

Am I a drop in the ocean? Do the actions and choices of an individual consumer matter?

By Sara Skatun

Podcast Description

Am I a drop in the ocean? Do the actions of an individual consumer matter? In this episode, we explore your role in helping create a sustainable world, and how each action you take can make waves of impact. Join me, as we unlock your power to shape the future.

Podcast Transcript

[crowd protests1]

The issue of climate change is becoming more pressing than ever. Across the globe, we're witnessing an increasing number of 'once-in-a-lifetime' extreme weather events, and as the world heats up, we are only going to continue to see more and more (NASA, no date). If you don't care about climate change now, very soon you will be left with no choice *but to care!* Scientists warn that we're rapidly heading towards an unstoppable 6th mass extinction event (Begum, 2023; WWF, 2024). It's imperative that we act now to minimise the damage that we have already made. But how much damage are *you* responsible for? You're listening to the *Marketing for a Sustainable Future* podcast and on today's episode, we're going to answer the question: am I a just drop in the ocean *[drop2]*; do my actions and choices as an individual consumer *really* matter? So, without further ado, let's get into it!

So, I am sure you have all heard about your carbon footprint; the ways in which your lifestyle contributes to carbon emissions (WWF, no date). However, have you ever heard about carbon numeracy? *[huh?3]* Carbon numeracy refers to an individual's ability to correctly understand their own carbon footprint and manage the impact of their decisions (Wynes, Zhao and Donner, 2020). Now, the interesting thing about carbon numeracy is that we often get it wrong!

In fact, consumers vastly underestimate the impact of certain behaviours like travel and meat consumption and greatly overestimate the impact of smaller actions such as using an LED lightbulb or avoiding plastic packaging (Wynes, Zhao and Donner, 2020). This means that consumers can waste their time focusing on improving less effective actions while simultaneously ignoring actions which have a much greater impact (Wynes, Zhao and Donner, 2020)!

Now, don't get me wrong, these small actions matter too in helping the world! In fact, small environmental actions can help lead to a domino effect in which an individual will gain motivation to take on more environmental actions (White, Hardisty and Habib, 2019a). However. There is also a danger that after engaging in one sustainable action an individual might feel justified in subsequently engaging in less environmentally friendly actions (White, Hardisty and Habib, 2019a)! *[dun, dun, dun4]* That is why it is essential for consumers to fully understand the impact of their sustainable choices. If we as marketers can help educate consumers on the actions which have bigger impacts, such as reducing air travel, washing clothes on a lower setting, and even air-drying clothes, we could enhance our individual efforts to protecting the environment (Wynes, Zhao and Donner, 2020)! Although we may feel like we are a drop in the ocean *[drop2]*, our decisions do lead to environmental harm!

I know what some of you might be thinking at this point. *So what* I have an impact? My impact is nothing compared with the large organisations polluting our Earth, they are the big fish in the sea of environmental destruction *[bubbles]*. And I'm not going to argue with you on that. A study recently revealed that since 2016, a staggering 80% of greenhouse gas emissions can be traced back to just 57 companies (Watts,

2024). 57 companies!! And while that statistic highlights the massive role corporations have on the environment; it doesn't mean that consumer actions aren't without value.

There is this term in economics called 'consumer sovereignty', where consumers have the power to influence producers and ultimately shape the market with their purchasing decisions (Sassetilli, 2015). Even though each individual action may seem small, when these choices are combined on a large scale, companies will respond to the demand-- not because they necessarily believe in the cause, but because it suits them economically (Korthals, 2001). *[cash registers]* And we have actually seen this happen in the marketplace! Remember the 'save the turtles' campaign that led to the reduction of plastic straws (Rosch, 2024)? That movement was driven by consumer pressure, which ultimately pushed companies and governments to change their policies to respond to consumer demands.

Of course, we could have a big debate here about carbon numeracy skills and how effective banning the straws have actually been on helping the environment, especially when we compare it to other single use plastic pollutants (Jordan, 2018). But that's a discussion for another day! My main point here is that consumers aren't just passive participants in the marketplace, we can actively influence organisations and governments when we work together! History has shown that when enough of us take a stand, companies will adapt, proving we can drive change and make an impact!

But here's the problem! *[dun7]*; See, sometimes businesses like to be sneaky (Katono and Atukunda, 2021). They might deliberately mislead or lie to consumers about how environmentally friendly they are, in a term known as 'greenwashing' (Fella and Bausa, 2024). Do you remember when I was telling you how bad we are as consumers with our carbon numeracy? Well, greenwashing directly distorts our understanding of the environmental impact of our choices. It gives us the false impression that we're making ethical decisions, when in reality, we're doing very little to help the planet. When we're not actively on the lookout for greenwashing tactics by companies, we become highly susceptible to falling for them (Fella and Bausa, 2024).

Thankfully, consumers aren't dumb! *[yays]* In fact, when we come together, we're actually quite smart! When we communicate with each other, we form a collective intelligence, making it harder for companies to trick us (Ashman, Solomon and Wolny, 2015)! By staying informed and educating one another, we have the power to hold companies accountable. When we combine as consumers and form a collective, we can create massive waves of impact.

A great example of this is H&M's greenwashing scandal. The clothing brand H&M launched and marketed a so-called environmentally friendly 'conscious collection,' which, as a fast fashion company, was quickly criticised by consumers and activists (Sierra, 2024). The clothing items in the 'conscious collection' included scorecards to inform consumers about how environmentally friendly the clothing was. However, an investigation discovered that more than half of these scorecards were greatly exaggerating the truth, and H&M were forced to retract them (Shendruk, 2022; Stern, 2022). This highlights how powerful we are together in demanding transparency from companies, and how we can work together to collectively raise our carbon numeracy!

Unfortunately, our poor carbon numeracy skills and businesses tricking us aren't our only obstacles to saving the planet. We might say, think and believe that we are sustainable individuals, but we don't often act like sustainably (ElHaffar, Durif and Dubé, 2020; Zalando, 2021). This is what's called the attitude-behaviour gap. Basically, when we talk the talk with sustainability but don't walk the walk. Fortunately, scientists have come up with frameworks to help bridge this gap (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019b)! And one key component I want to draw your attention to is the role of social influence.

Just like how when we form a collective, we can put pressure on companies and governments, we can also put pressure on ourselves and each other! Humans are inherently social beings; we have a need to fit in and follow expectations of others (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019b). So, by making sustainability the norm and socially desirable we can make sure to hold each other accountable (White, Habib and

Hardisty, 2019b). Every environmentally friendly choice you make can influence the behaviour of those around you, building a collective momentum that encourages more people to act sustainably.

So, let's go back to our episode's main question: Am *I* a drop in the ocean? **[drop2]** Do my actions as an individual consumer matter? Well, although your impact is minuscule compared to the damage made by businesses and organisations, your actions *do* matter. Enough of us together can create a ripple of change. And it's these ripples that can turn the tides on how other people, big organizations and governments think, behave and act sustainably.

So, my dear listener, the next time you are browsing in a shop or have your finger hovering over the 'Checkout' button **[click9]**, think about the impact of your choice. Educate yourself on how it affects our Earth. But don't stop there, educate others too! We hold the power to influence the market and thereby the power to change the world!

[outro music10]

I hope you enjoyed today's episode, this is your host, signing out!

Podcast References

- Ashman, R., Solomon, M.R. and Wolny, J. (2015) 'An Old Model for a New Age: Consumer Decision', *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 14(2), pp. 127-146. Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1362/147539215X14373846805743>.
- Begum, T. (2023) *What is Mass Extinction and Are We Facing a Sixth One?* Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/what-is-mass-extinction-and-are-we-facing-a-sixth-one.html> (Accessed: 4 February 2025).
- ElHaffar, G., Durif, F. and Dubé, L. (2020) 'Towards Closing the Attitude-Intention-Behavior Gap in Green Consumption: A Narrative Review of the Literature and an Overview of Future Research Directions', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 275. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.122556>.
- Fella, S. and Bausa, E. (2024) 'Green or Greenwashed? Examining Consumers' Ability to Identify Greenwashing', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 95. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2024.102281>.
- Jordan, R. (2018) *Do Plastic Straws Really Make a Difference?* Available at: <https://sustainability.stanford.edu/news/do-plastic-straws-really-make-difference> (Accessed: 8 February 2025).
- Katono, Y. and Atukunda, S. (2021) 'Consumers in Captivity: The Death of Consumer Sovereignty and Rise of Consumer Slavery', *International Journal of Business Marketing and Management (IJBM)*, 6(7), pp. 1-11.
- Korthals, M. (2001) 'Taking Consumers Seriously: Two Concepts of Consumer Sovereignty', *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 14, pp. 201-215. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011356930245>.
- NASA (no date) *Extreme Weather and Climate Change*. Available at: <https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/extreme-weather/> (Accessed: 3 February 2025).
- Rosch, C. (2024) *The Bloody Turtle Video That Sparked a Plastic Straw Revolution*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20240402-the-turtle-video-that-sparked-a-plastic-straw-revolution> (Accessed: 8 February 2025).
- Sassetilli, R. (2015) 'Consumer Culture, Sustainability and a New Vision of Consumer Sovereignty', *Journal of The European Society for Rural Sociology*, 55(4), pp. 483-496. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12081>.

- Shendruk, A. (2022) *Quartz Investigation: H&M Showed Bogus Environmental Scores for its Clothing*. Available at: <https://qz.com/2180075/hm-showed-bogus-environmental-higg-index-scores-for-its-clothing> (Accessed: 8 February 2025).
- Sierra, B. (2024) *H&M is Being Sued For “Misleading” Sustainability Marketing. What Does This Mean for the Future of Greenwashing?* Available at: <https://www.thesustainablefashionforum.com/pages/hm-is-being-sued-for-misleading-sustainability-marketing-what-does-this-mean-for-the-future-of-greenwashing> (Accessed: 10 February 2025).
- Stern, M. (2022) *H&M Case Shows How Greenwashing Breaks Brand Promise*. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/retailwire/2022/07/13/hm-case-shows-how-greenwashing-breaks-brand-promise/> (Accessed: 10 February 2025).
- Watts, J. (2024) *Just 57 Companies Linked to 80% of Greenhouse Gas Emissions Since 2016*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/04/just-57-companies-linked-to-80-of-greenhouse-gas-emissions-since-2016> (Accessed: 5 February 2025).
- White, K., Hardisty, D.J. & Habib, R. (2019a) ‘The Elusive Green Consumer’, *Harvard Business Review*, 97(4), pp. 124–133.
- White, K., Hardisty, D.J. & Habib, R. (2019b) ‘How to SHIFT Consumer Behaviors to be More Sustainable: A Literature Review and Guiding Framework’, *Journal of Marketing*, 83(3). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919825649>.
- WWF (no date) *How Did We All Work It Out?* Available at: <https://footprint.wwf.org.uk/faqs> (Accessed: 5 February 2025).
- WWF (2024) *Average Wildlife Population Sizes Decline by 73% in 50 years as WWF Warns That Tipping Points Pose Grave Threats to Humanity*. Available at: <https://www.wwf.org.uk/press-release/wwfs-living-planet-report-shows-73-decline#:~:text=Monitored%20global%20wildlife%20populations%20have,Living%20Planet%20Report%20%E2%80%93%20has%20found> (Accessed: 3 February 2025).
- Wynes, S., Zhao, J. and Donner, S.D. (2020) ‘How Well Do People Understand the Climate Impact of Individual Actions?’ *Climatic Change*, 162, pp. 1521–1534. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-02811-5>
- Zalando (2021) *Attitude-Behavior Gap Report: How the Industry and Consumers can Close the Sustainability Attitude-Behavior Gap in Fashion*. Available at: <https://corporate.zalando.com/en/our-impact/sustainability/sustainability-reports/attitude-behavior-gap-report> (Accessed: 29 January 2025).

Podcast Music

Sound effects via Pixabay.

1. Track: "Protesting Crowd, Climate Strike, Guildford, 01-01"
Artist/Composer: InspectorJ (Freesound)
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/protesting-crowd-climate-strike-guildford-01-01-6337/>
License: Pixabay License
2. Track: "Water Drop"
Artist/Composer: blukotek (Freesound)
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/water-drop-85731/>
License: Pixabay License
3. Track: "Huh 001"
Artist/Composer: 24687763
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/huh-001-120387/>
License: Pixabay License

4. Track: "Dun Dun Duuun v.01"
Artist/Composer: divenorth (Freesound)
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/dun-dun-duuun-v01-105105/>
License: Pixabay License
5. Track: "bubbles-03"
Artist/Composer: kijjaz (Freesound)
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/bubbles-03-91268/>
License: Pixabay License
6. Track: "Cashier “ka-ching” sound effect"
Artist/Composer: u_byub5wd934
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/cashier-quotka-chingquot-sound-effect-129698/>
License: Pixabay License
7. Track: "Dun"
Artist/Composer: JimmytheJohn
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/dun-283044/>
License: Pixabay License
8. Track: "yay"
Artist/Composer: zut50 (Freesound)
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/yay-6326/>
License: Pixabay License
9. Track: "Mouse click"
Artist/Composer: MatthewVakaliuk73627
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/mouse-click-290204/>
License: Pixabay License
10. Track: "background music"
Artist/Composer: oOsongOo
Source: Pixabay <https://pixabay.com/sound-effects/background-music-224633/>
License: Pixabay License