Survey which found that individuals who endorse biospheric values worry about climate change, and the more worry people have about climate change, the more they push for policies that address it (Bouman et al., 2020). A clear example for that is #FridaysForFuture movement, started by one teenager Greta Thunberg on social media, has led to millions of young people across the world demanding action from governments and corporations (Kraemer, 2019). It shows that individual actions are not insignificant. In fact, it can inspire bigger movements!

Perspective 2 – System Action is Needed; Individual Consumer Choices Do Not Matter

Beth (Mum)

You know girls, it's admirable that you're so passionate about this, but individual actions alone won't solve the climate crisis. Think about this: only 57 oil, gas, coal and cement companies are directly responsible for 80% of global CO2 emissions since the 2016 Paris Agreement (Watts, 2024). That's like trying to mop up an overflowing river with a sponge. As much as I respect those environmental advocates you mentioned, they too admit that personal choices won't solve these systemic issues. Ziying, I know that Michael Mann has emphasised he chooses to live sustainably, but he insists that systemic policy changes are essential. He argues that oil companies pushed the narrative of personal responsibility to deflect blame from themselves and in his view, real change requires pressuring governments and corporations, not just individual lifestyle tweaks (Mann, 2021). Without large-scale political and economic shifts, consumer actions are, well, just drops in the ocean.

I think we need to take a closer look at what drives large-scale change. While I get the idea of "conscious consumerism," there's this thing called the Collective Action Problem. The collective action problem describes how the combined effects of individual actions can lead to unintended outcomes (Hormio, 2023). This issue cannot be addressed by any one individual or group acting alone. Instead, meaningful action on climate change requires coordinated efforts and support from many stakeholders. In the context of climate change, the collective action problem arises when the cumulative impact of individual actions leads to unintended environmental consequences, such as global warming. Addressing climate change effectively requires a coordinated approach, where multiple actors—governments, businesses, communities, and individuals—work together rather than acting alone (Petzold et al., 2023).

Take for example fast fashion, companies like Shein, Zara, and H&M produce enormous volumes of cheap clothing, which promotes a wear once and bin culture. This fashion industry alone is responsible for around 8-10% of global carbon emissions and significant water pollution (Stallard, 2022). Even if consumers were to buy fewer clothes or switch to sustainable brands, that's not enough to counteract the massive environmental impact created by these companies' high-speed, high-volume production. There needs to be a change in the business paradigm, both production processes and consumer attitudes need to change, this requires involvement from all stakeholders. The textile industry has to invest in cleaner technology, fashion brands need to construct newer more environmentally friendly business models, consumer attitudes must change, and policymakers must change legislation and global business rules (Niinimäki et al, 2020). Ultimately fast fashion giants only start making changes when governments and environmental groups pressured them with stricter regulations, proving that real impact requires systemic intervention (Smarch, 2022).

See girls, I see what you're saying, and I do agree that consumer choices and demand plays a role. But consider this: research on behavior change highlights that environmental habits are harder to adopt when there's no contextual factors such as infrastructure to support them (Steg & Vlek, 2009). It's not just about making choices; it's about whether those choices are realistic and sustainable long-term. Studies have shown that 'moments of change,' like moving homes or starting a new job, create opportunities to establish greener habits (Whitmarsh, Poortinga & Capstick, 2021). These are called midstream interventions, whereby companies and local governments can make eco-friendly options more accessible and appealing (Behavioural Insights Team, 2023; Hampton & Whitmarsh, 2023). But without those systems in place, individual efforts struggle to gain traction. It's like asking people to walk on a path that hasn't been built.

Individual actions do build momentum, but they need policy and corporate backing to have lasting impact. Research shows that countries with stringent environmental policies, like carbon taxes, could support the transition to a climate-neutral economy by 2050 and achieve the objectives of the European Green Deal reaching a net reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 (European Environment Agency, 2022). So, yes, our choices do matter, but they're most effective when they're paired with systemic shifts."

Freddie (Dad)

I love the enthusiasm girls, but I actually agree with your mother. These examples are only drops in the bucket compared to the scale of climate change. Most corporations won't make green shifts unless it directly benefits their bottom line. In fact, the Harvard Business Review describes how companies 'greenwash'—presenting an eco-friendly facade just to appease consumer demands without changing their core practices (White et al., 2019). Many companies end up increasing their overall sales through the use of greenwashing. They do this by increasing their sustainability on one product line that they offer, whilst keeping all the others the same. Consumers who believe that the company is meeting their CSR targets and acting in the public's best interest are therefore more inclined to purchase from these companies. And this goes even deeper too! Firstly, it may make people reduce their consumption of sustainable products as they are cautious around suspected greenwashing even if this isn't the case, increasing the magnitude of intention-behaviour gaps. Then there is the issue of moral licensing. These consumers who have been led to believe they have made a sustainable consumption choice by the companies may believe that it justifies them to then make another one that is more unsustainable!

Let's not forget about "rebound effects" either. Economists argue that when people adopt "greener" practices, they often end up increasing consumption in other areas (Walzberg et al., 2020). For instance, someone might buy an electric car and then feel better about flying more often. This happens a lot with "green" products; individuals feel they've done enough, and overall consumption barely changes. This phenomenon is so common it even has a name—the Jevons Paradox (Giampietro & Mayumi, 2018). These company shortcuts can therefore increase overall consumption, which is obviously not sustainable, even though company marketing strategies may make it appear to be so. Real change often requires laws that prevent companies from taking shortcuts, or the issues can get even more out of hand, even if consumers are intending to live sustainably. Take the European Union's Green Deal or the Paris Agreement, for example. It mandates stricter emissions regulations across industries, which leads to far greater reductions than any single person's decision to reduce plastic use (European Commission, 2020). These regulation changes are essential to take some of the pressure off consumers, who only have so much cognitive bandwidth, and struggle to remember every small action they should take. It's like adding a dam to control the flow of pollution. Without that dam, consumer efforts alone can only do so much.

Girls, you sure have good points, but let's remember the concept of the 'Tragedy of the Commons.' When people don't see others acting sustainably, they're less motivated to act themselves. The Journal of Environmental Psychology found that while people care about climate change, they often wait for institutions to take the first step (Hornsey et al., 2019). Ziyang, I think that Cripps theory of 'Weak

Collective Responsibility' still holds against the challenges and that groups drive change, but only when they work together in organised, impactful ways (Cripps, 2013). So, yes, personal actions might inspire, but it's coordinated, large-scale efforts that make a real difference. Think of it like a football team. One player can't win the game; it takes teamwork and strategy to win. Whilst it's great for each individual to be conscious of the impacts of their choices, it may be more impactful to push for bigger structural changes to achieve a meaningful change. It's estimated that having the right policies and infrastructure in place can influence behaviour so much that it may reduce greenhouse emissions up to 70% by 2050 (IPCC, 2022) Meaningful change needs to be brought by regulations, corporate accountability and shifts in political will, and maybe this is what we should all be focusing on trying to appeal for and change! Without large-scale cooperation, it would be like trying to push a boulder up the hill with a feather."

Conclusion

At the end of our podcast, we would like to state that change starts with one person. It starts with one drop. As individuals, "you are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop." Individual actions may seem small, but they are essential in building momentum for collective and systemic change. While we acknowledge that individuals alone may be insufficient, individuals, corporations, and governments together can ultimately solve climate change issues. So, for the next step as individuals, maybe choose a reusable bag or support a sustainable brand!

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