An institutional theory perspective on sustainable consumption

BY

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Declaration

I, Avikaar Ramphal, declare that the thesis/dissertation, which I hereby submit for the degree Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

SIGNATURE: Avikaar Ramphal

DATE: 17 May 2024

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The hours I take,
The sentences I make,
A path not straight.

Knowledge is a growing base,
Something I continue to chase,
But internal shifts are the gifts I embrace.

"Are we there yet?" I feel the shift within,
"Yes" a triumphant reply,
Gratitude flows to those who helped me fly.

I am grateful to God and the universe for blessing me with the opportunity to continue studying. Thank you, Mum and Dad, as I reflect on the sacrifices you have made to give me a good education. Mum, I appreciate you instilling the importance of reading at an early age through our frequent library visits. To my grandmother, Mama, your resilience and strength have always been a guiding light and inspiration to persevere.

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List of abbreviations, acronyms and symbols

§	Section, denoting section numbers in this thesis
ABDC	Australian Business Deans Council
AJG	Academic Journal Guide
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
B	Platform Brand
CB-SEM	Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
df	Degrees of Freedom
EFA	Exploratory Factor Analysis
IP	Intention to Participate in the Sharing Economy
IR	Independent Reputation
NFI	Normed Fit Index
p	P-value
PR	Platform Reputation
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RFI	Relative Fit Index
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SE	Sharing Economy
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
TC	Treatment Condition
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Index
TP	Trust in Sharing Economy Platform
TSP	Trust in Sharing Economy Service Provider
UN	United Nations
β	Beta (regression coefficient)
χ^2	Chi-square

Glossary

Cultural-cognitive institutions: Common beliefs and perceptions that shape how individuals interpret their social environment. These elements influence societal behaviour by embedding shared notions of reality and accepted behaviours.

Institutions: Formal and informal rules and practices that organise and guide both individual and collective actions within a society, providing consistency and predictability to social interactions.

Institutional entrepreneurship: Initiatives taken by individuals or organisations to develop or reform rules and practices governing their actions for their benefit. Institutional entrepreneurs are pivotal in initiating changes within institutional environments.

Institutional logics: Dominant assumptions and belief systems that inform practices within particular settings. These logics guide individuals on how to make sense of their environments and dictate acceptable practices.

Institutional theory: Focuses on understanding the mechanisms and processes by which norms, routines, and structures gain authority and guide social behaviour. This theory explores how institutions affect organisational and individual actions. Neo-institutional theory builds upon traditional institutional approaches by paying more attention to cultural and cognitive aspects of social structures.

Institutional work: Actions taken by individuals or groups to actively shape, maintain, or disrupt the established norms and rules within which they operate.

Normative institutions: Expectations and obligations that define acceptable behaviours within a society. They shape social conduct by establishing norms of what should be done.

Regulatory institutions: Formal rules, laws, and policies enforced by recognised authorities such as governments or professional bodies to govern and control behaviour.

Sustainable consumption: Use of goods and services that meet basic needs and improve quality of life while minimising environmental impact, ensuring the needs of future generations are not jeopardised.

Abstract

This research investigates the role of institutions in shaping sustainable consumption, an urgent inquiry given that unsustainable consumption patterns are pushing Earth toward environmental catastrophe. By integrating sustainable consumption and institutional theory, this research reveals how institutions either facilitate or inhibit sustainable consumption. Existing scholarship considers these areas separately and lacks a unified framework to address this multi-faceted issue. Specifically, this research answers three questions. How do institutions: (1) facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption; (2) impact consumers' trust in the sharing economy; and (3) (de)legitimate corporate sustainability communication? Employing a multi-method approach, the research is organised into three papers using a systematic literature review, an experimental vignette survey, and a qualitative content analysis of news articles. The first paper advances an institutional theoretical model for understanding sustainable consumption as a continuum, identifying aspects that support or obstruct such practices. The second paper uncovers institutional factors influencing trust and participation intention in the sharing economy. The third paper explores the legitimacy of business sustainability communication strategies. Collectively, the research contributes to scholarship by unifying sustainable consumption and institutional theory, offering insights into the roles different institutional factors play. The research provides actionable insights for businesses seeking to promote sustainability and lays the groundwork for researchers to extend this framework conceptually and methodologically.

Keywords

Sustainable consumption, institutional theory

1 Introduction

This research examines how institutions influence sustainable consumption, recognising that institutions – frameworks of rules, norms, and beliefs guiding human behaviour and societal activities – play a pivotal role in shaping consumption patterns. Despite the urgency of redefining consumption patterns to address threats to global sustainability, the role of institutions in this context is underexplored. This research bridges this gap by integrating sustainable consumption with institutional theory to provide a holistic understanding of how various institutions facilitate or inhibit sustainable practices.

The following sections set the stage for the research by exploring the background (§1.1) and scholarly impetus for examining sustainable consumption through the lens of institutional theory (§1.2). Next, research opportunities at the nexus of sustainable consumption and institutional theory are explored, leading to specific research questions (§1.3). The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis structure (§1.4).

1.1   Background to the research

Excessive consumption patterns are forging an unsustainable link between what we produce and what we consume, negatively impacting both our planet and people. Consider consumerism, characterised by an insatiable appetite for more, which is wreaking havoc on the natural environment and undermining the well-being of citizens (Alfredsson et al., 2018; Bhar, 2023; Mont et al., 2022). Some of its symptoms are evident in rising debt and deteriorating social bonds as the pursuit of material goods overtakes social and communal values (Boström, 2020). Recognising these pressing challenges, the United Nations (UN) introduced a visionary plan of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to weave together the needs of the planet, people, and prosperity. At the heart of this initiative, SDG 12 calls for sustainable consumption and production patterns (UN, 2015). Yet, nearly a decade after this proclamation, progress toward these goals is lacking. Progress on the production side of SDG 12 has been notable, with advancements in the efficiency of production processes. However, in the realm of consumption, efforts remain nascent, mostly uncharted and underdeveloped (Bengtsson et al., 2018).

Sustainable consumption is complex with diverse definitions and manifestations, grounded in the idea of sustainability, seeking to balance social, economic, and environmental imperatives (Purvis et al., 2019; Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020). The path

to achieving this balance, however, is a subject of debate. Proponents of consumer-driven sustainability emphasise solutions that enable consumers to make sustainable choices, highlighting individual responsibility (Lehner et al., 2016; K. White et al., 2019). Critics argue this approach is weak, contending that placing the onus on consumers overlooks the larger institutional structures shaping consumption (Caruana et al., 2016). Others focus on technology-driven solutions, emphasising efficiency improvements and altered consumption patterns (Tseng et al., 2016), including purchasing re-manufactured products, closing resource loops in the circular economy, or accessing sharing economy (SE) services rather than owning resources (De las Heras et al., 2021; Mont et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2023). Still, scholars advocate for restructuring societal paradigms for a stronger approach (Landrum, 2018; Press, 2021; Welch & Southerton, 2019). Despite differing views between 'weak' and 'strong' manifestations, the underlying goal remains consistent – sustainable consumption must consider both immediate environmental impacts and the well-being of future generations (Y. Liu et al., 2017).

The varied approaches to sustainable consumption are shaped by numerous factors and understanding them can benefit from the application of institutional theory. The urgent need to address unsustainable consumption drives this research, aiming to move society toward more sustainable alternatives. To identify such solutions, the research examines institutions, both formal and informal "rules of the game", which guide behaviour to promote sustainable consumption, as opposed to the narrower view of institutions as brick-and-mortar organisations (Cairney, 2019; North, 1990, pp. 3–4).

Consumers can be 'locked-in' certain behavioural patterns based on their institutional context from deeply engrained beliefs and societal norms (Jackson, 2004). Therefore, adopting an institutional theory perspective can address how institutional dimensions interplay to both limit and encourage sustainable consumption, reflecting both the stability (North et al., 2009; Scott, 2014) and change (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) of consumption patterns. By using institutional theory as a lens, this research helps uncover how society can shift toward sustainability.

Shifting towards sustainable consumption remains a major challenge attracting scholarly inquiry across disciplines (Di Giulio et al., 2014). Researchers approach the field from diverse vantage points, depending on their academic orientation (Middlemiss, 2018). Within the social sciences, especially in business and management studies, the focus is on bridging theory and practice to find tangible solutions. Therefore, this chapter places sustainable consumption at its core and applies institutional theory as a tool to explore potential solutions.

1.2   The research problem

Institutional theorists argue that institutional theory has reached its maturity (Scott, 2008), yet new avenues of inquiry are being opened, particularly in the realm of sustainability (e.g., Gümüsay et al., 2020; Hoffman & Jennings, 2021). Despite its maturity, the theory is far from stagnant; recent calls for integrating institutional theory and sustainable consumption have been emerging in scholarly conversations (see Table 1.1). As early as 2008, the potential of institutional theory to contribute to sustainable consumption was already being discussed (Mont & Plepys, 2008; Young, 2008).

More recent scholars have substantiated this assertion. For example, Brown (2012) calls for "the boundaries of the emerging sustainability science to include the perspectives from…institutional theory, and others, all through the lens of human behaviors that may help us transition to ecological and social sustainability" (p. 24). Adopting a holistic approach to sustainability that takes into account various societal elements, encompassing not just economic or environmental factors "must consider the role of culture, institutions, and individual behaviors" (Anantharaman, 2018, p. 554).

Similarly, Mont (2019) advocates for the applicability of institutional theory to sustainability research, suggesting "research can make use of…institutional theory…when studying…institutionalization processes of new consumption and business models, practices and transformations" in accelerating meso-level interventions of sustainable consumption (p. 10). This highlights how institutional theory can be a valuable tool in transforming business practices to ensure consumption is sustainable. These examples reflect a growing awareness of sustainability's complexity, emphasising that these issues cannot be fully understood or addressed without considering the underlying institutional framework.

Given this scholarly trajectory, researching sustainable consumption through institutional theory is both timely and imperative. Such a consensus emphasises the need for interdisciplinarity to tackle sustainability challenges. Emerging from this context is the overarching research question: How do institutions shape sustainable consumption? This incisive, yet broad question, acknowledges the interplay between institutions and sustainability, aiming to shed new light on how consumption patterns can be more sustainable.

1.3   Research questions

How do institutions facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption?

The academic discourse on sustainable consumption is experiencing a paradigmatic shift. Earlier discussions focused on individual disciplines promoting sustainability (Lim, 2017). Now, scholars recognise the multidimensional factors affecting sustainable consumption, such as cultural norms, individual behaviours, and the enabling or constraining institutions within which these behaviours occur (Anantharaman, 2018; Creutzig et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2021). This broader viewpoint ignites renewed theoretical engagement in capturing the complex nature of sustainable consumption. Traditional marketing theories are limited in addressing the challenges of achieving sustainable consumption (Lim, 2017; Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020). In this context, institutional theory offers promising opportunities to understand the interplay between internal and external factors that facilitate or obstruct sustainable consumption (Garcia et al., 2021).

Table 1.1 articulates the challenge of encouraging broader sustainable consumption patterns. Many disciplines have explored how to promote sustainable activities, yet a gap remains in understanding broader societal consumption patterns. Recognising this gap invites looking beyond traditional marketing theories to a more holistic, institutionally informed understanding. From these deliberations, the research question arises: How do institutions facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption? This question extends prior work and marks a departure toward understanding the institutional frameworks that shape, enable, or constrain sustainable consumption. Since a cohesive perspective uniting institutional theory with the diversity of sustainable consumption is absent, Chapter 4 addresses this gap through a systematic literature review. The chapter weaves together the threads of sustainable consumption and institutional theory by uncovering the growth of the field and examining it from various angles.

How do institutions impact consumers' trust in the sharing economy?

Chapter 5 narrows the focus to a particular aspect of sustainable consumption – the SE. Prior scholarship recognises the multi-faceted nature of sustainable consumption, encompassing individual behaviours and collective and community-based approaches (Sesini et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding the dynamics within the SE requires examining trust as a critical construct. Eckhardt et al. (2019) have questioned the nature and regulation of trust within SE transactions, particularly whether trust built through reputation systems, as derived from the collective, can be as robust as that engendered by formal regulatory mechanisms. The literature also provides a compelling rationale for using institutional theory in examining market phenomena, pointing to markets as "complex social and political processes" (Chaney & Slimane, 2014, p. 14) and calling for scrutiny of the "institutionalization processes of new consumption and business models" (Mont, 2019, p. 10).

Drawing upon these converging streams of scholarship, Table 1.1 highlights the exploration of the SE, with trust emerging as a central theme in governing transactions within this domain. The communitarian dimension of sustainability is also recognised, leading to an invitation to delve into the institutional conditions underpinning the SE. This leads to the research question: How do institutions impact consumers' trust in the SE? This question targets the role of institutions, focusing on how they influence the critical factor of trust in the burgeoning SE. This emerging model, marked by unique practices such as sharing among strangers, raises compelling questions about how trust is cultivated within this novel form of consumption. In response, Chapter 5 employs a quantitative study to examine how various institutions (normative, cultural-cognitive, regulatory) influence consumers' trust and their intent to participate in the SE.

How do institutions (de)legitimate corporate sustainability communication?

In an era of increasing sustainability claims, the scrutiny organisations face regarding the authenticity of their environmental initiatives has intensified (Buerke et al., 2017; Fischer et al., 2021). Therefore, Chapter 6 examines the implications for businesses in legitimising their sustainability communications (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018) and contributes to the emerging field of sustainability communication (Fischer et al., 2021).

The discourse around sustainable consumption has matured to a point where its importance is undeniable, necessitating its integral role in organisational strategies as outlined in Table 1.1 (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014; de Ruyter et al., 2022). Communication strategies informing consumers about sustainability are key for the successful adoption of sustainable practices (Buerke et al., 2017), even for sufficiency-oriented consumption (e.g., Gossen & Heinrich, 2021; Schadenberg & Folmer, 2022). Texts, as a form of communication and advertising, play a key role in forming consumer identities (Fairclough, 2004) and notions of responsibility placed on consumers by organisations (Caruana & Crane, 2008). While communication is pivotal, legitimacy and transparency in sustainability claims remain a significant challenge for organisations (de Ruyter et al., 2022). If sustainability communication efforts do not manifest in tangible, measurable ways, they risk being perceived as mere rhetoric or greenwashing, thereby losing their potential to foster genuine sustainable consumption.

Framing consumption as the result of rational, individual choices has been recognised as limited in fully addressing the challenges of sustainable consumption (e.g., Schaefer & Crane, 2005). However, institutional theory takes into account the regulatory, normative, and cognitive dimensions that underlie this challenge (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018; Connelly et al., 2011). Recent scholarship also points to the role of visual and symbolic communication (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), and digital marketing (Gossen & Heinrich, 2021) as instrumental in sustainability communication.

From this, a research question of both academic and practical significance emerges: How do institutions (de)legitimate corporate sustainability communication? Chapter 6 employs neo-institutional theory to explore the factors influencing sources of organisational legitimacy in driving sustainable consumption, and institutional work to determine what institutional elements businesses can leverage in their sustainability communication.

Table 1.1: Derivation of research questions

How to encourage sustainable consumption	Invitations to institutional theory	Research question
"Although academics and practitioners from various disciplines (e.g. marketing, psychology, sociology, and economics) have explored ways to encourage consumers to choose more sustainable products, scholarship still lacks understanding of how to encourage more sustainable patterns of consumption, especially for the society at large." (Lim, 2017, p. 70)	"Marketing theories (and theoretical perspectives) to analyze and describe sustainable consumption practices remain underdeveloped. As sustainability continues to grow as a central concern of many stakeholders in society, researchers need to offer new insights that build on current knowledge on sustainability and consumption and strive to develop a holistic conceptualization of sustainable consumption." (Lim, 2017, p. 70)	
"Academics, activists, and policymakers now agree that sustainability cannot be reduced to questions of greening production or reducing population growth, but must consider the role of culture, institutions, and individual behaviors." (Anantharaman, 2018, p. 554)	"What other theories can help explain this phenomenon [sustainable consumption]? Do we need a new theory that can explain the notion of sustainability and its dimensions?" (Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020, p. 326)	*How do institutions facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption?*
"From a sustainability perspective, consumption patterns should be studied as they exist within the larger societal and global fabric." (Prothero et al., 2011, p. 35)	"we recognize that a focus solely on individual, micro-related research at the expense of more systematic, structural, and institutional perspectives is insufficient to address the sustainability challenge effectively" (Prothero et al., 2011, p. 31)	
"Attempting to shift consumption towards being more sustainable by only affecting consumer behavior directly is not possible. Successfully achieving this also requires the design of an appropriate context (or system) capable of driving the right behavioral change (i.e., indirectly). This insight, given that consumers are embedded in society, through norms and regulation, illustrates the need to consider institutions." (Garcia et al., 2021, p. 11)	"…taking a neo-institutional view on consumer behavior can provide insights on the external and internal factors guiding or hindering [sustainable consumption behaviour]." (Garcia et al., 2021, p. 11) "The social sciences need to play a core role investigating preferences, norms and infrastructures in individual and institutional decision making, and its relevance for policy making;….to address ethical perspectives on the question of good living in the context of demand-side solutions" (Creutzig et al., 2021, p. 2)	

How to encourage sustainable consumption	Invitations to institutional theory	Research question
"What is the nature of trust in the sharing economy, and to what degree can it regulate sharing economy transactions? From a consumer perspective, is the trust engendered by reputation systems as strong as consumers' trust in formal regulators?" (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p. 11)	"[Neo-institutional theory] is thus an invitation to extend the field of marketing to institutional dimensions, in that it views markets and their development as complex social and political processes. This approach to markets focuses on the institutional conditions that individuals need in order to consume." (Chaney & Slimane, 2014, p. 14)	*How do institutions impact consumers' trust in the sharing economy?*
"Our findings suggest that the social dimension of sustainability provides a more communitarian and collective dimension, whose spotlight is the collective rather than the individual. This is in line with Peattie and Collins demanding an in-depth analysis of the other two sides of sustainability with the aim of emphasizing the connections and highlighting the consequences of individual and collective behavior." (Sesini et al., 2020, pp. 16–17)	"Future research can make use of several theories from a variety of disciplines, such as…institutional theory, … when studying…institutionalization processes of new consumption and business models, practices and transformations." (Mont, 2019, p. 10)	
"How can industries enhance the transparency of their production and marketing processes to provide tangible evidence of their sustainability or CSR commitments? In the wake of corporate scandals and malpractices, how can genuine CSR strategies be crafted to rebuild or repair brand reputations and have measurable impact on affected stakeholders?" (de Ruyter et al., 2022, p. 19)	"…it remains to be studied whether and how EOA [environmentally oriented anti-consumption] exerts normative and cognitive pressures toward conforming to environmental standards…. EOA could be approached as a part of the institutional framework in which companies seek legitimacy." (García-de-Frutos et al., 2018, p. 430)	*How do institutions (de)legitimate corporate sustainability communication?*
"Key questions still remain; if sustainability is a megatrend, how will it be embedded throughout the entire organisation, and what does this mean for sustainability marketing?" (McDonagh & Prothero, 2014, p. 1204)	"We expect that researchers also will begin to combine multiple theoretical perspectives to uncover rich and complex ways of explaining firm behavior with respect to sustainable business practices" (Connelly et al., 2011, p. 95)	
"Communication plays an important role in promoting sustainable consumption" (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 1) "it is crucial for organizations to flank their sustainable offers with appropriate communication activities that firstly alert consumers to sustainability issues" (Buerke et al., 2017, pp. 980–981) "Ultimately, corporations are deeply involved in co-creating the meaning of responsible consumption" (Caruana & Crane, 2008, p. 1515)	"Nascent research in communications, marketing, and even institutional theory examines the persuasive role of visual rhetoric and semiotics" (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015)	

Note. Source: Author's own

1.4   Structure of this thesis

This chapter has framed the argument for researching sustainable consumption through the lens of institutional theory. It has delineated the scope of this research by introducing key theoretical constructs to understand the boundaries within which this research operates.

The research is structured as a doctoral thesis by papers, encompassing three interrelated journal articles as chapters. These papers contribute conceptual (Chapter 4), empirical (Chapter 5), and practical insights (Chapter 6) to the field. Chapter 4 aims to understand how institutions play an enabling or constraining role in shaping sustainable consumption. Chapter 5 examines how different institutions impact consumers' trust in the SE, a manifestation of sustainable consumption. Chapter 6 outlines how businesses can communicate sustainable practices that are seen as legitimate, and therefore encourage sustainable consumption. The concluding Chapter 7 synthesises the results, discusses theoretical and practical implications, and outlines future research opportunities.

To maintain a coherent narrative thread, prior doctoral theses using the article format were consulted. A key strategy adopted is the explicit statement of 'what this chapter does' at the beginning of each paper (Lindgard, 2015), clarifying expectations before diving into the actual article content (Mason & Merga, 2018). The content of these 'what this chapter does' sections (§4.1, §5.1, §6.1) include the objectives of the chapter in terms of the research question addressed, link to the theoretical background of sustainable consumption and institutional theory, and choice of journal outlet, which informs the writing style, target audience, and journal-specific requirements for each paper. Table 1.2 outlines the thesis's chapter structure and content.

Table 1.2: Outline of thesis chapters

Chapter number	Chapter heading	Focus
1	Introduction	Overview of research problem, questions, significance, and structure of the thesis
2	Theoretical background	Examination of key concepts relevant to sustainable consumption and institutional theory literature
3	Research methodology	Description of the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques
4	Conceptual paper	Systematic literature review to understand the role of institutions in sustainable consumption Title: *Unravelling the sustainable consumption puzzle through institutional theory*
5	Empirical paper	Empirical examination of the role of institutional pillars in consumers' trust in the sharing economy Title: *Peer pressure trumps authority when trusting the sharing economy*
6	Practitioner paper	Exploration of actionable sustainability communication strategies for businesses to encourage sustainable consumption Title: *"How green is your valley?" – Charting a path from greenwashing to green transformation*
7	Conclusion	Synthesis of findings, discussion of theoretical and practical implications, and suggestions for future research

Note. Source: Author's own.

2 Theoretical background

This chapter introduces the theoretical foundations of the subsequent chapters. The first section focuses on sustainable consumption, examining its evolution and definitions within the academic discourse. Specifically, it presents a continuum for understanding sustainable consumption in terms of its impact and strength (§2.1). The second section explores the utility of institutional theory in understanding sustainable consumption. This is followed by a continuum focusing on the degree of stasis in institutional theory (§2.2).

2.1 Sustainable consumption: Evolution and definitions

Why is sustainable consumption a pressing concern? In what follows, the urgency and relevance of this issue are underscored. A myriad of factors contribute to the problems associated with unsustainable consumption, ranging from its historical underpinnings (Chappells & Trentmann, 2015), energy and resource intensity driving climate change (Creutzig et al., 2021), to other far-reaching ecological, social, economic, ethical and technological effects (Lim, 2016). The planet is struggling to sustain both human and non-human life—many of the world's environmental problems stem from consumption (Dauvergne, 2010) and its wasteful contribution toward a throwaway society (Cooper, 2013). Yet, the shift to more sustainable forms of consumption remains slow and fragmented. Barriers such as consumer resistance, lack of awareness, policy constraints, and economic factors often impede the adoption of more sustainable activities (K. White et al., 2019). However, the emergence of alternatives, aimed at reducing reliance on resources and ownership of material goods, necessitates a deeper comprehension of what sustainable consumption truly means, suggesting potential pathways to address the challenges of sustainability.

Sustainable consumption stems from the terms, sustainability, and sustainable development, which remain elusive and lack definitional consensus (Ramsey, 2015; M. A. White, 2013). Some interpret sustainability as having deep ecological and science-based orientations (Ruggerio, 2021), whereas others view its etymology to refer to socio-economic justice (Jones et al., 2008). In the absence of absolute definitional consensus, M. A. White's (2013) analysis of over 100 definitions reveals a conundrum of balancing environmental, economic, and social concerns. He argues "the set of definitions

examined herein contains a concern for growth, increase, and improvement, which presents a challenge for a world of limited resources and finite scales" (pp. 216–217).

A useful distinction is that sustainability can be viewed as processual towards achieving outcomes of sustainable development (Ozili, 2022). In this regard, a more widely accepted understanding of sustainable development emphasises "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 54). This principle demonstrates the need to bridge the gap between present consumption and long-term preservation.

The above-mentioned interpretations highlight the complexity of sustainability, particularly the paradoxical challenge of reconciling economic growth within the constraints of a finite world. Following the proclamation of sustainable development, the acknowledgement that consumption (and production) must be sustainable can be traced back to the UN Earth Summit in 1992 (Cohen, 2019), which marked a global recognition to balance human needs with environmental stewardship. Later, the working definition of sustainable consumption specifically was refined in 1994, where it was stated:

> The use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations. (UN, 2016, p. 12)

This definition stresses considering the life cycle of products to minimise environmental impacts. In doing so, it set forth a comprehensive framework for sustainable consumption, one that continues to guide policies and practices in the decades since. Despite sustainable consumption continuing to be an issue of global concern at subsequent UN-convened engagements, the conclusion of a 10-year programme of work started in 2012 reveals that "progress on sustainable consumption and production continues to be limited. Results achieved to date, while showcasing localized positive impacts, have been unequal, diffuse and not at the scale, speed and scope needed to implement the transformational shifts required" (UN, 2022, p. 18). This observation serves as a sobering reminder that, despite the framework and policies in place, the

journey towards sustainable consumption remains fraught with challenges, demanding continued focus.

Nevertheless, the study of sustainable consumption is accelerating as a multidisciplinary field, reflecting growing academic interest and commitment to the subject (Di Giulio et al., 2014; Middlemiss, 2018; Mont, 2019). And, similar to the many definitions of sustainability, sustainable consumption has also garnered different interpretations. These interpretations highlight its multi-dimensional nature, encompassing concerns for the environment, future generations, basic needs, quality of life, and a life-cycle approach (Quoquab & Mohammad, 2017, 2020). This complexity aligns with a growing aspirational shift away from conventional consumption practices, recognising that understanding the entire consumption continuum is key to achieving a more sustainable future (Lim, 2017; Lorek & Vergragt, 2015).

Another interpretation, and one that is adopted for this research, conceptualises sustainable consumption through the intensity of how it is achieved. Weak approaches seek to "improve material, social, and institutional efficiency of the prevailing production-consumption nexus" (p. 1083), while strong approaches aim to "displace current foci of 'growth' and 'the economy' with nonconsumption concepts and practices" (Hobson, 2013, p. 1083). A range of alternative consumption activities exists between these extremities, with some having different ideological sustainability orientations than other formats. Weak sustainability relies on consumer choices, using tools like sustainability labelling and education, whereas strong sustainability questions the current market hegemony through structural changes like degrowth (O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015).

Distinguishing between weak and strong approaches thus provides a framework for understanding the diverse ways in which sustainable consumption can be pursued. Drawing from Mont (2019), Mont et al. (2022), and O'Rourke and Lollo (2015), this framework encompasses three key strategies. First, to *improve* consumption by opting for greener products, reflecting a shift towards more environmentally responsible choices without necessarily reducing overall consumption levels. Second, to *change* consumption through engaging with new sustainable business models, such as sharing or circular economy practices, which can transform the way goods and services are accessed and utilised. Third, to *reduce* consumption by embracing alternative socio-economic models and sufficiency lifestyles, where individuals consciously minimise waste and excess, focusing on what is truly necessary rather than indulging in overconsumption.

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Together, these strategies of improving, changing, and reducing consumption acknowledge the complexity and diversity of paths towards sustainability (Mont, 2019; Mont et al., 2022; O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015). These perspectives (Mont et al., 2022; O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015) are mapped along a continuum in Figure 2.1.

Strength of sustainable consumption

Weak   Moderate   Strong

Improve   **Change**   **Reduce**
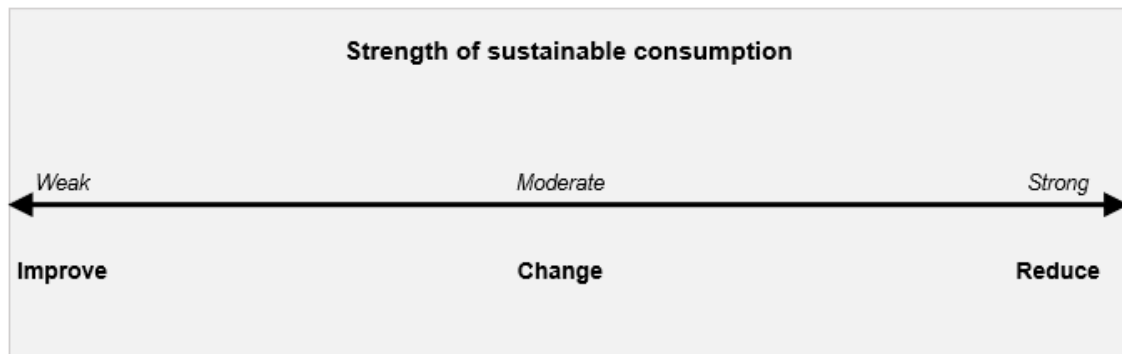
Figure 2.1: Sustainable consumption continuum

Note. Source: Author's own.

2.2 Understanding sustainable consumption through institutions

The story of sustainable consumption is incomplete without understanding the institutional dimensions that shape it, a theme that is unravelled next. The urgency of addressing environmental, economic, and social externalities caused by ever-growing consumption levels (Boström, 2020; Briceno & Stagl, 2006; Dauvergne, 2010) demands a deeper comprehension of the mechanisms at play. By investigating how institutions enable or constrain sustainable consumption, researchers can better grasp the complexities surrounding its integration into daily life and the potential avenues for fostering greater legitimacy and institutionalisation.

Everyday language recognises institutions as either organisations, a higher level of aggregation over micro levels, professions, beliefs, rules and laws, or the notion of establishing something long-lasting (Lammers & Barbour, 2006). As such, institutions can be described as semi-permanent fixtures in society that frame behaviour, and in doing so, legitimise (Suchman, 1995) those behaviours that align with the institutions' enduring nature. In consequence, certain activities become homogeneous due to

institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Conversely, activities that do not conform to these institutions may suffer penalties through a de-legitimating effect (Aksom, 2021; Oliver, 1992). However, non-conforming activities have the potential to transcend these institutional barriers, by breaking through the reigning institutions and achieving a new sense of legitimacy (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

The field of institutional theory can be distilled into three main sub-fields: neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023). Neo-institutional theory provides a framework for understanding how consumption patterns are shaped by the norms and values that are expected (normative institutions), the socially constructed meaning that people take for granted (cultural-cognitive institutions), and rules that govern and sanction such consumption (regulatory institutions) (Chaney & Slimane, 2014; Scott, 2014). Institutional logics extends this understanding by exploring the underlying belief systems that guide and constrain behaviour, recognising the complexity and sometimes conflict of different societal logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Thornton et al., 2012). Institutional entrepreneurship and work, on the other hand, focuses on the dynamic role of individuals and organisations in shaping and changing consumption patterns, acknowledging the potential for non-conforming activities to transcend barriers, innovate and create new paths of legitimacy in consumption (Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009). Together, these concepts offer a multi-faceted understanding of the semi-permanent fixtures in society that frame and legitimise behaviour, leading to homogeneity in certain consumption activities, and the potential for change and innovation in others.

Upon a closer examination of these relationships, stasis and change stand out as key elements that underpin institutional dynamics (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023). Stasis refers to the stability and persistence of established rules, norms and beliefs within an institution, while change represents its transformation, evolution, or disruption. These opposing forces, stasis and change, help to understand how institutions maintain their structure or adapt over time. As an example, this viewpoint has been investigated within the context of corporate sustainability literature, wherein deterministic approaches typify stasis, while interactive approaches embody change (Gauthier, 2013). Neo-institutional theory is associated with a high degree of stasis, focusing on the constraints that perpetuate stability (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014), while institutional entrepreneurship and work lean more towards change, thus a low degree of stasis, highlighting the transformative role of individuals and organisations (Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009). In-between these two ends, institutional logics represents a contingent view

of stasis and change by taking into account contextual factors and actor agency (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). These concepts are illustrated on a spectrum in Figure 2.2.
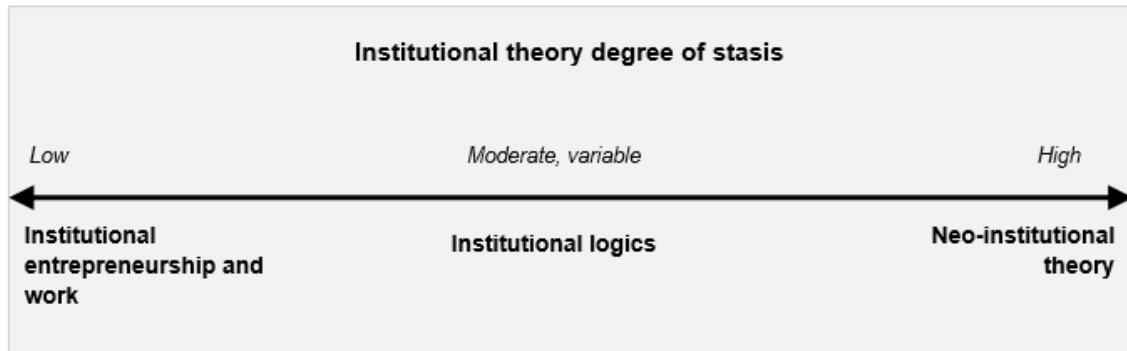
Figure 2.2: Institutional theory continuum

Note. Adapted from "An Intellectual History of Institutional Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward," by M.A. Glynn, and T. D'Aunno, 2023, *Academy of Management Annals*, *17*(1), p. 301-330 (https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2020.0341). Copyright 2023 by Academy of Management.

2.3   Link to theory in the subsequent papers

Building on the brief overview of the main theoretical concepts – sustainable consumption and institutional theory, particularly, their respective continuums – the subsequent papers identify which aspects of these continuums are covered in the research. The cover pages of each paper (§4, §5, §6) explicitly reference these continuums.

The conceptual paper provides a comprehensive overview of both the sustainable consumption and institutional theory continuums. The empirical paper focuses on the intersection of neo-institutional theory within the institutional theory continuum and the change strategy within the sustainable consumption continuum. Finally, the practitioner paper delves into institutional entrepreneurship and work within the institutional theory continuum and encompasses all strategies of the sustainable consumption continuum.

3 Research methodology

This chapter outlines the research methods foundational to the three papers in this thesis. To address the research questions, each section focuses on the methodological considerations, including the research philosophy (§3.1), research strategy (§3.2), data collection and quality (§3.3), deductive and inductive research approaches (§3.4), and ethics (§3.5).

3.1 Philosophical underpinnings

The research philosophy guides the methodological choices in each paper, focusing on their stances on the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) (Sousa, 2010). Social sciences research traditionally oscillates between positivist and interpretivist paradigms. While positivism emphasises an objective reality accessible through empirical methods (Hacking, 1983), interpretivism champions a socially constructed reality best understood through qualitative methodologies (Schwandt, 2000). Emerging paradigms like post-positivism and social constructivism help bridge these divisions. Specifically, post-positivism retains the empirical rigour of positivism but acknowledges the limitations of observational methods in capturing the complexity of human experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). On the other side of the spectrum, social constructivism emphasises the co-creation of social reality through human interactions, aligning more closely with interpretivism (Andrews, 2012).

Sustainable consumption, like institutional theory, contains complexities that defy monolithic interpretations. Sustainable consumption can be approached as a set of objectively measurable behaviours, fitting a post-positivist paradigm, or as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms and individual perceptions, aligning with an interpretivist or constructivist stance (Jackson, 2005b). Institutional theory, often considered to possess socially constructivist leanings, highlights the importance of shared norms, beliefs, and rules in understanding social phenomena (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, institutional theory also accommodates more objectivist stances when analysing established institutions and their measurable impact.

Given this background, the overall philosophical stance guiding this research embraces pragmatism, allowing for methodological diversity to address how institutions shape sustainable consumption. This philosophical pluralism aligns with the structure of the

thesis, which incorporates conceptual, empirical, and practitioner-focused papers, fitting a pragmatic paradigm (Morgan, 2007).

In the conceptual paper, the philosophy leans towards objectivism, as it distils insights from a broad array of literature through the structured method of a systematic literature review (SLR). However, it diverges from strict positivism by incorporating elements of social constructivism. Specifically, the paper employs a configural synthesis approach, allowing for the interpretation and contextualisation of findings, thereby accommodating multiple viewpoints on sustainable consumption and institutional theory (Gough et al., 2012). Considering the mix of qualitative and quantitative academic articles forming the review's corpus, this approach acknowledges that qualitative evidence syntheses, "lie on an epistemological continuum between idealist and realist positions and can be positioned anywhere between the two extremes" (Macura et al., 2019, p. 3). By organising existing research, the study unites these fields, recognising that sustainable consumption and institutional theory are often considered in isolation.

The empirical paper follows a post-positivist philosophy, suitable for this study as it allows for empirical verification and interpretation of socially constructed realities (Ponterotto, 2005). While sharing a realist ontology with the conceptual paper, it places a stronger emphasis on empirical verification. The post-positivist orientation supports the use of quantitative methods to isolate and measure variables like trust and intention. Such an approach enables a more objective understanding of consumer behaviour in the SE but recognises the complexities of human interaction and the socially constructed nature of phenomena like trust and intention. While these constructs can be empirically examined, the research accepts that they are not entirely reducible to quantitative measurement. This approach offers an understanding of the institutional shaping of consumer behaviour, contributing to the field of sustainable consumption.

Unlike the conceptual and empirical papers, the practitioner paper's pragmatic philosophy focuses on the implications for businesses. The ontology is relativist, acknowledging that interpretations of sustainability vary, shaped by organisational culture and market focus. Epistemologically, it embraces pluralism, drawing on objective and constructivist standpoints, recognising the role of texts in constructing the social world (Fairclough, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). This approach emphasises tangible impacts and real-world applications.

3.2   Research strategy

The chosen research strategy serves as an operational blueprint, aligning with the study's overarching research question and its philosophical positioning. Tailored to the research question and data types, research strategies detail steps and techniques guiding the inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

For the conceptual paper, the methodological framework follows an SLR, adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009) and contemporary social sciences guidelines (Macura et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2021; Xiao & Watson, 2019). The methodology proceeds sequentially, starting with a protocol that ensures robust article selection and screening, which involves developing a review plan, specifying the parameters for conducting the SLR and aligning the scope with the research question.

The empirical paper quantitatively examines the effects of different institutional factors on consumer behaviour in the SE. Using a between-subjects experimental vignette methodology (EVM) (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), or factorial design experiment, this method allows for measurement and validation through covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) (Hair et al., 2010). Administered via an online cross-sectional survey, the EVM manipulates independent variables, such as institutional norms or rules, to gauge their influence on dependent variables like consumer intentions. This methodology is advantageous for isolating specific attributes of institutional variables that hold sway over consumer decision-making in the SE (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010).

The practitioner paper scrutinises how organisations engage in greenwashing or authentic sustainability efforts, focusing on their use of institutions to shape public and consumer perceptions. To this end, the methodological choices are designed to culminate in a conceptual model. To address this objective, the chapter employs a strategy combining qualitative content analysis with conceptual modelling, dissecting relationships between organisational actions and their implications for public perception (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

3.3   Data collection and quality

Data collection can be categorised as primary or secondary, providing the empirical building blocks of the study (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Primary data are gathered directly for the specific study at hand, supporting a constructivist view of reality where knowledge is actively co-constructed. The empirical paper uses primary data from survey respondents. Conversely, secondary data are existing data collected for another purpose but applied to the study in question, usable in post-positivist and constructivist frameworks, depending on the analytical lens applied (Fielding, 2004). Both the conceptual and practitioner papers use secondary data in the form of peer-reviewed academic journal articles and newspaper articles, respectively.

Social science research can be subjected to four criteria to determine the quality of the data, namely, construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability (Yin, 2003), which is defined, and applied to the three papers in Table 3.1. Further details on how the data were collected and quality assessed are described in §4.3 of the conceptual paper, §5.4 of the empirical paper and §6.5 of the practitioner paper.

Table 3.1: Evaluation of data quality criteria per paper

Quality criterion		Conceptual paper	Empirical paper	Practitioner paper
Construct validity "establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied" (Yin, 2003, p. 33)	Criteria	▪ Comprehensive literature review to ensure all relevant constructs are considered ▪ Clear definition of constructs based on existing literature	▪ Use of validated scales and measures ▪ Confirmatory factor analysis to test the construct validity of the measurement model	▪ Operational definitions of constructs ▪ Triangulation of data sources to ensure constructs are accurately captured
	Evaluation	▪ High – Clear definitions of key constructs: sustainable consumption and institutional theory – Systematic approach of inclusion of articles specifically discussing these constructs in the context of each other	▪ Moderate to high – Clear operationalisation of a structured survey instrument with a reflective measurement approach – Use of mostly validated measures – Comprehensive data validation procedures of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses	▪ High – Clear operationalisation of greenwashing and institutions (regulative, normative, cultural-cognitive) – Validated sources: Newspaper Source Premier, Financial Times – Triangulated media sources with lawsuit filings, company reports, and press releases
Internal validity "whether a conclusion that incorporates a causal relationship between two or more variables holds" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 42)	Criteria	▪ Rigorous inclusion/exclusion criteria for studies ▪ Critical appraisal of the quality of included studies	▪ Random assignment to control for confounding variables ▪ Use of control groups and manipulation checks	▪ Establishment of a clear case study protocol ▪ Detailed within-case and cross-case analysis to identify causal relationships
	Evaluation	▪ Moderate to high – Rigorous methodology, but potential exclusion of relevant studies acknowledged – Exclusion of grey literature and articles where keywords appeared out of context (e.g., alcoholism, drug use) – Two-tiered evaluation process to filter out irrelevant articles	▪ Moderate to high – Robust experimental design and rigorous data analysis (structural equations) – Multiple controls used throughout the survey, including initial qualifying questions – Screened responses for low engagement	▪ High – Robust case study methodology and data triangulation – Content analysis: Atlas.ti network view aided in identifying and visualising complex relationships

Quality criterion		Conceptual paper	Empirical paper	Practitioner paper
External validity "whether the results of a study can be generalized beyond the specific research context" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 43)	Criteria	▪ Synthesis of findings across multiple studies to enhance generalisability ▪ Consideration of the context in which studies were conducted	▪ Representative sampling ▪ Ensuring the study sample mirrors the population of interest	▪ Selection of diverse cases to enhance generalisability ▪ Examination of the transferability of findings across different contexts
	Evaluation	▪ Moderate – Comprehensive search strategy enhances generalisability, but focus on high-ranked journals might limit perspectives – Focus on articles from established, recognised databases: Scopus, Web of Science – Inclusion of journals featured in recognised rankings: Scopus, AJG 2021, ABDC 2019 – Exclusion of grey literature	▪ Moderate – Convenience sampling method and focus on a specific population limits generalisability	▪ Moderate – Limited to specific sectors and regions – Limited generalisability of framework – Snapshot-in-time nature of study limits applicability to evolving corporate strategies and regulations – Reputable sources known for their broad influence on public opinion and business practices
Reliability "demonstrating that the operations of a study… can be repeated, with the same results" Yin, 2003, p. 33)	Criteria	▪ Consistent methodology in selecting and reviewing studies ▪ Clear documentation of the review process	▪ Cronbach's alpha to assess the reliability of scales ▪ Test-retest reliability to ensure stability of results	▪ Detailed documentation of data collection and analysis procedures ▪ Use of inter-coder reliability to ensure consistency in thematic coding
	Evaluation	▪ High – Standardised protocols and detailed steps ensure replicability and accuracy	▪ Moderate to high – Consistent data collection ensuring mandatory Likert scale questions to prevent missing values – Thorough factor analysis, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability – Checks for multicollinearity and common method bias	▪ Moderate to high – Consistent data collection through standardised databases and reputable sources – Consistent application of qualitative content analysis methodology

Note. Source: Author's own.

3.4   Research approaches

Deductive or inductive research approaches reflect the methodological logic underpinning the study. Deductive reasoning aligns with positivist or post-positivist paradigms, starting with a theoretical framework or hypothesis and moving to empirical observation for confirmation or refutation. In contrast, inductive reasoning aligns with interpretivist or constructivist paradigms, prioritising the emergence of theory from the data and ascending to broader theories or generalisations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

The conceptual paper combines both approaches. Initially, the study inductively captures the richness of terms, themes, and patterns from the articles through content analysis and invivo coding as part of thematic synthesis (Macura et al., 2019). Induction leaves room for unforeseen insights, thereby enriching the SLR's analytical landscape (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). These insights inform the deductive stage, ensuring the synthesis and contextualisation of findings within existing scholarly frameworks (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This phase applies theoretical concepts to structure the data, using frameworks from Mont et al.'s (2022) 'improve, change, reduce' sustainable consumption model and Glynn and D'Aunno's (2023) sub-fields of institutional theory.

The empirical paper adopts a deductive post-positivist approach where a priori hypotheses focus on the role of institutions in shaping consumer behaviours within the SE (Haig, 2014; Ponterotto, 2005). This stance aligns with a contemporary philosophy of social science, advocating methodological pluralism and integrating empirical data with theoretical constructs (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2015). While post-positivism permits an empirical, hypothesis-driven approach, it acknowledges human complexity and variability, allowing for a nuanced understanding not constrained by deterministic laws (Shadish et al., 2002).

The practitioner paper, rooted in constructivist and pragmatic philosophies, explores how companies draw on institutions to construct their sustainability narratives. The study inductively starts with specific cases and gradually ascends to a general framework on sustainability communication. This pragmatic approach aligns with the chapter's objective to offer actionable insights for businesses (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

Overall, this research adopts a methodologically pluralistic framework, guided by a pragmatic philosophical approach. This choice accommodates both empirical rigour and interpretive depth, particularly relevant for navigating the complexities of sustainable consumption and institutional theory fields (Morgan, 2007).

3.5   Ethical considerations

The research across all papers conforms to the ethical guidelines of the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, substantiated by the ethical clearance approval (Figure 3.1).

The orientation of the conceptual paper predominantly conforms to deontological ethics, which emphasises duties, rules, and principles in research, which is exemplified by the structure and rigour in selecting and evaluating data through the PRISMA framework and journal quality rankings (Suri, 2020). However, relying on established quality rankings may inadvertently exclude minority or non-mainstream perspectives. This issue is particularly salient when considered from an ethics of care framework, which emphasises actionable knowledge gleaned through collaborative, participatory reviews (Suri, 2020). While the SLR did not explicitly adopt this ethical standpoint, its methodological rigour and attention to detail align closely with a deontological ethical approach.

The empirical paper adhered to a principlist approach, prioritising respect for research respondents, whereby participation was voluntary, necessitated acknowledgements of informed consent, and assured both confidentiality and anonymity (Wiles, 2013). To uphold confidentiality, specific measures were taken to protect participants' data. Any information gathered via the Qualtrics software was securely stored upon download. To maintain anonymity, the survey was designed so that participants' personal details remained unknown. Additionally, the 'Anonymize Response' feature in Qualtrics was activated to prevent collecting participants' internet protocol addresses and location data.

The practitioner paper makes use of news articles that were analysed through content analysis. Similar to the deontological ethical approach used in the conceptual paper, the practitioner paper undertook consistent steps in how the articles were sourced, filtered, sorted and analysed. These steps are outlined in the paper (§6.5).

Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

14 February 2023

Dear Avikaar

ETHICS APPLICATION: Avikaar Ramphal (Student number: 19405864)

Research Title: An institutional theory perspective on sustainable consumption

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.
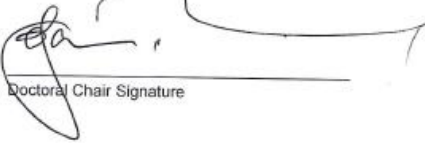
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

Please note that approval is granted based on the methodology and research instruments provided in the application. If there is any deviation change or addition to the research method or tools, a supplementary application for approval must be obtained

We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

Kind Regards

GIBS Doctoral Research Ethical Clearance Committee

Doctoral Chair Signature

Gordon Institute of Business Science
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University of Pretoria

Figure 3.1: Ethical clearance approval

4 Conceptual paper

HOW DO INSTITUTIONS SHAPE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

[1] HOW DO INSTITUTIONS....

LOW	MODERATE, VARIABLE	HIGH
←	**INSTITUTIONAL DEGREE OF STASIS**	→
INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND WORK ✓	INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS ✓	NEO-INSTITUTIONAL THEORY ✓

[2] ...SHAPE...

FACILITATE OR HINDER SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION	**IMPACT CONSUMERS' TRUST IN THE SHARING ECONOMY**	**(DE)LEGITIMATE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION**
CONCEPTUAL PAPER ✓	EMPIRICAL PAPER	PRACTITIONER PAPER

[3] ...SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
←	**STRENGTH OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION**	→
IMPROVE ✓	CHANGE ✓	REDUCE ✓

Key: ✓ *Focus of this chapter*

26
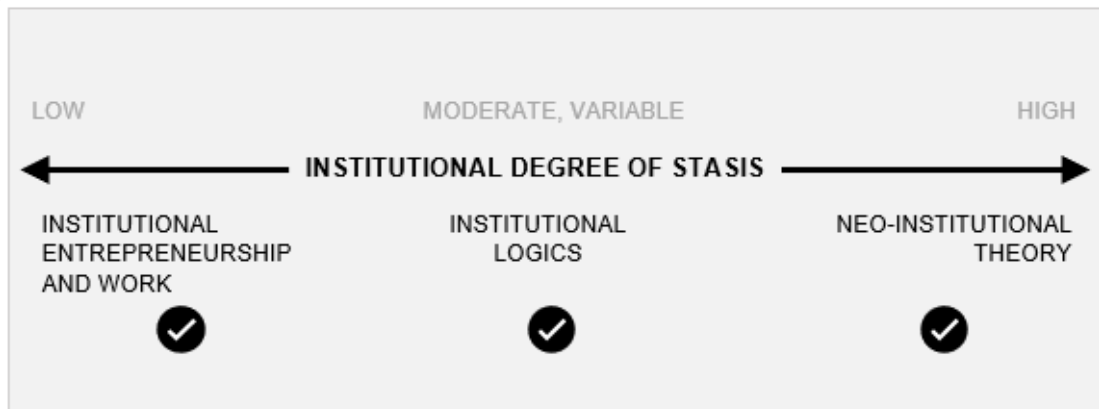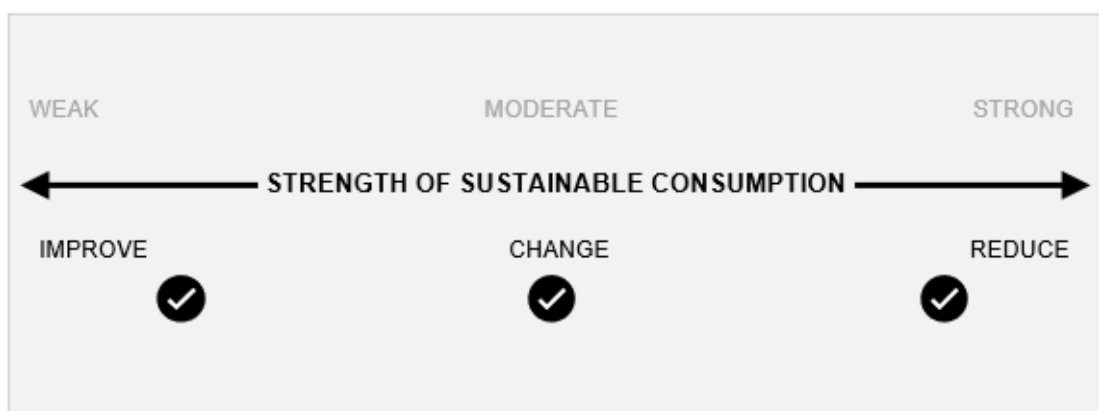
4.1   What this chapter does

4.1.1   Objectives

The chapter synthesises existing literature on sustainable consumption and institutional theory, developing a framework for future research. It addresses the research question: How do institutions facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption? The chapter explores how institutional theory can deepen an understanding of sustainable consumption.

4.1.2   Link to sustainable consumption

This chapter foregrounds the sustainable consumption continuum introduced earlier (§2.1, Figure 2.1). Through a systematic literature review, various manifestations of sustainable consumption are plotted along the continuum's improve, change, and reduce strategies, which are highlighted on the prior cover page.

4.1.3   Link to institutional theory

The chapter also incorporates the institutional degree of stasis (§2.2, Figure 2.2). It covers articles discussing sustainable consumption within the subfields of institutional theory: neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work. These subfields are highlighted on the prior cover page.

4.1.4   Target journal

The chapter targets the International Journal of Management Reviews (IJMR), ranked 3 by the AJG and A by the ABDC, chosen for its openness to interdisciplinarity and specialisation in review papers. Editors call for more interdisciplinary research to address "complex problems and research questions posed by current global social, economic, ecological and political challenges" (Breslin et al., 2020, p. 5). This directive resonates with the research question, exploring the intersection of sustainable consumption – a normative field addressing complex problems – and institutional theory, a framework traditionally associated with management and organisational studies.

IJMR emphasise conceptual and theoretical contributions, such as "a framework including the concept's dimensions" (Alegre et al., 2023, p. 5). This paper enriches the sustainable consumption literature by developing a 3x3 framework that integrates three core sustainable consumption strategies (improve, change, and reduce) with three sub-fields of institutional theory (neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, institutional entrepreneurship and work).

Title: Unravelling the sustainable consumption puzzle through institutional theory

Abstract

Consuming sustainably is like solving a puzzle, where strategies towards minimising the detrimental impacts of consumption-as-usual serve as puzzle pieces that need to be fitted together. These strategies range from 'improving' consumption by choosing more eco-friendly produced goods, 'changing' consumption by departing from traditional business models and exploring alternative less resource-intensive modalities, and 'reducing' consumption by consuming less overall in absolute terms. However, achieving sustainable consumption is complicated by deeply ingrained institutional frameworks that govern daily life. Institutional theory offers insights into how sustainable consumption can be understood, through its three sub-fields of neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work. However, our puzzle remains incomplete, as strategies to reduce consumption in line with institutional theory through non-conventional methods, remain underdeveloped. This study underscores the significance of institutional theory in sustainable consumption through a systematic literature review of one hundred and twelve scholarly articles. The resultant conceptual framework elucidates the institutional forces that facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption and paves the way for future research.

Keywords

Authors

Avikaar Ramphal, Morris Mthombeni, Kerry Chipp

4.2 Introduction

Since consumption-as-usual is harming planet Earth and its people (Ivanova et al., 2016; Soper, 2017), sustainable consumption research is traversing fields and disciplines to transform how we consume (Lorek & Vergragt, 2015; McCormick et al., 2016). Three decades of sustainable consumption research have illuminated a multitude of disciplinary lenses through which the field can be interpreted, theorised and measured (Y. Liu et al., 2017; Middlemiss, 2018; Mont, 2019). While sustainable consumption research varies based on the ideological and disciplinary orientations of researchers and journals, one of the nascent themes is the role of institutional theory. As scholars navigate the field, the role of institutions in sustainable consumption is important (Anantharaman, 2018; Mont, 2019), but the literature is unclear on what it says about institutions and sustainable consumption. While some scholars suggest that institutions have the potential to act as catalysts for transforming consumption patterns towards sustainability (e.g., Jackson, 2017; Soneryd & Uggla, 2015), others point to limitations of its rigidity and challenges of institutional change (e.g., Mont & Plepys, 2008; Vergragt et al., 2014). To move forward in this area of inquiry, we need to engage in a more holistic and interdisciplinary dialogue that takes into account the complex interactions between institutions, individuals, and broader social and environmental contexts.

Sustainable consumption offers a reprieve by improving consumption, such as opting for eco-friendly products; changing consumption habits and modalities through accessing assets rather than owning them, and reducing the extent and quantity of what is consumed (Mont, 2019; Mont et al., 2022). As researchers seek to solve for sustainable consumption, the field continues to attract multiple disciplines and leverage points, either through individualistic (K. White et al., 2019) or institutional (Lorek & Spangenberg, 2014) approaches. For example, the former approaches the topic through marketing green products and behaviour shifts (Schaefer & Crane, 2005), while the latter strives for decoupling consumption from resource use (O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015) and more fundamental societal shifts (Davies et al., 2020). Given the diversity in approaches, "academics, activists, and policymakers now agree that sustainability…must consider the role of culture, institutions, and individual behaviors" (Anantharaman, 2018, p. 554) and "future research can make use of several theories from a variety of disciplines, such as …, *institutional theory* [emphasis added], …when studying governance and institutionalization processes of new consumption and business models, practices and transformations" (Mont, 2019, p. 10). As such, institutional theory offers a useful framework for understanding the institutionalisation processes and governance

structures that underlie sustainable consumption for developing more comprehensive insights into the drivers of sustainable consumption.

Institutional theory is an incredibly wide field, but as the review paper by Glynn and D'Aunno (2023) demonstrates, the literature can be divided into three sub-fields: neo-institutional theory focusing on homogeneity; institutional logics on the conditions for conformity and change; and institutional entrepreneurship and work on agency and changing institutions. All three sub-fields have in fact been utilised in the sustainable consumption literature: from a neo-institutional theory perspective, how institutions enable or constrain behaving sustainably (e.g., Humphreys, 2014; Mont, 2004; Yang et al., 2021); the combination of institutional logics necessary for sustainable consumption to become mainstream (e.g., Egan, 2014; Grinevich et al., 2019; Papaoikonomou & Valor, 2017); and how actors leverage institutional entrepreneurship and work to change prevailing institutions to make consumption more sustainable (e.g., Hopkinson & Cronin, 2015; Mylan, 2017; Närvänen et al., 2021). Although the literature already applies institutional theory to sustainable consumption, a comprehensive review is still needed. Such a review would leverage insights from institutional theory sub-fields to enhance our understanding of sustainable consumption dynamics. A review of this nature would offer sustainable consumption scholars a helpful framework to direct their future research on sustainable consumption from an institutional perspective.

This paper synthesises and brings coherence to the intersecting fields of sustainable consumption and institutional theory. Using a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed academic articles, we followed established protocols to identify and analyse research on the relationship between sustainable consumption and institutional theory to elucidate how institutions facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption.

Sustainable consumption can be envisioned as a puzzle, where different pieces of institutional theory and sustainable consumption strategies must interlock to form a comprehensive understanding of the field. Our review sheds light on how institutions can either enable or impede sustainable consumption behaviours and contributes to a multi-faceted understanding of the complex relationship between individual behaviour, institutional structures, and broader social and environmental contexts.

We construct an organising framework with two axes for interpreting our findings. The first axis denotes the strength of sustainable consumption comprising three strategies ranging from weak, to moderate and strong sustainable consumption (improving consumption, changing consumption, and reducing consumption, respectively). Our

second axis captures the degree of stasis within institutional theory ranging from low, to moderate and high stasis (institutional entrepreneurship and work, institutional logics, and neo-institutional theory, respectively). The resultant three-by-three matrix highlights that strategies for realising sustainable consumption must take into account the degree of stasis conferred by prevailing institutional forces, which can either enable or constrain the advancement of sustainable consumption. The puzzle of reducing consumption in line with institutional theory is still incomplete, with some of its pieces missing. While various sustainable consumption strategies have been proposed and implemented, research remains limited on non-conventional approaches through institutional theory that could offer more effective and long-lasting changes.

We contribute to the sustainable consumption literature by applying institutional theory as a comprehensive framework to examine how its various sub-fields elucidate distinct strategies for promoting sustainable consumption. In doing so, we provide a roadmap for scholars to advance sustainable consumption research through the different sub-fields of institutional theory.

In systematising the intersection of sustainable consumption and institutional theory, we first provide background on institutional theory and its relevance to sustainable consumption (§4.3). Second, we outline how we obtained and analysed the articles that inform our review (§4.4). Third, we organise our review through a conceptual framework that classifies the strength of sustainable consumption along with the degree of stasis of institutional theory, wherein we unpack the main tensions emanating from extant literature to provide future research opportunities (§4.5). The paper concludes with the salience of the research, its limitations, and paradigmatic implications (§4.6). An appendix supplements this paper, including the search string, the sample of articles constituting this review, and a coding table with themes and supporting quotes identified during the qualitative analysis (§4.7).

4.3   The value of institutional theory in examining sustainable consumption

As the urgency of addressing sustainability challenges intensifies, the field of sustainable consumption must continue to evolve and refine its theoretical underpinnings. Institutional theory, which examines the processes by which social structures, rules, and norms emerge, persist, and transform (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023), offers an important lens for understanding and driving sustainable consumption patterns. Surveying the institutional theory literature reveals a broad field examining relationships between institutions and society, having evolved from early and new institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) to incorporate change (Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) and logics (Thornton et al., 2012). We therefore deem it necessary to introduce key sub-fields of institutional theory (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023), specifically neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work, to demonstrate their relevance for advancing sustainable consumption research.

Under neo-institutional theory, institutions, described as semi-permanent societal fixtures (Lammers & Barbour, 2006), legitimise behaviours (Suchman, 1995) through formal and informal rules (North et al., 2009), across regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars (Scott, 2014) to both constrain and enable behaviour. The regulatory pillar encompasses formal rules, laws, and sanctions that govern organisational conduct; the normative pillar comprises informal norms, values, and expectations that shape social behaviour; whereas the cultural-cognitive pillar reflects shared beliefs, mental models, and taken-for-granted assumptions that guide organisational action (Scott, 2014). Neo-institutional theory posits that organisations and individuals respond to pressures from their institutional environment, adopting practices and structures that enhance their legitimacy and increase the chance of survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Neo-institutional theory also addresses isomorphism, which refers to the process by which organisations within a field become more alike in reaction to institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Isomorphism manifests in three forms: coercive, resulting from regulatory pressures; normative, arising from professional and normative expectations; and mimetic, driven by the imitation of successful peers (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). By applying neo-institutional theory to sustainable consumption, researchers can examine how institutional forces influence consumption patterns and market practices, and how businesses adapt to meet sustainability

demands (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thus, neo-institutional theory provides a robust framework for investigating how institutions contribute to or inhibit the adoption of sustainable consumption practices across various contexts (Greenwood et al., 2008).

Institutional logics extend neo-institutional theory by explicating the underlying belief systems that drive organisational decision-making and action (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). An institutional logic unifies institutions based on norms and rules aimed at specific goals within a group or society, with alignment rooted in fundamental values accepted by actors, ensuring consistency across normative, regulative, and cognitive dimensions (Edvardsson et al., 2014). Institutional logics highlight the multiplicity and heterogeneity of institutional forces and their influence on shaping individual and organisational action (Thornton et al., 2012). Central to this perspective is the notion that actors are influenced by multiple, sometimes competing, sets of norms and values, known as logics, which create tensions and opportunities for change (Thornton et al., 2012). These logics can emanate from various sources, such as market, state, community (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012), and recently, the environment (Gümüsay et al., 2020), each with its own set of guiding principles and assumptions. By examining the interplay of logics, this perspective affords researchers to analyse how societal and institutional contexts create conditions for conformity and change (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008), and uncovers the sources of contradictions, conflicts, and synergies that shape how sustainable consumption practices are promoted and adopted (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). In the context of sustainable consumption, examining competing logics (e.g., consumerism versus sustainability) can provide insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting more sustainable consumption practices. Consequently, institutional logics offer a nuanced lens for analysing the complexities and contingencies involved in the pursuit of sustainable consumption. Furthermore, institutional logics can reveal how different actors reconcile conflicting logics, leading to innovative solutions and new market trends (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Edvardsson et al., 2014).

Finally, institutional entrepreneurship and work focuses on the role of individuals and organisations in instigating and implementing institutional change. Institutional entrepreneurs are actors who possess the agency and resources to challenge and transform prevailing institutions (Battilana et al., 2009), while institutional work encompasses the strategic actions they undertake to create, maintain, or disrupt institutional arrangements (Lawrence et al., 2009). Creating, maintaining, and disrupting work refer respectively to the actions that establish or transform institutions; support or

strengthen existing arrangements; and weaken, dismantle, or alter institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This categorisation helps to understand the diverse strategies and mechanisms employed by different actors in challenging existing norms, creating new market practices, and advocating for regulatory shifts in the context of sustainable consumption (Pacheco et al., 2010; Wijen & Ansari, 2007). Institutional entrepreneurship and work helps to uncover how these actors navigate the complex interplay of institutional forces, overcome resistance, and facilitate the emergence and diffusion of sustainable consumption practices across various contexts (Garud et al., 2007; Tracey et al., 2011). In doing so, institutional entrepreneurship and work contributes to an agentic understanding of the processes and factors that enable or inhibit the adoption and institutionalisation of sustainable consumption practices, ultimately informing the development of more effective and context-sensitive interventions (Battilana et al., 2009; Pacheco et al., 2010).

Though originating in the fields of management and organisational studies, institutional theory has proven valuable for enhancing the marketing field. This includes examining the social dimension of marketing actions (Handelman & Arnold, 1999), evaluating how firms gain legitimacy through sustainability initiatives (Connelly et al., 2011), and exploring the emulation of industry benchmarks in marketing practices (Ketchen & Hult, 2011). And, on the consumer side, institutional theory has helped examine how consumers adapt to or shape institutional demands (Slimane et al., 2019), trust industry practices after branding disasters (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014), and legitimate alternative markets of casino gambling (Humphreys, 2010) and plus-size fashion (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). The close relationship between marketing and consumption behaviours can be evidenced by the shared focus on understanding the role of institutions, norms, and values in shaping consumer choices and preferences (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Luchs et al., 2010). Given this connection, exploring the application of institutional theory to sustainable consumption becomes necessary. However, a comprehensive understanding of sustainable consumption within the context of institutional theory is yet to be fully achieved. This gap in understanding persists even with the recent increase in sustainable consumption literature reviews (e.g., Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020; Sesini et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020).

Building on the application of institutional theory to marketing and the ongoing quest for understanding sustainable consumption, we strive to illuminate how institutions can be changed or reconfigured to promote a more sustainable way of living (Boström, 2020; Chaney et al., 2016; Scott, 2014). This line of inquiry aligns with the research invitations

proposed by Anantharaman (2018) and Mont (2019), which call for a deeper understanding of how institutions can advance or hinder sustainable consumption, given its embeddedness in daily life.

4.4   Methodology

This present study takes on a systematic approach to fully realise the potential of merging the sustainable consumption and institutional theory fields.

4.4.1   Planning the review and searching the literature

As an integrative theory-based review (Paul et al., 2021), we chart how institutional theory has been applied to the sustainable consumption domain and answer what is currently known about this nexus, and where the research needs to be directed. Although originating in the medical sciences, the PRISMA framework (Moher et al., 2009) has been leveraged in combination with recent guidance from the social sciences (Paul et al., 2021; Xiao & Watson, 2019) to develop a nine-step protocol (Figure 4.1) for conducting the review.

We searched the *Scopus* and *Web of Science* databases for only English academic articles with no date limitation. The search string (Appendix, Table A4.1) used in the database search included keywords from other sustainable consumption reviews and key terms from institutional theory literature. Applying the search string to the articles' titles, abstracts, and keywords resulted in 3353 records for further filtering.

Planning the review

1 Problem formulation

Domain

Sustainable consumption (SC) ∩ Institutional theory (IT)

Focus of this review: SC ∩ IT

Research question

- What do we know/not know about how IT enables/hinders SC?
  - What are the main themes of IT that are researched with SC?
  - How do the major sub-fields of IT shape SC?

Source type and quality

- Academic journal articles
- Ranked in at least
  - Scopus, or
  - AJG 2021, or
  - ABDC 2019

Searching the literature

2 Literature acquisition

Material acquisition

Clarivate Web of Science • Scopus

Search period

- No restriction

Search keywords

- Boolean terms
- See Table in appendix

3 Identification

# of records identified through database searching, n = 3353

# of duplicates removed, n = 1355

Filtering the results

4 Screening

# of records screened (title and abstracts), n = 1998

# of records excluded, n = 1718

- Book / book review / chapter, n = 22
- Conference proceedings, n = 147
- Editorial, n = 9
- Erratum, n = 3
- False positive, n = 1537

5 Eligibility

# of full-text articles assessed for eligibility, n = 280

# of records excluded, n = 187

- Journal not rated on Scopus, AJG, ABDC, n = 6
- Limited discussion of SC, n = 140
- Limited discussion of IT, n = 41

6 Inclusion

# of articles included, n = 93

# of records added, n = 19

- Backward searching, n = 3
- Identified from other sources, n = 16

Final sample, n = 112

Reporting the results

7 Data extraction

- Organising codes: Descriptive article-level categories (e.g., contextual information)
- Organising frameworks: Strength of sustainable consumption, sub-fields of institutional theory

8 Evaluation

- Analysis method: Content analysis
- Agenda proposal method: Synthesising tensions and contradictions from extant research

9 Reporting

- Reporting conventions: Summary figures and tables in main text and supporting online information
- Limitations: Keywords, databases, only academic articles
- Sources of funding: None

Figure 4.1: Review procedure

Note. Source: Authors' own.

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4.4.2 Filtering the results

After 1355 duplicates were deleted, the titles and abstracts of 1998 research items were screened to exclude 181 grey sources and 1537 false positives. False positives reflected keywords, but in a context out of scope, of which 127 included negative consumption contexts, such as alcoholism and drug use. Screening the titles and abstracts and excluding non-journal articles resulted in 280 articles for further assessment. The journal of the article had to be ranked in at least Scopus, the 2021 Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide (AJG) or the 2019 Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List, otherwise it was excluded. As the last filter, articles had to have a sustainable consumption focus being discussed under at least one of the different sub-fields of institutional theory. The final number of 112 articles constituting this review are in Table A4.2 of the appendix.

4.4.3 Reporting the results

We approached the corpus of articles through content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and coded the articles in a spreadsheet with a detailed coding scheme (Appendix, Table A4.3), specifically, each article's citation information, research methods, contextual information, the type of sustainable consumption, and institutional theory sub-fields.

Our first round of coding captured the diversity of terminology addressing the sustainable consumption phenomenon as part of the research in each article through exploratory in vivo coding (Appendix, Table A4.4). Figure 4.2 depicts how we then elevated these first-order codes into second-order themes and ultimately fitted these into Mont et al.'s (2022) improve, change, and reduce sustainable consumption strategies. So, while the approach was initially inductive, our last iteration was deductive as we sought to use theoretical concepts from literature, that is, from Mont et al. (2022), to articulate a more parsimonious conceptualisation of the literature. Similarly, we categorised all aspects of institutional theory being researched in the articles and then deductively fitted these into Glynn and D'Aunno's (2023) three sub-fields.

Research was scant under the reduce strategy, with only four studies on sufficiency, and five studies on alternative economic models. We then revisited the databases to search for these concepts. However, since these sub-categories of sustainable consumption did not explicitly use institutional theory, we were unable to find articles that examined the nexus of institutional theory and the reduce strategy. Therefore, we assessed articles on sufficiency and alternative economic models more broadly to determine if associations

with institutions were being discussed implicitly. Furthermore, some of the journals for these topics did not meet our quality criteria, for example, the International Journal of Community Currency Research, which covers alternative economic models, does not feature on Scopus, AJG nor ABDC.
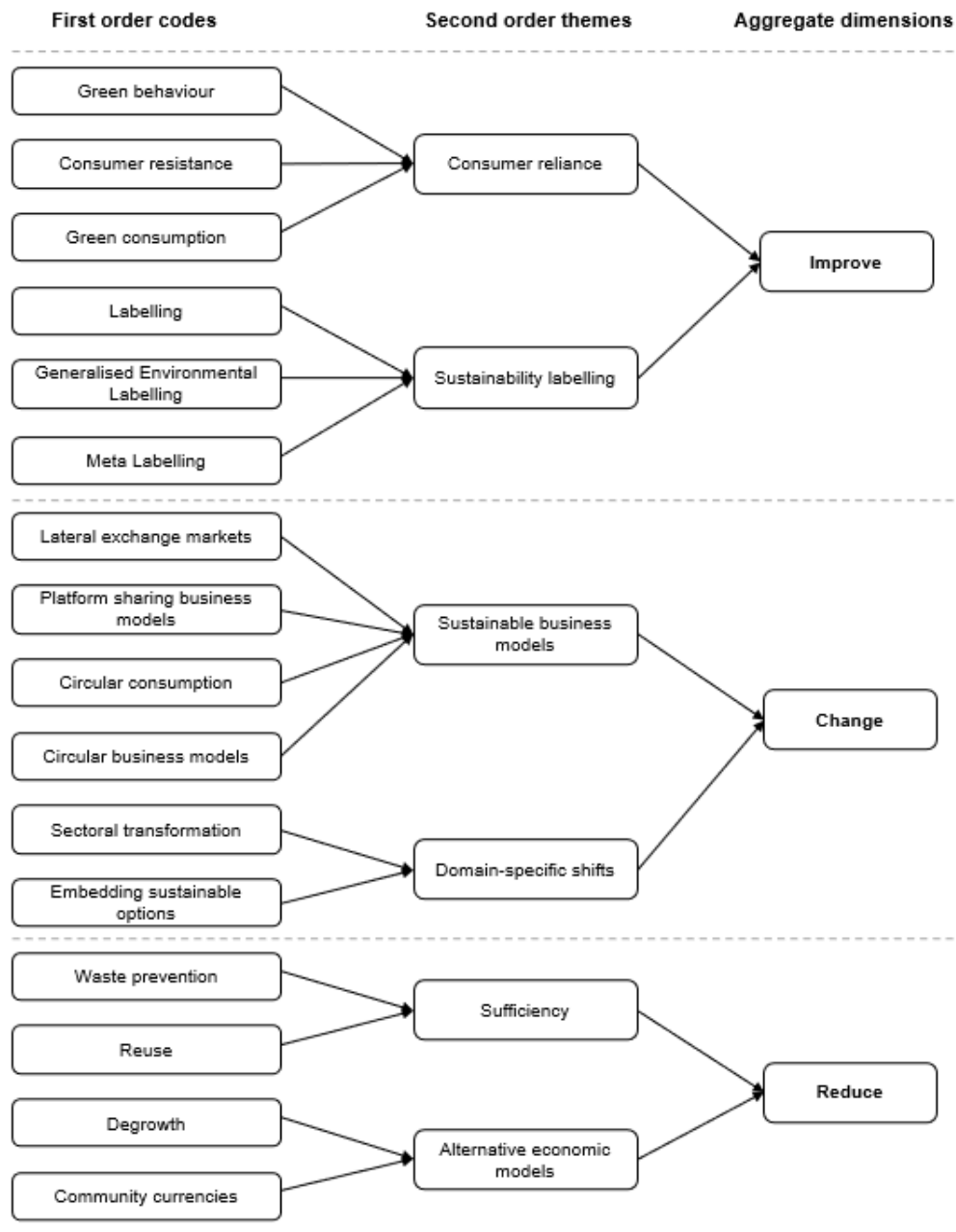
Figure 4.2: Coding tree for sustainable consumption

Note. Source: Authors' own.

4.5   Putting the puzzle pieces together

To fully unravel the applicability of institutional theory to sustainable consumption, we introduce an organising framework that delves deeper into the complexities of these research areas. This framework consists of two integral components, which are discussed below, namely, the (1) sustainable consumption continuum, and (2) degree of stasis in institutional theory. Our resultant framework (Figure 4.5) yields nine intersections of sustainable consumption and institutional theory. For each of the nine intersections, we surface the main tensions from extant research in suggesting future research opportunities.

4.5.1   Strength of sustainable consumption

In synthesising how researchers conceptualise sustainable consumption strategies, Mont (2019) and Mont et al. (2022) distilled three strategies to realise sustainable consumption: to *improve* means using resources efficiently by opting for eco-friendly products; to *change* means consuming differently from consumption-as-usual by departing from traditional business models and exploring alternative modalities; and to *reduce* means a more radical shift towards consuming less overall. However, these three strategies do not necessarily represent equal contributions to sustainable consumption efforts.

To complement these categories, we apply the notion of the strength of sustainable consumption (O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015), which allows for a more layered understanding of the potential impact of each strategy and compartmentalises our findings along a spectrum of weak, moderate, and strong forms of sustainable consumption strategies. Thus, moving from left to right on the sustainable consumption continuum (Figure 4.3), the improve strategies represent a weaker form of sustainability, relying on individual responsibility, whereas reduce strategies represent a stronger form of sustainability, requiring systemic change (O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015). Weak approaches do not critique capitalist production-consumption systems, while strong approaches argue for alternatives beyond economic growth (Lorek & Fuchs, 2013).

Strength of sustainable consumption

Weak | Moderate | Strong

Improve | **Change** | **Reduce**
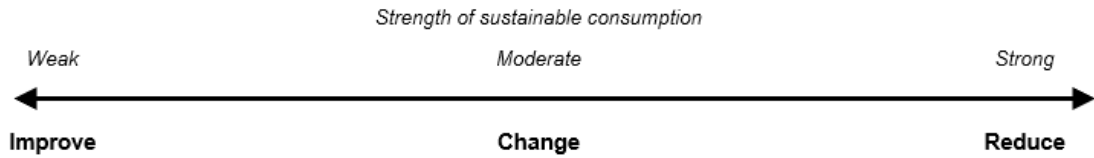
Figure 4.3: Sustainable consumption continuum

Note. Source: Authors' own.

The terms 'weak' and 'strong' refer to the potential impact and effectiveness of sustainable consumption strategies; however, they also represent inherent assumptions on accumulation and political-economic questions (Lorek & Fuchs, 2013). Some scholars perceive these strategies to represent an aspirational shift away from the challenges of consumption-as-usual (Lorek & Vergragt, 2015) because "knowledge harvested from both ends of the consumption continuum (i.e. for and against sustainable consumption) would increase understanding of consumers toward greater sustainability." (Lim, 2017, p. 78).

As illustrated earlier in Figure 4.2, we drew inspiration from Mont et al.'s (2022) sustainable consumption taxonomy. Figure 4.4 now categorises our analysis into six sub-categories, which contribute to the three overarching improve, change, and reduce strategies.

Strength of sustainable consumption

Weak | Moderate | Strong

Improve | **Change** | **Reduce**

Consumer reliance | Sustainable business models | Sufficiency

Sustainability labelling | Domain-specific shifts | Alternative economic models
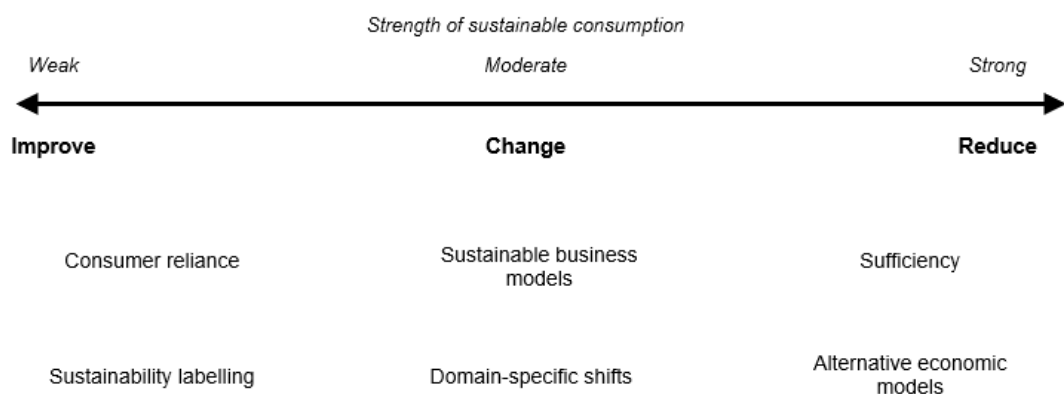
Figure 4.4: Sustainable consumption continuum with sub-categories

Note. Source: Authors' own. Sub-categories based on authors' grouping of articles.

The improve strategy includes the sub-categories of consumer reliance and sustainability labelling, as they represent actions that focus on improving the sustainability of consumption through more efficient use of resources and eco-friendly products. Studies in these sub-categories had a central theme of consumer choice, highlighting how consumers have the power to select environmentally sustainable products and consume in a mindful, ethical, and responsible manner. The studies were classified into consumer reliance (n=16); and sustainability labelling (n=7). Consumer reliance denotes the responsibility placed on consumers to choose eco-friendly products over ones produced unsustainably, and sustainability labelling encompasses the governing mechanisms of labels and certifications which verify the sustainability standards of the products that consumers are expected to purchase. Taken together, these sub-categories represent a dependence on micro-level actions to uphold sustainable consumption and may not necessarily address the root causes of unsustainable consumption.

The change strategy involves shifting to sustainable business models, exemplified by the sharing and circular economies, as well as new modes of consumption – these represent a departure from traditional ownership models, closing resource loops, and substitutions towards sustainable alternatives. Studies under this strategy centred on consuming differently, through sharing (n=25) and circular (n=15) economy business models, and domain-specific transitions (n=21). The change strategy tends to incorporate innovative approaches that reconceptualises traditional ownership and linear business models, and shifts sectors to less resource intensive production and consumption. Here, domain-specific transitions encompass shifting from resource-intensive modalities that rely on carbon-based fuels to renewable or less carbon-intensive sources. While this strategy holds promise, it tends to rely on meso-level interventions and may require substantial systemic change to be implemented at scale.

Sufficiency (n=2) and alternative economic model (n=5) sub-categories form part of the reduce strategy, which differ from the eco-modernist worldview of the improve and change strategies. Sufficiency supports lower consumption levels overall, through lifestyles such as minimalism, voluntary simplicity, and frugality. These lifestyles tend to prioritise experiences over material possessions and encourage individuals to live within their means while minimising their environmental footprint. However, such lifestyles may not be accessible or desirable for all individuals, and reducing consumption levels may not be enough to address the institutionalisation of unsustainable consumption. New economic models such as degrowth prioritise sustainability and well-being over

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economic growth, challenging the dominant market paradigm. Community currencies, such as time banks and local exchange trading systems (LETS), are examples of such models. These models represent a more systemic and transformative approach to sustainable consumption, which seeks to fundamentally shift the current patterns of production and consumption that drive ecological degradation and social inequality. However, the implementation of such approaches may face resistance in societies where economic growth is closely tied to notions of progress and prosperity.

Overall, sustainable consumption will require a combination of individual, societal, and systemic changes to be achieved. While each strategy has its own strengths and limitations, a comprehensive approach will be necessary to address the ingrained issues at the heart of unsustainable consumption.

4.5.2 Degree of stasis: Institutional theory sub-fields

While neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work all contribute to our understanding of institutional dynamics, they differ in the degree to which they emphasise stasis versus change (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023). Neo-institutional theory primarily explains stability and has a high degree of stasis, as it focuses on how institutions constrain and enable behaviour, thereby perpetuating established norms and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014). Institutional logics, however, offers a more balanced perspective on stasis and change by capturing the intricate interplay between stability and change by emphasising the contextual factors, actor agency, and strategic choices that shape the outcomes of institutional processes (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). This approach recognises the multiplicity and heterogeneity of institutional forces, acknowledging that actors often operate within a web of intersecting and sometimes competing logics, leading to both stability and change within institutional contexts. Lastly, institutional entrepreneurship and work has a low degree of stasis and highlights the transformative potential of individuals and organisations in instigating and implementing institutional change (Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009). By focusing on the agency of institutional entrepreneurs and their strategic actions, institutional entrepreneurship and work accentuates the processes that drive institutional change, thereby offering a more dynamic view of the interplay between stasis and transformation. Table 4.1 compares each sub-field, illustrating the differences and similarities among neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work with the degree of stasis.

Table 4.1: Institutional theory sub-fields

Institutional theory sub-fields	Degree of stasis	Characteristics
Neo-institutional theory	High	▪ Focus on institutions as constraining and enabling factors ▪ Emphasises stability and adherence to norms within institutional contexts
Institutional logics	Moderate, variable	▪ Accounts for both stability and change, recognising the multiplicity of forces compared to the high stability in neo-institutional theory and change-driven focus in institutional entrepreneurship and work ▪ Emphasises contextual factors, actor agency, and strategic choices leading to variable stasis
Institutional entrepreneurship and work	Low	▪ Emphasis on the agency of individuals and organisations ▪ Accentuates institutional change and transformative potential

Note. Adapted from "An Intellectual History of Institutional Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward," by M.A. Glynn, and T. D'Aunno, 2023, *Academy of Management Annals*, *17*(1), p. 301-330 (https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2020.0341). Copyright 2023 by Academy of Management.

4.5.3 An organising framework of sustainable consumption and institutional theory

Building on the previous two sub-sections, we construct an organising framework (Figure 4.5) that incorporates our insights of sustainable consumption sub-categories into sustainable consumption strategies (Mont et al., 2022) and the strength of sustainable consumption (O'Rourke & Lollo, 2015), alongside the degrees of stasis of institutional theory sub-fields (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023). Specifically, on the vertical axis, our framework distinguishes between low, moderate, and high degrees of stasis to depict institutional entrepreneurship and work, institutional logics, and neo-institutional theory, respectively. By employing institutional theory as a prism, we illuminate how its multifaceted sub-fields clarify improve, change, and reduce strategies of sustainable consumption reflected on the horizontal axis.

Consumer reliance, sustainability labelling   *Sustainable business models, domain-specific shifts*   *Sufficiency, alternative economic models*

	Consumer reliance, sustainability labelling	Sustainable business models, domain-specific shifts	Sufficiency, alternative economic models
Neo-institutional theory (High)	**1** — **Conformity** Sustainable consumption within the iron cage Greenwashing: Separating symbolism from substance	**4** — **Contrast** Liability of being different: Legitimising sustainable business models	**7** — **Convergence** Integrating environmental and social systems
Institutional logics (Moderate, variable)	**2** — **Contradiction** Primacy and paradox of market logics: Promoting sustainability under competing logics	**5** — **Coexistence** Navigating competing logics for legitimacy and scale	**8** — **Conversion** Shifting from market to social-ecological logics
Institutional entrepreneurship and work (Low)	**3** — **Capacitation** Power imbalances: Empowering agency beyond incremental change	**6** — **Contestation** Active proponents and opponents: Surmounting vested interests	**9** — **Community** Overcoming resistance and fostering grassroots support

Degree of stasis (High → Moderate, variable → Low)

Improve   **Change**   **Reduce**

Weak   *Moderate*   *Strong*

Strength of sustainable consumption

Figure 4.5: Organising framework of tensions to be resolved from extant research

Note. Source: Authors' own. Numbers denote the corresponding sub-sections discussed below. Sub-categories of improve, change, and reduce strategies are listed above each column for ease of reference.

Our categorisation is particularly apt, as our goal is to examine the mechanisms that drive the evolution of sustainable consumption strategies. By grasping the factors that both preserve and transform existing equilibria, we gain deeper insights into this complex phenomenon. Through this organising framework we now report on areas of agreement and dispute in the extant research and highlight tensions which serve as springboards for future research by focusing on sustainable consumption strategies aimed at improving, changing, or reducing consumption, under which the respective institutional theory sub-field intersections are discussed.

1 Conformity: Improving consumption through neo-institutional theory

Within the realm of neo-institutional theory, two tensions emerged that demonstrate the challenges of effectively harnessing the institutional environment in shaping sustainable consumption, particularly due to the high degree of stasis inherent in neo-institutional theory: the 'iron cage' perpetuating the consumption-as-usual status quo, and isomorphism leading to greenwashing.

Sustainable consumption within the iron cage

The institutional context within neo-institutional theory creates an 'iron cage' that perpetuates the status quo of consumption-as-usual and impedes advances towards sustainable consumption. Research continues to highlight the green gap whereby consumers' intentions to be sustainable do not align with their actions, despite their intentions toward green products being positively influenced by regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive institutions (Martinez et al., 2015), the negligible influence of certain regulative institutions (Sreen et al., 2021), country-specific normative and cultural-cognitive institutions (Yang et al., 2021), and injunctive norms (Pristl et al., 2021; Sreen et al., 2021). These studies highlight that institutional context matters in shaping how sustainable consumption is enabled or constrained. This entrenchment, explained by the high stasis in neo-institutional theory, constrains the capacity for institutions to adapt and evolve, hindering the widespread adoption of more sustainable practices.

To address the above challenge, we therefore propose that future research could examine how prevailing institutions legitimise unsustainable consumption and how sustainable consumption alternatives can co-exist with the dominant institutions. In other words, how can sustainable consumption blend in with prevailing institutions, while

standing out by consuming more sustainably? Given the high degree of stasis afforded by prevailing institutions that perpetuate the consumption-as-usual status quo, how can interactions with such prevailing institutions be reimagined to foster consumption that is sustainable? By incorporating sustainable practices into mainstream consumer culture, can sustainable consumption be achieved through promoting sustainable offerings as desirable, fashionable, and high-quality alternatives to traditional options?

Additionally, research could examine how the developing world may have different needs when it comes to consumption, and how this may require new approaches to promoting sustainable consumption. For instance, research could investigate how cultural norms and values shape consumption practices in different contexts, and explore how sustainable consumption can be integrated with local customs and traditions to promote more effective and culturally relevant solutions.

Greenwashing: Separating symbolism from substance

The prevalence of isomorphism, or the homogenisation of practices, poses the risk of greenwashing, where companies claim environmental benefits without making substantive changes to their production or supply chains. The responsibility of sustainability has been shifted to the consumer realm, whereby consumers "supporting companies who have sound environmental practices" (p. 275) confer legitimacy to such firms (Humphreys, 2014). Consumers trust, support, and purchase from firms that are perceived to have legitimate sustainable practices (Wang & He, 2022), which are also contingent on the institutional pressures faced by the firms (Yao et al., 2021). Consequently, consumers may inadvertently contribute to increased overall resource consumption under the guise of sustainable choices.

Classifying products complying with sustainability credentials helps consumers verify that their consumption thereof is sustainable. Under institutional pressures, several transnational rule-making organisations have emerged to govern the sustainable consumption of fish, timber, organic farming, and fair trade, among others (Dingwerth & Pattberg, 2009). But, while brands may communicate to consumers to choose greener products, the regulative nature of such brand credentials imposes isomorphic pressures on producers that do not necessarily enable a more sustainable mode of production. For example, Swagemakers et al. (2021) demonstrate that while brand development offers institutional conditions for farmers to resolve economic goals with sustainability claims, it prohibits a deeper shift to agroecological methods. Furthermore, external factors imposed by organisations and media on consumers as to what is green also create

uncertainty about whom to trust when enacting green consumption behaviours (Gleim et al., 2019). The lack of standardisation and regulation regarding green labels and certifications (Dendler, 2014; Dendler & Dewick, 2016) further exacerbates consumer confusion and scepticism on the legitimacy of such sustainability tools, undermining the potential for genuine progress towards sustainable consumption.

Future research could explore how to effectively separate symbolism from substance in curbing greenwashing and ensuring that green marketing claims are supported by substantive sustainable practices, particularly in the face of isomorphic pressures. The tendency for organisations to adopt similar practices due to institutional pressures may pose a challenge to achieving genuine sustainability practices and avoiding greenwashing. Therefore, investigating how firms can maintain authenticity in their sustainability practices while conforming to institutional pressures is a critical area for future research. This may include investigating the role of regulatory bodies, industry associations, and third-party certifications in incentivising and enforcing genuine sustainability practices. Additionally, research could examine the impact of different types of information and communication strategies on consumer perceptions and behaviours towards sustainable products and firms. For instance, how can communication and marketing strategies be optimised to provide accurate and transparent information to consumers about the environmental impact of products, without misleading or confusing them? How can these strategies be designed to promote more critical thinking and informed decision-making by consumers, while considering the isomorphic pressures that firms may face in their current institutional contexts?

2 Contradiction: Improving consumption through institutional logics

Primacy and paradox of market logics: Promoting sustainability under competing logics

When examining the tensions from an institutional logics perspective, the central contradiction lies in the intersection between the market logic and sustainability logic, with each presenting their own degree of stasis. While the market logic enables sustainable consumption practices to become mainstream, it simultaneously fosters overconsumption through its inherent focus on growth and consumerism. Thus, the market logic's emphasis on exchange and competition undermines the potential for achieving genuine sustainability. The variable stasis in institutional logics allows for

competing logics to coexist, but it can also lead to conflicts and contradictions that prevent transformative change (Thornton et al., 2012).

Several studies demonstrate how institutional logics shape an environment that enables the emergence of markets that promote sustainable consumption. While called by different names, such as ethical markets (Hughes et al., 2015) or moralised markets (Koos, 2021; Suckert, 2018), these markets prioritise the environmental and social factors that are often deprioritised in conventional markets. These markets share the common goal of promoting sustainable, ethical, and socially responsible economic systems. In the context of such markets, these logics play an important role in shaping the attitudes and behaviours of producers, consumers, and regulators towards sustainability. In particular, the primacy and pre-requisite of market logics establishes the appropriate conditions for the emergence or scaling up of such markets (e.g., Suckert, 2018), but they prioritise efficiency and profitability over social and environmental concerns. For example, fair trade certification began as a normative obligation but scaled to a point of differentiation and legitimacy as businesses leveraged its market logic (Koos, 2021; Strambach & Surmeier, 2013).

However, as sustainability becomes more important to consumers and regulators, market logics are adapting with other logics to produce sustainable goods in different industries. For example, local logics are becoming increasingly important in food production, with large food organisations procuring food from local suppliers to reduce their carbon footprint (Hedberg & Lounsbury, 2021). Institutional logics are also playing a role in promoting sustainable fashion, with art logics being combined with sustainability logics to promote eco-friendly and ethical fashion practices (Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020). Nevertheless, logics can also create tensions and contradictions that hinder such markets from becoming truly sustainable, as the tension between the market logic and sustainability logic can lead to overconsumption and greenwashing.

While the market logic is essential for promoting sustainable consumption as the basis of exchange and competition, it may also prioritise economic growth over social and environmental sustainability, potentially leading to rebound effects. This is evident as seen in recent events where European governments reneged on their renewable energy commitments due to oil and gas supply constraints following the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Such developments underscore the deep-seated tension between the market logic and sustainability logic. Recognising these complexities, we therefore heed calls for further research into how organisations frame their sustainability objectives in terms of how the three capitals (social, environmental, economic) are prioritised (Dzhengiz & Hockerts,

2022). Future research could explore how to effectively balance the market logic and sustainability logic to achieve genuine sustainability. This may include investigating the role of institutional arrangements, such as regulations, policies, and industry standards, in shaping market dynamics that promote sustainable consumption. Additionally, research could examine the impact of different types of formal institutions such as market incentives and disincentives on consumer behaviour and business practices. Recent policy apparatuses like the US Inflation Reduction Act and the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism represent such attempts to incentivise green investment and penalise carbon-intensive production methods, respectively, which also yield unintended consequences.

3 Capacitation: Improving consumption through institutional entrepreneurship and work

Power imbalances: Empowering agency beyond incremental change

When viewed through the lens of institutional entrepreneurship and work, strategies to improve sustainable consumption require the active participation of change agents, such as consumers, firms, and governments. Unlike neo-institutional theory and institutional logics, institutional entrepreneurship and work place a greater emphasis on agency and transformation, allowing for greater potential for change. While examples of incremental change exist, a truly transformative shift towards consumption that moves away from a capitalist ideology of buying more green products has not yet fully emerged. Additionally, such market exchanges are characterised by entrenched power imbalances, which can limit the ability of marginalised groups to participate in shaping sustainability outcomes.

Studies have illustrated the role of organisations, consumers, and the media as agents of change. Organisations use their positions of power in the market to transform the sectors they occupy from a top-down approach. For example, food industry organisations employ institutional work by communicating about food-related sustainability to transform the sustainable consumption of their products (Bartelmeß & Godemann, 2020). As such, businesses are traversing the eco-efficiency business case to one that incorporates a more naturalistic and societal orientation (Young & Tilley, 2006). This notion of sustainable entrepreneurship is closely linked to institutional entrepreneurship. While these concepts share similarities in their goal to promote sustainable practices and disrupt the status quo, they differ in their approach. Sustainable entrepreneurship focuses on creating new ventures and business models that prioritise social and

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environmental impact which may be more focused on creating sustainable value for customers, while institutional entrepreneurship may be more focused on driving systemic change towards sustainability through changing existing institutional structures and norms (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011).

In contrast, consumers, who often have fewer resources to influence change, adopt a bottom-up approach through consumer activism and resistance, such as boycotts (Shamir, 2015, 2017). Consumers attempt to influence established institutions by opposing companies engaging in fast fashion, child labour and environmental harm (Chaney & Slimane, 2019), however, their efforts may be limited by the systemic power of established institutional logics and the complexity of global supply chains (McLoughlin & Meehan, 2021). The media can also provide a platform to raise awareness of sustainability issues, amplify the voices of change agents, and hold organisations accountable for their social and environmental impacts. For instance, institutional work strategies used by a television docuseries helped influence authorities to provide more informative sustainability labelling and mobilise consumers to choose more sustainable product options (Hopkinson & Cronin, 2015). However, media coverage can also be limited by dominant institutional logics and prevailing institutional norms, and may prioritise sensationalist stories over meaningful dialogue about sustainable consumption, as in the case of a celebrity's social media account that failed to drive sustainable consumption behaviour despite the celebrity's influential role in climate change causes (Chaturvedi et al., 2022).

Future research could explore how to effectively empower individuals and communities to make more sustainable choices, and how to overcome power imbalances that may be hindering progress towards sustainable consumption. This may involve examining the role of education and information campaigns, community organising, and policy interventions in promoting empowerment and reducing power imbalances. The power of consumer choice, coupled with institutional pressures, can drive change in environmentally responsible production practices, contributing to the growth of sustainability-oriented markets. Future research could explore strategies for capacitating marginalised groups, such as low-income consumers and small-scale producers in emerging markets, to participate more effectively in the sustainability discourse and achieve their unique sustainability goals.

4 Contrast: Changing consumption through neo-institutional theory

Liability of being different: Legitimising sustainable business models

Sustainable business models often differ from traditional models, making it challenging to gain legitimacy and be fully institutionalised. The liability of being different is a key theme that emerges from research on sustainable business models, highlighting the need to navigate institutional pressures and overcome cognitive biases and preconceptions about how businesses should operate.

Scholars generally agree that traditional business models are often unsustainable and that new models are needed (Parguel et al., 2017). However, as organisations that are striving to conduct their business sustainably, attaining legitimacy is particularly challenging. Sustainable business models, such as those in the SE, circular economy, and domains that are shifting towards less resource-intensive methods, often face challenges in obtaining legitimacy due to their departure from traditional business models (Do et al., 2022; Marano et al., 2020; Remme & Jackson, 2023). For example, within the emergent SE field, firms vie for legitimacy by promoting their value propositions and business model features as both beneficial and appropriate (Wruk, Oberg & Maurer, 2019). Some require central coordinating platforms, while others, like community gardens, gain legitimacy through cultural capital and legal infrastructure (Glennie, 2020). Moreover, political, functional, and social institutional pressures cause fields to evolve from within and from outside (de Leeuw & Gössling, 2016). For example, coworking spaces represent a new institutional field emerging from institutional pressures stemming from the need for social interaction and autonomy (Bouncken, Kraus, et al., 2020), therefore, solving underutilised office space, reducing commercial property footprints, and benefiting businesses and their employees alike (Bouncken, Ratzmann, et al., 2020).

The institutional environment plays a crucial role in legitimising emerging business models, through its regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements, particularly when such models differ from typical organisational forms in a given organisational field. In this regard, the SE's institutional mechanisms shape the overall environment in which trust is established and maintained among consumers, service providers, and platform firms. Scholars generally agree that trust is a key element of the SE (Gonzalez-Padron, 2017) and that institutional mechanisms at the macro-regulative level serve as the boundary conditions shaping the overall environment for trust-building (Lu et al., 2021). However, the literature on the effectiveness of platform-based mechanisms at the micro

level, such as reputation systems, remains disputed. While some scholars argue that these mechanisms can promote trust and reduce information asymmetry among users (Gonzalez-Padron, 2017), others point to instances of manipulation and bias that can undermine trust (Shepherd & Matherly, 2021; Zervas et al., 2021). Despite these debates, a robust institutional environment that fosters trust is crucial for the SE to gain legitimacy and succeed in the long term.

To 'stand out' offers potential rewards of differentiation, but legitimacy challenges make it difficult for sustainable business models to 'blend in' and be fully institutionalised. For example, mimicking features of traditional business models positively influences accommodation SE firm performance but reaches a tipping point as more SE firms enter the market (Xie & Young, 2021). Thus, rather than offering a solution to underutilised resources, the market scales to increase consumption.

Servitisation policies focusing on shifting from product-based to service-based business models to reduce natural resource consumption have been encouraged. Environmental regulations can create new markets, turning compliance into a competitive advantage as consumers become increasingly aware of their consumption impacts (Hojnik, 2018). However, despite pro-regulatory environments for SE firms, opposition from other stakeholders can halt these firms' expansion (Altura et al., 2021) as incumbents try to reconcile disruption to their organisational fields (Weber et al., 2019). Furthermore, some scholars question whether servitisation and the SE have helped decrease material consumption, despite certain countries demonstrating a pro-regulatory environment (Acquier et al., 2019). Rebound effects due to increased efficiencies, convenience and potentially lower costs could thwart any initial environmental benefits of the SE, and in some cases, SE consumption could even be higher than traditional models (Freire-González, 2021; Meshulam et al., 2022). This suggests that while policies and regulations may provide a supportive environment for sustainable business models, other factors such as consumption patterns and human behaviour play a significant role in determining the sustainability of such models.

Recognising the need for sustainable business models is growing, but the difficulty lies in institutionalising them within existing norms and expectations. As Ackermann et al. (2022) note, sustainable business models often face resistance due to cognitive biases and preconceptions about how businesses should operate. These biases can lead to negative perceptions of sustainable business models and hinder their legitimacy. For instance, carbon taxes and public transport tend to be ineffective regulative and normative institutions in promoting car sharing due to the social status associated with

car ownership outweighing the benefits of access to a car (Mont, 2004). However, the study by Press et al. (2020) suggests that sustainable business models are more likely to succeed when supported by linked legitimacy from stakeholders and partners, which means harmony exists between the legitimacy of the organisation and that of its partners and stakeholders. This highlights the importance of strategic partnerships and collaborative efforts towards achieving legitimacy and driving change towards sustainability, through leveraging the transference of legitimacy from the existing organisational field.

Furthermore, scholars have observed that institutional environments vary in their support for sustainable business models. Regulations governing circular economy practices can vary widely across different countries, creating challenges for firms seeking to adopt circular business models (Fitch-Roy et al., 2020; Levänen et al., 2018; Ranta et al., 2018). Similarly, while coercive and mimetic institutional pressures have spurred regional adoption of circular practices in some countries, normative concerns around recycling, cultural-cognitive preferences for new products over used ones, and prioritising recycling over reuse and reduction strategies can hinder the full potential of the circular economy (Alonso-Almeida & Rodríguez-Antón, 2020; Ranta et al., 2018). Moreover, normative pressures from overseas customer demand may be insufficient to influence firms to adopt more sustainable practices in some contexts, which are influenced by coercive and mimetic pressures instead (Chen et al., 2021). The notion of stasis associated with neo-institutional theory results in inertia, for example in studies on legitimising community renewable energy (Genus & Iskandarova, 2020), and the slower pace of change from cultural-cognitive and normative institutions in urban energy transitions (Mahzouni, 2019).

Scholars have extensively examined domain-specific efficiency transitions, such as the legitimisation of renewable energy sources (Chaar et al., 2020; Cheah & Low, 2022). However, the viability of certain alternatives, such as biofuels, remains a subject of debate as authorities legitimise the alternative through regulative institutions (permits), while local communities delegitimise it based on environmental concerns using other institutions (norms, values) (Thompson, 2018). Similarly, while companies can innovate (e.g., hybrid car development) in response to institutional pressures (Roh et al., 2015), they must be mindful of unintended consequences. For example, while critical minerals play a key role as inputs into emerging technologies in the energy transition, the value chains through which these minerals are sourced are littered with child labour controversies (Remme & Jackson, 2023).

Future research in legitimising sustainable business models could focus on resolving the areas of dispute identified in the literature, such as the effectiveness of platform-based mechanisms for trust-building in the SE, the potential rebound effects of increased efficiency in sustainable business models, and the varied levels of support for circular economy practices in different institutional environments. Continued research in this area is necessary to identify effective strategies for legitimising sustainable business models and promoting sustainability in business practices.

5 Coexistence: Changing consumption through institutional logics

Navigating competing logics for legitimacy and scale

Organisations seeking to implement sustainable business models navigate the tensions between competing institutional logics, which may facilitate or hinder their expansion because they prioritise different values: community logics stress social responsibility; commercial logics prioritise profitability; and green logics aim to minimise environmental harm and maximise resource efficiency. Therefore, institutional logics that promote growth and profitability may conflict with those that promote social and environmental sustainability. Achieving success in all three areas is often difficult, as they can conflict with one another.

Alternative organising typically arises in response to social issues or institutional exclusion (Mair & Rathert, 2021). While platform organisations represent an institutional evolution of corporations, responding to and shaping institutions to secure legitimacy (Frenken & Fuenfschilling, 2021; Mair & Reischauer, 2017), debates ensue on the environmental sustainability of the SE (e.g., rebound effects). However, using redundant and underutilised resources presents an opportunity for the SE to amplify a green logic to gain legitimacy, alongside established economic and social logics (Grinevich et al., 2019; Rechene et al., 2018). Indeed, platform intermediation and the social dynamics and relationships facilitating interactions among participants, lie at the heart of lateral exchange markets, a categorisation encompassing various forms of SE, collaborative consumption, and access-based consumption platforms (Perren & Kozinets, 2018).

Scholars generally agree that navigating the tensions between competing institutional logics is a key challenge for organisations seeking to implement sustainable business models, including in the SE. While network-based logics may enable technology-based trust, community and market-based logics can face obstacles (Julsrud & Uteng, 2021),

and decentralised evaluation systems may limit diversity and inclusivity among users (Barbe & Hussler, 2019). Co-existing and competing logics have been found to undermine the expansion of sharing initiatives (Guyader et al., 2021), highlighting the importance of configuring appropriate logics to scale the SE towards sustainable transformation (Westskog et al., 2021).

On the other hand, research demonstrates how logics can coalesce to alter the conditions underpinning shifts to sustainable consumption. Moving towards renewable energy prosumerism requires state, market, and community logics to interact to form hybrid institutional arrangements (Wittmayer et al., 2021). Relatedly, the deployment and adoption of smart electricity meters were supported by nested logics across different organisations (Kallman & Frickel, 2019). Food and beverage producers consumed water more efficiently as cost and profitability logics developed towards a water efficiency logic (Egan, 2014). Similarly, an economic efficiency logic and environmental sustainability logic infiltrated the water field, made the dominant 'hydraulic' logic less coherent, and set the enabling conditions for change towards increased sustainability of water (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014).

While businesses striving for circularity attain the triple bottom line through their operational activities, financial scalability is often restricted by the inherent tensions between community and commercial logics that both enable and constrain them (Cullen, 2021). Consequently, firms occasionally resort to decoupling (Stål & Corvellec, 2018, 2021), particularly due to the dominant logic of cost reduction (Glover et al., 2014). Decoupling enables organisations to maintain their current business practices while appearing to adopt sustainable practices, thereby protecting their existing business models. However, decoupling fails to address underlying issues and can result in negative environmental and social impacts. For example, firms that adopt circular practices as a form of greenwashing without fully embracing resource efficiency may contribute to the illusion of progress while continuing to perpetuate unsustainable consumption patterns (Stål & Corvellec, 2018, 2021).

Therefore, understanding how organisations navigate the tensions between community, commercial, and green logics, and the negative outcomes of decoupling is crucial for the development of more effective sustainable business models. Future research could investigate factors driving firms to adopt decoupling strategies, consequences of decoupling for stakeholders, and alternative approaches that balance the demands of commercial and environmental sustainability.

6 Contestation: Changing consumption through institutional entrepreneurship and work

Active proponents and opponents: Surmounting vested interests

While institutional entrepreneurship and work have contributed to the institutionalisation of sustainable consumption practices, tensions prevail between incumbent institutions and new sustainability-oriented practices. Vested interests may resist changes in the market that threaten the status quo. As such, institutionalising new sustainable practices depends on the agentic efforts of both proponents and opponents.

Proponents enact several institutional work strategies in actively shaping markets that they wish to enter or disrupt. Several studies in the SE highlight such efforts, for example, private and public actors employing regulative, cultural-cognitive and normative institutional work strategies in institutionalising the bicycle-sharing economy (Winslow & Mont, 2019); government's role in shaping ride- and bike-sharing markets (Qi et al., 2020; Rechene et al., 2018); and platform firms' disruption of incumbent industries (Weber et al., 2019) and market entry (Marano et al., 2020). Actors have also created, disrupted (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016), and maintained (Binz et al., 2016) institutions towards circularity. Similarly, firms are seeking more responsible ways for consumers to use their products. For example, a consumer goods company innovated its detergent product by institutionalising the washing of laundry at lower temperatures by leveraging cultural-cognitive and regulative institutions through lobbying, storytelling, and framing (Mylan, 2017).

On the other hand, sustainability efforts are met with institutional work strategies by opponents of change. Power dynamics are most likely evident in some of the longer-serving industries where energy use and fossil-fuel investment have been the norm. The fossil fuel industry has been known to actively oppose policies and practices that promote renewable energy sources (Bernstein & Hoffmann, 2018). Teschner and Paavola (2013) show that despite discoveries of alternative energy sources, discourses on energy abundance from powerful stakeholders compromised the sustainability of a particular country's energy transition. Nevertheless, some success in embedding sustainable consumption practices has been attributed to the policy experimentation of regulatory institutions (Kivimaa & Rogge, 2022) and employing different institutional work strategies based on context (van Doren et al., 2020).

Despite these efforts, tensions between incumbent institutions and new sustainability-oriented practices persist, and more research is encouraged to surmount vested

interests and overcome the challenges of implementing sustainable business models. These vested interests may wield considerable power and influence in their respective industries, making it difficult for sustainability-oriented practices to gain a foothold. Resultantly, the agentic efforts of proponents and opponents are crucial in shaping the market and promoting sustainable consumption practices, and deserve to be researched further for new insights.

7 Convergence: Reducing consumption through neo-institutional theory

Integrating environmental and social systems

Reducing consumption tends to be limited to individual choice and constrained by the broader institutional environment. For instance, McGouran and Prothero (2016) found that requesting consumers to intentionally consume less can lead to enacted voluntary simplicity but is constrained by their institutional environment which is already deeply entrenched. Similarly, Aasen et al. (2022) found that climate norms have only a limited influence on leisure air travel, highlighting the need for policy interventions at the structural level. Furthermore, even children who are raised by voluntary simplifiers do not necessarily continue their frugal practices into adulthood due to the dominant institutional environment of a consumption-focused society (Walther & Sandlin, 2013). These examples highlight that reducing consumption at the micro level is not enough to tackle the broader systemic issues that underpin unsustainable consumption patterns. The institutional environment, social norms, and structural factors play a crucial role in shaping individual consumption patterns.

Taking a meso perspective, Isaksson and Hagbert (2020) investigated the ability of small Swedish municipalities to adopt radical sustainability. They found that local authorities, civil society, and external actors can work together to develop more sustainable practices, highlighting the importance of institutional contexts and collaborations for promoting sustainable change. Thus, reducing consumption requires shifts in social norms, institutional contexts (Jackson, 2005a), and the capacity of institutions to integrate radical sustainability perspectives (Isaksson & Hagbert, 2020).

While neo-institutional theory offers insights into the processes of institutionalisation and governance structures underlying sustainable consumption, it can also be criticised for its high degree of stasis. This is because neo-institutional theory concepts are often associated with the status quo and the perpetuation of existing institutional

arrangements, which can be resistant to change even in the face of sustainability challenges. However, a politicised institutional theory accounting for environmental and social concerns can help guide transformative change in the Anthropocene Era (Hoffman & Jennings, 2021). One way to do this is by recognising and addressing the interdependence between human systems and the natural world. Institutional theory can help highlight how institutions are embedded within and interact with ecological systems (Folke et al., 2021; Hoffman & Jennings, 2021). For example, Seyfang and Longhurst (2013) argue that community currencies can serve as a means of re-embedding economic activity in social and ecological contexts, rather than treating them as separate spheres. Similarly, the concept of socio-ecological systems emphasises the interconnectedness between social and ecological systems and the need for integrated approaches to addressing sustainability challenges (Ostrom, 2009). By embracing the interconnectedness of institutional and ecological systems, institutional theory can be used to develop more effective and holistic strategies for sustainable consumption that address the root causes of unsustainability.

Further research is encouraged on the reduce strategy of the sustainable consumption continuum to build out a more comprehensive research agenda. Treating the natural environment as separate from the institutional environment is problematic in the pursuit of sustainable consumption, as it obscures the interdependence between human systems and the natural world. Consequently, we echo Hoffman and Jennings (2021), who reconceptualise how scholars should interpret and apply institutional theory in advancing sustainability research. Therefore, to better understand how society may develop in the Anthropocene, researchers should investigate how various social systems connect and affect the environment and society, how unexpected events impact social institutions, and how the pace and duration of change can vary institutionalisation across the Anthropocene (Hoffman & Jennings, 2021). Particularly in marketing, a research agenda on radical product and market exchange models will further advance strong sustainability research (Press, 2021).

8 Conversion: Reducing consumption through institutional logics

Shifting from market to social-ecological logics

Conflicting institutional logics can pose a significant barrier to the implementation of sustainable consumption practices, as exemplified by the lack of progress in fashion reuse in a mall setting due to competing institutional interests (Hedegård et al., 2020). In

their study of fashion retail, Hedegård et al. (2020) found that while the reuse of clothing contributes to sustainable consumption, it often conflicts with the institutional logics of fast fashion and newness, which prioritise market exchange and profitability over social and environmental values.

To achieve additional outcomes of social and ecological value, alternative economy marketing systems require logics that prioritise social and ecological objectives over market exchange logics (Haase et al., 2018). However, the institutionalisation of these alternative systems can be challenging due to the influence of plural logics, as demonstrated in the case of timebanks (Papaoikonomou & Valor, 2017). Moreover, the appeal of sufficiency lifestyles to broader society is a key question, including when such practices would be socially acceptable and their relevance in the developing world (Schor, 2005).

A key question is how to promote and scale up social-ecological logics in a way that addresses the deeper systemic drivers of unsustainable consumption, rather than simply creating niche markets within the existing institutional framework. Additionally, further exploration is needed into the interplay between institutional logics and the power structures underpinning unsustainable consumption patterns, particularly in the developing world where poverty, inequality, and cultural values may pose unique challenges to the adoption of social-ecological logics.

9 Community: Reducing consumption through institutional entrepreneurship and work

Overcoming resistance and fostering grassroots support

Institutional entrepreneurs have been identified as change agents in guiding organisational action; however, a key challenge in the Anthropocene Era is the lack of natural environmental interests in standard institutional analyses.

Zapata Campos and Zapata (2017) emphasise the role of citizen-driven initiatives in promoting sustainable consumption practices and highlight the potential of political consumption to create alternative, sustainable economies. Their work stresses the importance of infiltrating existing institutions and working with multiple stakeholders, including local governments and non-governmental organisations, to create sustainable consumption practices. This underscores the need for institutional entrepreneurs who can create an institutional environment that supports voluntary simplicity lifestyles and

promotes alternative economic models prioritising sustainability, as emphasised by Seyfang and Smith (2007).

Additionally, the role of grassroots support cannot be ignored, as social movements and community-driven initiatives have been found to be effective in promoting sustainable consumption practices and reducing consumption (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013), albeit their impacts remain limited to a niche segment of society. Scholars have also explored the role of institutional entrepreneurs in self-organising and experimenting to implement alternative economic models in sustainable urban contexts (Weisenfeld & Hauerwaas, 2018). However, institutionalising such models can prove challenging, as the government may work to maintain the dominant social paradigm of existing institutions. Joutsenvirta's (2016) study showed that the institutionalisation of timebanks faced challenges due to the government's efforts to maintain the existing tax institution, which perpetuates the dominant social paradigm. Additionally, erratic events in the Anthropocene Era may dampen mobilisation and have unpredictable effects on institutional forms that emerge (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015).

Looking ahead, research can continue to explore ways to overcome resistance to sustainable consumption practices and foster grassroots support. Further research is needed to identify effective strategies for institutional entrepreneurs to infiltrate existing institutions, work with multiple stakeholders, and create an institutional environment that supports sufficiency lifestyles and promotes alternative economic models prioritising sustainability. This could include the role of social movements, and citizen- and community-driven initiatives. Furthermore, in line with Bachouche and Sabri (2019), future research can broaden the understanding of consumer empowerment and resistance by examining quieter forms of resistance, such as voluntary simplicity lifestyles, in addition to overt and aggressive means like boycotting, which open up new approaches of understanding consumer resistance in reducing consumption.

4.6 Discussion and conclusion

As consumption is deeply ingrained in everyday life and sustained by various institutions, this review applied institutional theory to elucidate how consuming sustainably can gain increased legitimacy and institutionalisation, ultimately becoming a normal way of life. This review surfaces the complexity of institutionalising sustainable consumption away from consumption-as-usual by improving, changing, and reducing consumption towards more sustainable ends. We contribute to the sustainable consumption literature by systematically organising how sustainable consumption is institutionalised using the lens of institutional theory sub-fields, namely, neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work. Our analysis results in the intersections of the three sustainable consumption strategies and three institutional theory sub-fields, resulting in 3 x 3 conceptual framework. By reviewing the extant literature, we have outlined agreed-upon knowledge, areas of dispute, and resultant tensions. While we have not resolved these tensions, we hope that future researchers can begin unravelling these tensions through the lens of our framework.

4.6.1 Limitations

Potentially relevant studies may have been excluded due to the methodological choices made of keyword search strings, database selection and only including English peer-reviewed academic journals. While the conceptual framework serves as a starting point for future research, it should be subjected to further testing and validation through empirical research to determine its practical usefulness and applicability in real-world contexts. Many of the articles discussed in this review adopt an eco-modernist approach, emphasising technological innovation and market-based solutions to achieving sustainability. Consequently, deep ecology perspectives are noticeably absent. Furthermore, deep ecology perspectives often underpin the reduce strategy. Subsequent reviews and refinement of the framework can seek out alternative sources to incorporate such perspectives. Lastly, while research can illuminate tensions and contradictions, it does not inherently resolve them. This realisation prompts a call for interdisciplinary approaches and collaborative efforts that span policy, industry, and community sectors as researchers cannot alone resolve wicked problems. Addressing complex societal challenges requires a paradigm shift in research practice, emphasising co-production of knowledge, reflexivity, and a commitment to transformative change (Fazey et al., 2018).

4.6.2 Opposing paradigms

The predominance of eco-modernist perspectives can be problematic as it reinforces the status quo of economic growth and consumerism while failing to address deeper systemic issues that drive unsustainable consumption patterns. Within the theme of improving consumption, the focus on labelling and consumer reliance highlights the desire to maintain market-based solutions rather than more transformative approaches. Similarly, the theme of changing consumption through sustainable business models tends to prioritise scaling up of these models within existing institutional frameworks, rather than questioning the broader systemic drivers of unsustainable consumption. In the theme of reducing consumption through sufficiency and alternative economic models, a tension exists between promoting practices that challenge mainstream consumerism and those that can be co-opted into the eco-modernist paradigm. Consequently, sustainability risks being reduced to a technical problem that can be solved through institutional reform, rather than recognising the deeper social and cultural roots of unsustainable consumption.

The predominance of eco-modernism can also be seen in the focus on neo-institutional theory, which tends to maintain the existing institutional framework rather than question its underlying assumptions. Additionally, the focus on institutional logics prioritises incremental change within the existing system, rather than questioning the power structures underpinning unsustainable consumption patterns. However, a few studies in institutional entrepreneurship and work challenge the status quo by exploring more transformative approaches to sustainability.

Furthermore, an eco-modernist approach tends to prioritise the concerns of the developed over the developing world and perpetuates existing power structures by reinforcing the dominance of wealthy nations and corporations (Hickel, 2021). Thus, while technological innovation and market-based solutions may have a role to play in achieving sustainability, they should be complemented by a deeper critique of the social, economic, and political structures that underpin unsustainability.

4.7   Appendix for Chapter 4

Table A4.1: Search string for systematic literature review

Combined sustainable consumption and institutional theory search string

("access-based consum*" OR "alternative consum*" OR "anticonsum*" OR "anti-consum*" OR "boycott" OR "brand avoid*" OR "circular economy" OR "collaborat* consum*" OR "consum* activism" OR "consum* animosity" OR "consum* resistance" OR "decreased consum*" OR "deviance" OR "ecological behavio*" OR "ecological consum*" OR "environment* friendly behavio*" OR "environment* oriented anticonsum*" OR "environment* oriented consum*" OR "environment* responsible consum*" OR "ethical consum*" OR "green consum*" OR "low* consum*" OR "minimalis*" OR "political consum*" OR "product avoid*" OR "reduc* consum*" OR "shar* economy" OR "slow consum*" OR "socially responsible consum*" OR "sufficien* consum*" OR "sufficiency" OR "sustain* consum*" OR "sustain* lifestyle*" OR "sustainability" OR "sustainable consumer behavio*" OR "voluntary simpli*") **AND** ("cognitive institution" OR "cognitive pillar" OR "cultural-cognitive institution" OR "cultural-cognitive pillar" OR "institution* pillar*"   OR "institutional logic" OR "institutional order" OR "institutional theory" OR "institutionalisation" OR "institutionalism" OR "institutionalization" OR "neoinstitutional theory" OR "neo-institutional theory" OR "neoinstitutionalism" OR "neo-institutionalism" OR "normative institution" OR "pillar* of institution*" OR "regulative institution" OR "regulatory institution")

Note. Source: Authors' own. OR Boolean operators link related terms within the sustainable consumption category, and within the institutional theory category; wildcards (*) capture variations of terms; and the AND Boolean operator links both of these categories.

Table A4.2: Reviewed articles

Reference	Article title	Journal name
(Aasen et al., 2022)	The limited influence of climate norms on leisure air travel	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
(Ackermann et al., 2022)	A legitimacy perspective on sharing economy consumption in the accommodation sector	Current Issues in Tourism
(Agovino et al., 2020)	The separate collection of recyclable waste materials as a flywheel for the circular economy: The role of institutional quality and socio-economic factors	Economia Politica
(Alonso-Almeida & Rodríguez-Antón, 2020)	The role of institutional engagement at the macro level in pushing the circular economy in Spain and its regions	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health
(Alonso-Almeida et al., 2020)	Sustainable development and circular economy: The role of institutional promotion on circular consumption and market competitiveness from a multistakeholder engagement approach	Business Strategy and the Environment
(Altura et al., 2021)	Japan meets the sharing economy: Contending frames	Social Science Japan Journal
(Bachouche & Sabri, 2019)	Empowerment in marketing: Synthesis, critical review, and agenda for future research	AMS Review
(Barbe & Hussler, 2019)	"The war of the worlds won't occur": Decentralized evaluation systems and orders of worth in market organizations of the sharing economy	Technological Forecasting and Social Change
(Bartelmeß & Godemann, 2020)	Corporate perspectives on responsibility and sustainability in the food system: A (Food) communicative-constructivist viewpoint	Sustainability
(Binz et al., 2016)	The thorny road to technology legitimation—Institutional work for potable water reuse in California	Technological Forecasting and Social Change
(Bouncken, Kraus, et al., 2020)	Entrepreneurship of an institutional field: The emergence of coworking spaces for digital business models	International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal
(Bouncken, Ratzmann, et al., 2020)	Coworking spaces: Empowerment for entrepreneurship and innovation in the digital and sharing economy	Journal of Business Research
(Chaar et al., 2020)	Transition towards sustainability in a post-conflict country: A neo-institutional perspective on the Lebanese case	Climatic Change
(Chaney & Slimane, 2019)	Rethinking consumer resistance through institutional entrepreneurship	International Journal of Market Research
(Chaturvedi et al., 2022)	Investigating the role of celebrity institutional entrepreneur in reducing the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable consumption	Management of Environmental Quality
(Cheah & Low, 2021)	The impact of public policy marketing, institutional narratives and discourses on renewable energy consumption in a developing economy	Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics
(Chen et al., 2021)	Does R&D intensity promote the adoption of circular supply chain management? Evidence from China	Industrial Marketing Management
(Crutzen et al., 2018)	Developing sustainability mobility controls: The case of four Belgian local governments	Social and Environmental Accountability Journal

Reference	Article title	Journal name
(Cullen, 2021)	Exploring a circular business model: Insights from the institutional theory perspective and the business model lens	International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation
(de Leeuw & Gössling, 2016)	Theorizing change revisited: An amended process model of institutional innovations and changes in institutional fields	Journal of Cleaner Production
(Dendler & Dewick, 2016)	Institutionalising the organic labelling scheme in China: A legitimacy perspective	Journal of Cleaner Production
(Dendler, 2014)	Sustainability Meta Labelling: An effective measure to facilitate more sustainable consumption and production?	Journal of Cleaner Production
(Dingwerth & Pattberg, 2009)	World politics and organizational fields: The case of transnational sustainability governance	European Journal of International Relations
(Duque et al., 2014)	Invisible commuters: Assessing a university's eco-friendly transportation policies and commuting behaviours	Journal of Transport Geography
(Egan, 2014)	Progress towards institutionalising field-wide water efficiency change	Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal
(Fitch-Roy et al., 2020)	Going around in circles? Conceptual recycling, patching and policy layering in the EU circular economy package	Environmental Politics
(Folke et al., 2021)	Our future in the Anthropocene biosphere	Ambio
(François-Lecompte et al., 2017)	The Environmental Labelling rollout of consumer goods by public authorities: Analysis of and lessons learned from the French case	Journal of Cleaner Production
(Frenken & Fuenfschilling, 2021)	The rise of online platforms and the triumph of the corporation	Sociologica
(Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014)	The structuration of socio-technical regimes-Conceptual foundations from institutional theory	Research Policy
(Genus & Iskandarova, 2020)	Transforming the energy system? Technology and organisational legitimacy and the institutionalisation of community renewable energy	Renewable & Sustainable Energy Reviews
(Genus & Jensen, 2019)	Beyond 'behaviour': The institutionalisation of practice and the case of energy-efficient lighting in Denmark	Journal of Consumer Culture
(Genus & Mafakheri, 2014)	A neo-institutional perspective of supply chains and energy security: Bioenergy in the UK	Applied Energy
(Gleim et al., 2019)	Extending the institutional environment: The impact of internal and external factors on the green behaviors of an individual	Journal of Strategic Marketing
(Glennie, 2020)	Cultivating place: Urban development and the institutionalization of Seattle's P-Patch Community Gardens	City and Community
(Glover et al., 2014)	An institutional theory perspective on sustainable practices across the dairy supply chain	International Journal of Production Economics
(Gonzalez-Padron, 2017)	Ethics in the sharing economy: Creating a legitimate marketing channel	Journal of Marketing Channels

Reference	Article title	Journal name
(Govindan, 2018)	Sustainable consumption and production in the food supply chain: A conceptual framework	International Journal of Production Economics
(Grinevich et al., 2019)	Green entrepreneurship in the sharing economy: Utilising multiplicity of institutional logics	Small Business Economics
(Guyader et al., 2021)	Institutional logics at play in a mobility-as-a-service ecosystem	Sustainability
(Haase et al., 2018)	Alternative economies as marketing systems? The role of value creation and the criticism of economic growth	Journal of Macromarketing
(Hedberg & Lounsbury, 2021)	Not just small potatoes: Cultural entrepreneurship in the moralizing of markets	Organization Science
(Hedegård et al., 2020)	Management of sustainable fashion retail based on reuse – A struggle with multiple logics	International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research
(Heller & Vatn, 2017)	The divisive and disruptive effect of a weight-based waste fee	Ecological Economics
(Hoffman & Jennings, 2021)	Institutional-political scenarios for Anthropocene society	Business and Society
(Hofman, 2008)	Governance for green electricity: Formation of rules between market and hierarchy	Energy and Environment
(Hojnik, 2018)	Ecological modernization through servitization: EU regulatory support for sustainable product–service systems	Review of European, Comparative and International Environmental Law
(Hopkinson & Cronin, 2015)	'When people take action ….' Mainstreaming malcontent and the role of the celebrity institutional entrepreneur	Journal of Marketing Management
(Humphreys, 2014)	How is sustainability structured? The discursive life of environmentalism	Journal of Macromarketing
(Isaksson & Hagbert, 2020)	Institutional capacity to integrate 'radical' perspectives on sustainability in small municipalities: Experiences from Sweden	Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions
(Jackson, 2005a)	Live better by consuming less? Is there a "double dividend" in sustainable consumption?	Journal of Industrial Ecology
(Joutsenvirta, 2016)	A practice approach to the institutionalization of economic degrowth	Ecological Economics
(Julsrud & Uteng, 2021)	Trust and sharing in online environments: A comparative study of different groups of Norwegian car sharers	Sustainability
(Kallman & Frickel, 2019)	Nested logics and smart meter adoption: Institutional processes and organizational change in the diffusion of smart meters in the United States	Energy Research and Social Science
(Kivimaa & Rogge, 2022)	Interplay of policy experimentation and institutional change in sustainability transitions: The case of mobility as a service in Finland	Research Policy
(Koos, 2021)	Moralising markets, marketizing morality. The Fair Trade movement, product labeling and the emergence of ethical consumerism in Europe	Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing
(Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016)	Innovation in service ecosystems-Breaking, making, and maintaining institutionalized rules of resource integration	Journal of Business Research

Reference	Article title	Journal name
(Levänen et al., 2018)	Modelling the interplay between institutions and circular economy business models: A case study of battery recycling in Finland and Chile	Ecological Economics
(Lu et al., 2021)	Platform-based mechanisms, institutional trust, and continuous use intention: The moderating role of perceived effectiveness of sharing economy institutional mechanisms	Information and Management
(Mahzouni, 2019)	The institutional challenges of scaling-up housing retrofit: The Swiss cities of Basel and Sion	Facilities
(Mair & Rathert, 2021)	Alternative organizing with social purpose: Revisiting institutional analysis of market-based activity	Socio-Economic Review
(Mair & Reischauer, 2017)	Capturing the dynamics of the sharing economy: Institutional research on the plural forms and practices of sharing economy organizations	Technological Forecasting and Social Change
(Marano et al., 2020)	The liability of disruption	Global Strategy Journal
(Martinez et al., 2015)	Effects of institutions on ecological attitudes and behaviour of consumers in a developing Asian country: The case of the Philippines	International Journal of Consumer Studies
(McGouran & Prothero, 2016)	Enacted voluntary simplicity – exploring the consequences of requesting consumers to intentionally consume less	European Journal of Marketing
(McLoughlin & Meehan, 2021)	The institutional logic of the sustainable organisation: the case of a chocolate supply network	International Journal of Operations and Production Management
(Mont, 2004)	Institutionalisation of sustainable consumption patterns based on shared use	Ecological Economics
(Mylan, 2017)	The business of "behaviour change": Analysing the consumer-oriented corporate sustainability journey of low-temperature laundry	Organization and Environment
(N. K. Jain et al., 2020)	Institutional pressures and circular economy performance: The role of environmental management system and organizational flexibility in oil and gas sector	Business Strategy and the Environment
(Närvänen et al., 2021)	Institutional work in food waste reduction: Start-ups' role in moving towards a circular economy	Industrial Marketing Management
(Ostrom, 2009)	A general framework for analyzing sustainability of social-ecological systems	Science
(Ozdamar Ertekin et al., 2020)	The logic of sustainability: Institutional transformation towards a new culture of fashion	Journal of Marketing Management
(Ozdemir & Turker, 2019)	Institutionalization of the sharing in the context of Airbnb: A systematic literature review and content analysis	Anatolia
(Papaoikonomou & Valor, 2017)	The institutionalization of alternative economies: The processes of objectification in time banks	Journal of Macromarketing
(Perren & Kozinets, 2018)	Lateral exchange markets: How social platforms operate in a networked economy	Journal of Marketing
(Pristl et al., 2020)	When does a social norm catch the worm? Disentangling social normative influences on sustainable consumption behaviour	Journal of Consumer Behaviour

Reference	Article title	Journal name
(Qi et al., 2020)	The co-evolution of institutions and stakeholders in creating new industries	Asia Pacific Journal of Management
(Ranta et al., 2018)	Exploring institutional drivers and barriers of the circular economy: A cross-regional comparison of China, the US, and Europe	Resources, Conservation and Recycling
(Rechene et al., 2018)	Sharing economy and sustainability logic: Analyzing the use of shared bikes	Bar - Brazilian Administration Review
(Ritch & Brownlie, 2016)	Doing it for the kids: The role of sustainability in family consumption	International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management
(Roh et al., 2015)	Stakeholders' pressure and managerial responses: Lessons from hybrid car development and commercialisation	International Journal of Business Information Systems
(Runhaar et al., 2020)	Endogenous regime change: Lessons from transition pathways in Dutch dairy farming	Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions
(S. Jain et al., 2020)	Construction and demolition waste recycling: Investigating the role of theory of planned behavior, institutional pressures and environmental consciousness	Journal of Cleaner Production
(Sareen & Wolf, 2021)	Accountability and sustainability transitions	Ecological Economics
(Schor, 2005)	Sustainable consumption and worktime reduction	Journal of Industrial Ecology
(Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013)	Growing green money? Mapping community currencies for sustainable development	Ecological Economics
(Seyfang & Smith, 2007)	Grassroots innovations for sustainable development: Towards a new research and policy agenda	Environmental Politics
(Shamir, 2015)	On sensitivity and disability: Political consumerism, social-political entrepreneurship and social justice	World Political Science
(Shamir, 2017)	Israel is too expensive for us? Political consumerism, public policy and entrepreneurship: The case of the cottage cheese boycott	Israel Affairs
(Shepherd & Matherly, 2021)	Racialization of peer-to-peer transactions: Inequality and barriers to legitimacy	Journal of Consumer Affairs
(Sorensen & Brenner, 2021)	Cities, urban property systems, and sustainability transitions: Contested processes of institutional change and the regulation of urban property development	Sustainability
(Sreen, et al., 2021)	The impact of the institutional environment on green consumption in India	Journal of Consumer Marketing
(Stål & Corvellec, 2018)	A decoupling perspective on circular business model implementation: Illustrations from Swedish apparel	Journal of Cleaner Production
(Stål & Corvellec, 2021)	Organizing means–ends decoupling: Core–compartment separations in fast fashion	Business and Society
(Strambach & Surmeier, 2013)	Knowledge dynamics in setting sustainable standards in tourism - the case of 'Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa'	Current Issues in Tourism
(Suckert, 2018)	Unravelling ambivalence: A field-theoretical approach to moralised markets	Current Sociology

Reference	Article title	Journal name
(Swagemakers et al., 2021)	To what extent do brands contribute to sustainability transition in agricultural production practices? Lessons from three European case studies	Ecological Economics
(Teschner & Paavola, 2013)	Discourses of abundance: Transitions in Israel's energy regime	Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning
(Thompson, 2018)	Biofuels are (not) the future! Legitimation strategies of sustainable ventures in complex institutional environments	Sustainability
(van Doren et al., 2020)	Institutional work in diverse niche contexts: The case of low-carbon housing in the Netherlands	Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions
(Walther & Sandlin, 2013)	Green capital and social reproduction within families practising voluntary simplicity in the US	International Journal of Consumer Studies
(Wang & He, 2022)	The impact of retailers' sustainable development on consumer advocacy: A chain mediation model investigation	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services
(Weber et al., 2019)	Institution-infused sensemaking of discontinuous innovations: The case of the sharing economy	Journal of Product Innovation Management
(Weisenfeld & Hauerwaas, 2018)	Adopters build bridges: Changing the institutional logic for more sustainable cities. From action to workset to practice	Research Policy
(Westskog, et al., 2021)	The role of community sharing in sustainability transformation: Case studies from Norway	Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy
(Winslow & Mont, 2019)	Bicycle sharing: Sustainable value creation and institutionalisation strategies in Barcelona	Sustainability
(Wittmayer et al., 2021)	Contributing to sustainable and just energy systems? The mainstreaming of renewable energy prosumerism within and across institutional logics	Energy Policy
(Wruk et al., 2019)	The presentation of self as good and right: How value propositions and business model features are linked in the sharing economy	Journal of Business Ethics
(Xie & Young, 2021)	The copycat effect: Do hotel-like features drive Airbnb performance?	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
(Yang et al., 2021)	An institutional perspective on consumers' environmental awareness and pro-environmental behavioral intention: Evidence from 39 countries	Business Strategy and the Environment
(Yao, et al., 2021)	Green innovation and brand equity: Moderating effects of industrial institutions	Asia Pacific Journal of Management
(Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2017)	Infiltrating citizen-driven initiatives for sustainability	Environmental Politics

Note. Source: Authors' own.

Table A4.3: Coding scheme

Category	Fields	Values
Citation information	Author(s) Article title Abstract Publication year Journal *	Extracted directly from the database export file or the article * Given the journal name, the fields in the 'Journal quality' category rows below were referenced to assess journal quality
Journal quality *	Scopus sub-subject area	Specific research field or sub-discipline within a broader academic discipline or subject area used by the Scopus database
	Scopus percentile	Metric used to determine the relative rank of a journal in comparison to other journals in the same field, expressed as a percentage, with a higher percentage indicating greater quality
	Academic Journal Guide (AJG) 2021	Quality ratings from lowest to highest: 1, 2, 3, 4, 4*
	Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) 2019	Quality ratings from lowest to highest: C, B, A, A*
Research methods	Methodology	Qualitative, Quantitative, Conceptual, Mixed, Review
Contextual information	Geographical setting	Countries where the studies were researched, which were then grouped by continent: Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania, South America
	Consumption setting	Contexts under which the studies were researched: Mobility, Food, Property, Energy, General, Clothing, Waste, Services, Electronics, Cities, Timebanks, Water, Tourism, Tools
	Actors	Actors enabling or constraining sustainable consumption were categorised across micro, meso and macro levels: ▪ Macro: Government, Policymakers, Standard and Rule-setting bodies ▪ Meso: Firms, Platform organisations, Non-profit organisations, Research organisations, Timebanks ▪ Micro: Consumers, Citizens
Sustainable consumption	Sustainable consumption strategies and sub-categories	Different sustainable consumption elements were initially categorised, and then later grouped into three strategies: ▪ Improve: Consumer reliance, Sustainability labelling ▪ Change: Sustainable business models, Domain-specific shifts ▪ Reduce: Sufficiency, Alternative economic models
Institutional theory	Institutional theory elements and sub-fields	Different institutional theory elements were initially categorised, and then later grouped into the three sub-fields: ▪ Neo-institutional theory (NIT): Institutional pillars, Institutional pressures, Institutional carriers, Institutionalisation, Legitimacy, Decoupling ▪ Institutional logics (IL): Institutional logics ▪ Institutional entrepreneurship and work (IEW): Institutional entrepreneurship, Institutional work, Institutional change

Note. Authors' own.

Table A4.4: Coding table for sustainable consumption

Representative quotations and first-order codes	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
▪ "Eco-behaviour describes the conduct of consumers towards the avoidance or reduction of wastes as well the conservation of energy in the process of choosing, consuming and disposal of consumer goods or services." (Martinez et al., 2015, p. 576)	Green behaviour	Consumer reliance
▪ "Pro-environmental behaviours, which have been defined as "behaviour's that aim to improve environmental quality and minimize negative impacts on the environment" (Yang et al., 2021, p. 566)		
▪ "willingness to boycott non-green firms, …. purchase intentions toward green products, …. willingness to invest in green firms" (Gleim et al., 2019, p. 509)		
▪ "purchase intention for the sustainable product" (Pristl et al., 2021, p. 644)		
▪ "the rebels, who refuse to consume and oppose the market, its practices, and symbols (fast fashion, child labor, mass advertising) through boycotts or other social movements" (Chaney & Slimane, 2019, p. 476)	Consumer resistance	Improve
▪ "Green consumption is defined as the purchase of environmentally friendly products to minimize the environmental impact of purchases" (Sreen et al., 2021, p. 47)	Green consumption	
▪ "New approaches to fish labelling enable such a consumer to make appropriate choices." (Hopkinson & Cronin, 2015, p. 1395)	Labelling	
▪ "GEL is intended to give consumers the environmental impact of the product in an educational manner through a scoring system placed directly on the packaging" (François-Lecompte et al., 2017, p. 689)	Generalised Environmental Labelling	Sustainability labelling
▪ "implementation of some form of 'meta' scheme that condenses existing product labels and other communication measures into an overarching [s]ustainability message" (Dendler, 2014, p. 74)	Meta labelling	
▪ "Market formed through an intermediating technology platform that facilitates exchange activities among a network of equivalently positioned economic actors" (Perren & Kozinets, 2018, p. 5)	Lateral exchange markets	Sharing economy business models
▪ "set of firms that mediate exchanges primarily among peers through digital platforms to enable the sharing of underutilized assets." (Weber et al., 2019, p. 638)	Platform business models	Change
▪ "The so-called sharing economy consists of firms whose innovative business models are transforming traditional industries by relying on unused or underused resources (including assets, skills, time, money)" (Marano et al., 2020, p. 178)		

Representative quotations and first-order codes	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
▪ "Redistribution and access to resources via technology" (Mair & Rathert, 2021, p. 37)		
▪ "CE success requires special engagement of consumers because in a number of cases, consumers are required to return products at the end of their life to the stores, to separate waste for recycling, or to use reusable packaging" (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2020, p. 2804)	**Circular consumption**	**Circular economy business models**
▪ "A CBM [circular business model] is a business model in which the conceptual logic for value creation is based on utilizing economic value retained in products after use in the production of new offerings" (Cullen, 2021, p. 3) ▪ "CBMs [circular business models] represent a subcategory that deviates from linear value creation, proposing environmental benefits by creating value from waste or providing functions instead of products" (Stål & Corvellec, 2018, p. 631) ▪ "businesses that utilise digital platforms to broker between organisations that produce waste and those that utilise it as a resource" (Närvänen et al., 2021, p. 605)	**Circular business models**	
▪ "utility sectors, such as water, energy or transportation, are confronted with problems of resource scarcity, climate change and environmental degradation and are therefore facing a growing number of transformation pressures" (Fuenfschilling & Truffer, 2014, p. 772) ▪ "transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, such as solar energy" (Cheah & Low, 2022, p. 944) ▪ "how water consuming organisations can develop a focus on water efficiency" (Egan, 2014, p. 809)	**Sectoral transformation**	**Change**
▪ "'packaged offerings' with "intermodal planning, booking and payment functionalities, as well as multiple transport modes and mobility packages"" (Kivimaa & Rogge, 2022, p. 5)		**Domain-specific shifts**
▪ "'green' transportation policies aimed at promoting more pedestrian traffic on campus, providing more local and on-campus shuttle services, and developing campus infrastructure to support more bicycle commuting" (Duque et al., 2014, p. 134) ▪ "change how consumers use products, …intervene in domestic practices to promote sustainable consumption….reduce domestic food waste….stimulate reuse of clothing…..alter how people do domestic laundry" (Mylan, 2017, p. 284)	**Embedding sustainable options**	
▪ "citizen- driven waste-prevention initiatives" (Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2017, p. 1061)	**Waste prevention**	**Reduce**
▪ "reuse occurs when a garment is used again" (Hedegård et al., 2020, p. 312)	**Reuse**	**Sufficiency**
▪ "a democratic and redistributive downscaling of production and consumption to assure that society's throughput – resource use and waste – stays within safe ecosystem boundaries" (Joutsenvirta, 2016, p. 23)	**Degrowth**	

Representative quotations and first-order codes	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
▪ "de-growth movements need to escape from economics as a system of representation. If alternative economies are conceptualized in terms of economics, it would be difficult to consider them something alternative to "regular" economies" (Haase et al., 2018, p. 58)		
▪ "'service credit' system that aims to build social capital, inclusion and cohesion by rewarding and strengthening neighborly support, social care and community-based activities." (Joutsenvirta, 2016, p. 26)	**Community currencies ('Time Banks', 'Economy for the Common Good')**	**Alternative economic models**
▪ "Economy for the Common Good, 'ECG', is one of several concepts (others are for example 'local currency' and 'regio-economics') that break with key institutions of the market logic" (Weisenfeld & Hauerwaas, 2018, p. 916)		

5 Empirical paper

HOW DO INSTITUTIONS SHAPE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

[1] HOW DO INSTITUTIONS....

LOW	MODERATE, VARIABLE	HIGH
←	**INSTITUTIONAL DEGREE OF STASIS**	→
INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND WORK	INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS	NEO-INSTITUTIONAL THEORY ✓

[2] ...SHAPE...

FACILITATE OR HINDER SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION	**IMPACT CONSUMERS' TRUST IN THE SHARING ECONOMY**	**(DE)LEGITIMATE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION**
CONCEPTUAL PAPER	EMPIRICAL PAPER ✓	PRACTITIONER PAPER

[3] ...SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
←	**STRENGTH OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION**	→
IMPROVE	CHANGE ✓	REDUCE

Key: ✓ *Focus of this chapter*

5.1 What this chapter does

5.1.1 Objectives

While Chapter 4 examines the broader role of institutions in shaping sustainable consumption, Chapter 5 focuses on a particular aspect of sustainable consumption – the SE, which is part of the change strategy in the strength of sustainable consumption continuum introduced in §2.1. This is highlighted on the prior cover page. The chapter addresses the research question: How do institutions impact consumers' trust in the SE?

5.1.2 Link to sustainable consumption

This section outlines arguments for and against the SE in terms of its impact on sustainability and its potential as a form of sustainable consumption. The sustainability of the SE remains contested. Celebrated for its potential to address social, environmental, and economic aspects of sustainability (Heinrichs, 2013) and praised for revolutionising traditional consumption patterns (Botsman & Rogers, 2010), the SE surfaces paradoxes that challenge its sustainability goals (Acquier et al., 2017). As the SE scales globally, tension emerges between its foundational sustainability objectives and the forces of commercialisation (Martin, 2016; Öberg, 2024).

One key issue is resource overuse driven by increased demand. Lower access costs lead to a rebound effect where savings from shared consumption increase overall consumption, raising the environmental footprint (Cohen, 2017; Meshulam et al., 2024). This effect is pronounced in travel and accommodation sectors, where ease and affordability encourage more frequent and longer travel, contributing to higher carbon emissions (Gössling & Michael Hall, 2019; Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). Additionally, inconsistent standards and regulations across SE platforms can exacerbate local issues, such as housing shortages in tourist-heavy areas, challenging the social equity aspect of sustainability (Koens et al., 2018). Economic disparities may also threaten local economies due to wealth concentration among platform owners and the destabilisation of traditional businesses (Richardson, 2015; Zervas et al., 2017).

Contemporaneously, the SE is seen as a potential solution for sustainable development (Heinrichs, 2013), addressing many UN SDGs (Boar et al., 2020; Pérez-Pérez et al., 2021) through sustainable value creation in SE business models (Laukkanen & Tura, 2020). Efficient asset utilisation can reduce demand for new infrastructure, lowering the environmental footprint associated with production and construction (Eckelman & Kalmykova, 2023). Economically, the SE provides income opportunities, supports local

economies, and creates jobs, especially in developing countries (Fang et al., 2016; Kaushal, 2018; Shereni, 2019). Socially, accommodation sharing increases access to affordable accommodations, promotes cultural exchange, and enhances community engagement and social inclusivity (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). At the individual level, motivations for engaging in the SE include several social, environmental, and economic factors (Böcker & Meelen, 2017; Kurisu et al., 2021), and its adoption has been associated with improved consumption patterns (Retamal, 2019; Sandes et al., 2019).

The SE's sustainability impacts vary regionally and among stakeholders. In some developed economies, accommodation sharing is often framed negatively in terms of urban liveability but positively for its economic contributions, service quality, and socio-economic equity (Enochsson et al., 2021). Similarly, a developing market perspective emphasises the definition of sustainability to include social and economic aspects alongside environmental ones. For example, the SE improves social well-being by providing income opportunities, addressing underemployment (Akbar & Bodhanya, 2021) and appealing to minimalistic and environmentally conscious tourists (Rasheed & Balakrishnan, 2024). Additionally, overtourism is less of a concern in developing economies relying on tourism income for poverty alleviation and socio-economic development (e.g., Khan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the framing of sustainability differs across accommodation SE platforms, whereby free platforms, like Couchsurfing, involve no monetary exchange, focusing on cultural exchange and social connections; reciprocal platforms, like HomeExchange, involve home swaps based on mutual benefit; and rental platforms, like Airbnb, are profit-driven property rentals (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2017). Sustainability frames include: community building and environmental awareness but also insurance and legal challenges (free platforms); prioritisation of social connections over economic gains (reciprocal platforms); and economic benefits and resource efficiency from reduced new constructions but also challenges of unregulated markets and environmental rebound effects (rental platforms) (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2017).

Despite studies highlighting the SE's negative sustainability impacts, dismissing it as a sustainable pathway is premature. Studies present mixed impacts, prioritising different facets of sustainability – social, environmental, or economic (Eckelman & Kalmykova, 2023; Juvan et al., 2017). Developing a standardised mechanism to evaluate the SE's social, environmental, and economic impacts holistically, akin to traditional companies, is essential (Wruk, Oberg & Friedrich-Schieback, 2019). Furthermore, specific conditions are recommended to be incorporated into overarching regulatory principles

(X. Liu & Chen, 2020) and governance (Mi & Coffman, 2019) to support a more sustainable SE. These include ensuring the durability of products or services even with increased usage, interoperability across various platforms, and the renewability of resources to facilitate a circular economy for end-of-life products, as well as implementing consumer restrictions to reduce the misuse of shared property rights (X. Liu & Chen, 2020).

> Over time, the sharing economy will also help foster structural change towards lower carbon economies, but the empirical evidence for these effects is, as yet, *mixed* [emphasis added], and there is a great deal of room for optimisation strategies, just as there is a pressing need for more research to inform evidence-based policy-making. (Mi & Coffman, 2019, p. 3)

Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from platform operators, regulators, and the community of SE prosumers "to incorporate environmental limits, social foundations, and care into everyday life" (Ivanova & Büchs, 2023, p. 790). By intentionally incorporating sustainability into SE business models, its transformative potential as a model for sustainable consumption can be harnessed (Curtis & Mont, 2020).

The rent-seeking behaviours of the SE stem from its paradox – introducing a social model within a capitalist framework. Despite capitalist co-optation, the core socio-cultural institution of the SE, built on trust, remains sound. Currently, the SE is structured to encourage commercialisation and rent-seeking through institutions, within a capitalist model that generates excess and captures rent, causing the rebound effects and externalities. The growth-driven nature of these platforms exacerbates these issues, creating a conflict between the economic logic of the institutions that support commercialisation and the sociocultural institution of sharing. Recognising the profit-seeking nature of institutions is essential, as restructuring the SE to emphasise trust within small communities and groups can enhance its sustainability value proposition.

Although addressing rent-seeking behaviour and its externalities was beyond the study's scope, this paper examines the socio-cultural institutions of trust, demonstrating their effectiveness by establishing the sources of trust (platform, other consumers, external service providers). The SE has the potential to champion sustainability outcomes, but its true value lies in generating trust and addressing the externalities of commercialisation. In acknowledging the existing problems, this paper establishes an institutional framework

for trust. Future research should explore SE platforms that overcome the negativity of large, rent-seeking entities while preserving the inherent value of sharing.

5.1.3 Link to institutional theory

The research aligns with neo-institutional theory's determinant approach characterised by a relatively higher degree of stasis and the role of pressures in shaping both organisational and individual behaviour (Scott, 2014). This subfield is highlighted on the prior cover page. In this study, star ratings assigned to service providers by other consumers serve as normative institutions – collective benchmarks that set expectations for service providers and prospective consumers. As descriptive norms, these ratings reflect aggregated judgments of previous consumers and embody socially constructed meanings that influence future consumer interactions, as subpar ratings could adversely affect their future interactions on the platform.

Similarly, ratings assigned to service providers by independent assessors serve as regulatory institutions. They act as heuristics for prospective consumers, informing them of the expected level of service and thereby influencing their choices.

The brand of the SE platform is conceptualised as a cultural-cognitive institution, shaping the social construction of reality and consequently, organisational and individual actions (Scott, 2014). In this regard, the brand serves as a cognitive schema—a shared mental model—that consumers use to interpret and navigate different SE platforms. The brand embodies a complex set of taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations about the platform's reliability, security, and overall service quality, which consumers have internalised. This schema is shaped by the conceptions that define social reality and the frames through which meaning is constructed (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), thereby influencing how consumers interact with the platform.

5.1.4 Target journal

Chapter 5 has been submitted to the journal, Information Technology & People (ITP), which is rated 3 by the AJG and A by the ABDC. The editor has recommended publication, pending revision and resubmission. It is currently in the review stage, awaiting scores from peer reviewers. Given the journal's focus on understanding new social definitions of institutions due to technological change, the chapter's results highlight a shift towards trusting decentralised reputation signals – a new socially constructed 'institution' – rather than formal regulators in the SE.

Title: Peer pressure trumps authority when trusting the sharing economy

Abstract

Information asymmetry characterises the sharing economy's (SE) consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions. Through institutional theory, this study sets out to determine the influence of regulatory versus platform-driven normative and cultural-cognitive reputation effects – at the micro, meso and macro levels within the C2C ecosystem – on consumers' trust and intention to participate in this emergent form of sustainable consumption, that is, the SE. Multiple-indicator-multiple-cause covariance-based structural equation modelling was performed using data from 635 respondents exposed to a between-subjects experimental vignette online survey. Normative (service provider's platform reputation derived from other consumers) and cultural-cognitive (platform brand) institutions were better able to create consumer trust at the micro and meso levels than regulatory (service provider's independently derived reputation) institutions at the macro level. When consumers trust the SE, a service provider's reputation derived from previous consumers supplants the reputation derived from an authoritative source. Policymakers and platform organisations should consider under which scenarios different combinations of institutional mechanisms will foster greater trust and participation in this developing model of sustainable consumption. This study clarifies at what levels (micro, meso, macro) trust is created, how (institutional mechanisms) trust is conveyed, and who (service provider, platform organisation) consumers trust when they intend to participate in the SE. The results suggest that against prevailing normative and cultural-cognitive institutions, regulatory institutions may be less effective in legitimising the SE from the consumer's viewpoint.

Keywords

Sharing economy, trust, institutional theory, structural equation modelling

Authors

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5.2   Introduction

In the SE, consumers participate in services that do not necessarily have the same quality and safety standards found in the traditional economy. As part of the SE phenomenon, digital-platform organisations facilitate the transfer of value from underused assets between individual consumers and service providers, contributing to sustainable consumption from reduced resource usage (Dabbous & Tarhini, 2019) and the resultant disintermediation of traditional sector incumbents (Gerwe & Silva, 2020; Hawlitschek et al., 2018; Wirtz et al., 2019). The SE's virtual nature enables platforms to circumvent traditional regulation (Davlembayeva et al., 2020) because platforms are not subject to the same standards applicable to traditional sectors (Lee et al., 2020), resulting in information asymmetry (Akerlof, 1978; Sundararajan, 2016). Furthermore, the potential for manipulating information on the platform in the service provider's favour is bringing consumers' trust in the SE into question (Zervas et al., 2021). The extent to which consumers trust the SE has implications for its legitimacy and longer-term institutionalisation within a set of values, norms, and rules, which can advance or constrain this emergent market form.

Trust is fundamental for consumers' participation in the SE, ameliorating both the lack of standards and information asymmetries, as well as for the continued legitimacy of all players in the C2C ecosystem. Naturally, marketers of such digital-platform organisations build trust to facilitate how the different parties interact and interchange value (Rangaswamy et al., 2020). Additionally, normative, cultural-cognitive and regulatory institutions (Scott, 2014) impact how resources are coordinated in creating value (Edvardsson et al., 2014) and shaping consumption markets (Chaney & Slimane, 2014). Through the above line of enquiry, this paper draws on trust literature and institutional theory to determine how institutions impact consumers' trust and intention to participate in the SE.

In doing so, this paper responds to calls to analyse trust of "a platform business on multiple levels" (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017, p. 768; Lumineau & Schilke, 2018). Trust is enabled at three levels. First, platforms self-regulate their offerings through interaction-based trust at a micro level, based on a service provider's reputation derived from previous consumers' interactions (Ert & Fleischer, 2019), consistent with the normative institutional pillar. Second, institution-based trust is developed at a meso level stemming from the brand's reliability (Akhmedova et al., 2021) in an unregulated space, representative of the cultural-cognitive institutional pillar. Combined, these levels help in

"understanding the evolving interplay between decentralized digital cues and centralized corporate brands in generating consumer trust at scale" (Sundararajan, 2019, p. 32). Third, consonant with the regulatory institutional pillar, regulators set standards to reduce moral hazards and create macro-level, institution-based trust (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021) typical of the traditional economy. As platforms gain legitimacy through consumer adoption, prevailing institutions can become increasingly regulative as regulators implement policies applicable to incumbents (Chalmers & Matthews, 2019). Specifically, "is the trust engendered by reputation systems as strong as consumers' trust in formal regulators?" (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p. 11).

Therefore, this study sets out to answer the question: does traditional regulation inspire more trust, or will platform-driven interventions continue to engender trust, irrespective of regulatory oversight? In answering this question, the study determines the extent to which decentralised platform reputation of service providers, the centralised platform brand and regulatory-independent reputation of service providers at the micro, meso and macro levels, respectively, influence consumers' trust and intention to participate in the SE. This research contributes to the SE literature in four ways. First, consumers' trust in the service provider and intention to participate in the SE are significantly influenced by the normative aspect of the service provider's platform reputation, derived from other consumers' (micro) interactions. Second, this study confirms the risk-reducing role of the brand's cultural-cognitive dimension in engendering institution-based trust in the platform (meso); however, consumers' intention to participate in the SE relies more on the trust of the service provider than the platform. Third, institution-based trust from the service provider's regulatory independent reputation (macro) plays a limited role in SE trust-building. Lastly, when the service provider's normative and regulatory reputational dimensions are evaluated together, the resulting trust in the service provider is skewed towards higher normative platform ratings – the existence of a rating floor.

This paper is organised as follows. The next section (§5.3) integrates trust and institutional pillars across these three levels to produce a novel trust model. Section 5.4 outlines the quantitative approach to data collection, validation, and analysis, resulting in a revised model (§5.5), which is discussed in relation to extant literature (§5.6). The paper concludes with theoretical and practical implications, research limitations and further research pathways (§5.6), followed by an appendix (§5.7).

5.3 Theoretical background

5.3.1 Trust in the sharing economy

Trust research is exceptionally diverse and interpreted differently based on its disciplinary roots. From interpersonal relationships to organisational and societal settings, trust has been theorised as an essential lubricant in situations where the trustor depends on the trustee against the backdrop of uncertainty and risk (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Although the SE is a broad phenomenon, core definitional aspects – private individual interaction, digital platform enablement, leveraging underutilised assets – differentiates this new socio-economic system from other market forms (Gerwe & Silva, 2020). These characteristics of the SE underscore the need for trust. Whereas trust is described dyadically between trustor and trustee (Mayer et al., 1995), interacting in the SE requires three parties: the consumer, the service provider and the platform. Thus, consumers have to trust service providers who are consumers themselves rather than providers affiliated with the brands of traditional firms. The SE's novelty (Belk, 2014) comes from its digital platform-enabled stranger sharing (Schor, 2016; Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018). Yet this entails risk, such as when shared personal assets (like accommodation space or vehicles) are damaged (Schor, 2016), misrepresented (Hong et al., 2019) or misused by previous consumers (Jin et al., 2020). Therefore, consumers need to feel comfortable relinquishing control and interacting with service-provider strangers – the cornerstone of the SE.

The uncertainty, risks and interdependence among peers are all pre-conditions for developing trust (McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Rousseau et al., 1998). Normally, regulation would mitigate risks, boosting trust in the SE as an institution providing recourse (Sundararajan, 2019) and inducing compliant behaviours (Ferrari, 2016). However, by design, the SE does not have external enforcement mechanisms. Because of the difficulty of implementing formal mechanisms like state-sponsored regulation to mitigate SE risks, interventions such as interaction-based and institution-based trust show some promise.

Interaction-based trust is "built on the basis of repeated face-to-face contacts" (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011, p. 283). In a SE context, interaction-based trust develops from technology-enabled interactions between individuals and is replicated at scale as consumers rate their service encounter with the provider. Consequently, interaction-

based trust is inferred from the platform's aggregative feedback mechanisms, such as other consumers' reviews (Cheng et al., 2019) and ratings (Abrahao et al., 2017) of SE service providers. As an adaptive feedback mechanism (Havakhor et al., 2018), a service provider's reputation is derived endogenously within the C2C ecosystem and varies with how other consumers assess the service provider. In other words, the platform organisation conveys the trustworthiness of its service providers to potential consumers through the service providers' reputational profiles (Resnick et al., 2000). Can these decentralised forms of platform-derived reputation be adequate substitutes for trust garnered through formal regulatory mechanisms? Although the impersonal nature of business renders interaction-based trust insufficient on its own (Bachmann, 2001), reputational capital derived from platforms was probably not even conceived two decades ago, well before the emergence of the SE.

Institution-based trust is a decision that "actors make in the light of specific institutional arrangements" (Bachmann, 2011, p. 207) so that "one believes that favorable conditions are in place that are conducive to situational success in an endeavor" (McKnight & Chervany, 2001, p. 45). Such favourable conditions or institutional arrangements strengthen consumers' trust in the services of traditional-economy participants. Regulators create institution-based trust through independent reputation mechanisms based on predetermined standards (Bartlett et al., 2013), with which organisations must comply. In this regard, service providers' reputations are based on an objective feedback mechanism (Havakhor et al., 2018), whereby the assessment of the service providers is performed outside the C2C ecosystem to build trust. Conversely, when regulatory mechanisms are absent, platform organisations rely on their own brands to create institution-based trust – for example, through secure transactions (Kong et al., 2020) and guarantee policies (Akhmedova et al., 2021). As such, institution-based trust is intrinsic to the organisation and has a performance element (Hudson, 2006; North, 1990). Therefore, to be perceived as legitimate, consumers expect the organisation to perform competently and with integrity within the set of norms, beliefs, values, and rules (Mayer et al., 1995; Scott, 2014). Hence, trust within an institutional context directs parties' behaviours, necessitating institution-based trust over and above interaction-based trust

5.3.2 *An institutional theoretical perspective*

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA, 2017), marketing is defined as "the activity, set of *institutions* [emphasis added], and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers,

clients, partners, and society at large". Elaborating on the definition's institutional component, Gundlach and Wilkie (2009) explain that the marketing field includes "the institutions that both individually and collectively help facilitate and govern these activities (e.g., governmental agencies, legislators, courts, professional associations, social norms, ethics and individual values)" (p. 262). They contextualise "that marketing systems … are a part of marketing as are social processes (e.g., regulations and norms)" (Gundlach & Wilkie, 2009, p. 261). Therefore, marketing and Scott's (2014) three institutional pillars are intertwined.

Both formal and informal rules make up institutions, comprising cultural-cognitive, normative and regulatory dimensions that work together to constrain and enable behaviour (North et al., 2009; Scott, 2014). As an emergent market form, the SE relies on building its legitimacy; thus, leveraging different institutions matters in institutionalising the SE. So, consumers' trust and intention to participate in the SE can be shaped by the norms and values that are expected (normative institutions), the socially constructed meaning that people take for granted (cultural-cognitive institutions), and rules that govern and sanction their consumption in the SE (regulatory institutions) (Scott, 2014).

Given this background, "(1) consumers (i.e., entities that consume offerings), (2) firms (i.e., entities that create offerings) and channels (i.e., entities that facilitate access to offerings), and (3) regulators (i.e., entities that govern the exchange of offerings)" are central in shaping the institutions and marketing in the SE (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p. 9). Central to the SE is the individual consumer's flexibility as a prosumer, consuming service offerings and providing their underutilised assets to other consumers, therefore also playing a service provider role. Indeed, these institutions and their associated use of institutional mechanisms facilitate value from the offerings (Duncan, 1920, as cited in Rosenbloom, 2013) and coordinate resources across different players (Edvardsson et al., 2014) through the SE platform. By drawing on institutional theory, this study examines the influence of normative, cultural-cognitive, and regulatory institutions on consumers' trust and intention to participate in the SE

5.3.3 Levels of analysis in the sharing economy

Several studies have examined the SE at micro, meso and macro levels, for example, what drives individuals to take part in the SE (micro), characteristics of the platform (meso) and regulatory aspects (macro) (Maurer et al., 2020; Trenz et al., 2018). In the

SE, trust has primarily been examined at the micro and meso levels (for example, Mao et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019), but research remains nascent at the macro level. Theorising the SE at multiple levels is currently under-researched; thus, "integration of variables at various levels will have the potential to push [the] SE field forward" (Cheng, 2016, p. 68).

At a micro level, consumers interact with other consumers in sharing a service, which is mediated through a platform at a meso level and ultimately governed (or not) at a macro level through applicable standards and rules. In consequence, illustrating the SE along these levels (Figure 5.1) helps clarify the sources and levels from which trust originates, the means of creating it, and the types of trust that are then imbued in the referent object being trusted.
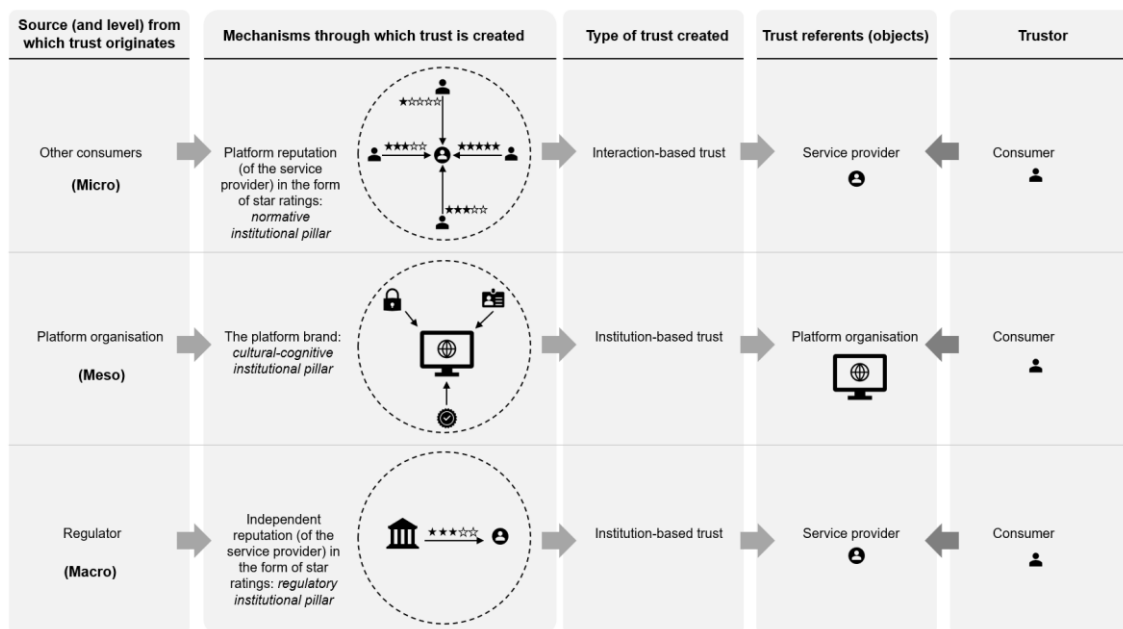
Figure 5.1: Levels of analysis in the sharing economy

Note. Source: Author's own

5.3.4 Micro-level trust from (normative) platform reputation of service provider

In micro-level interactions, consumers want service providers to act in their best interests and be dependable as far as their service offerings are concerned. McKnight and Chervany (2001) conceptualise this as trusting beliefs and intentions, indicative of interpersonal trust. Because interactions occur virtually through the SE platform prior to service delivery, interaction-based trust is a more apt term than interpersonal trust. At this micro level, trust is a product of the provider's ability, integrity and benevolence (McKnight & Chervany, 2001) in e-commerce (Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006) and SE settings (Tussyadiah & Park, 2018; Yang et al., 2019). Interacting 'at a distance' becomes difficult for the consumer and SE service provider to reduce asymmetrical information and build mutual trust. This dilemma is what platforms seek to resolve, with consumers basing their level of trust on previous consumers' interactions with the SE service provider in question, thus deriving a form of reputation from others – platform reputation.

Rather than explicitly assessing the service provider's ability, integrity and benevolence, the platform fabricates a proxy interaction-based trust. By aggregating other consumers' ratings of a service provider (Abrahao et al., 2017), the platform infers the service provider's reputation (Vavilis et al., 2014), which builds interaction-based trust. Interestingly, consumers base their decisions on the interactions of other consumers with whom they have not interacted. As such, platform reputation takes the form of a normative institution in that it embodies the role of shared norms (Scott, 2014). Specifically, other consumers' ratings of the service provider reflect a descriptive norm, as they indicate what most other consumers have done, thus serving as an effective decision-making heuristic (Cialdini et al., 1991). Is it really optimal for consumers to follow the crowd's wisdom (Kremer et al., 2014) without direct clues from the SE service providers themselves? Indeed, this appears to be an effective trust-building mechanism in the SE, with a service provider's reputation inferred through online reviews and star ratings (Mao et al., 2020; Mauri et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019). Thus, a service provider's reputation is hypothesised to affect consumers' trust.

> *H1.* Platform reputation (PR) in the form of ratings of the SE service provider affects consumers' trust in the SE service provider (TSP).

> *H1a.* Low (1-star) PR ratings have a negative effect on TSP than medium (3-star) PR ratings.

H1b. High (5-star) PR ratings have a positive effect on TSP than medium (3-star) PR ratings.

5.3.5 *Meso-level trust from (cultural-cognitive) platform brand*

Although insurance and escrows generate institution-based trust, facilitating transactions (Zucker, 1986), corporate brands have replaced this formality (Möhlmann & Geissinger, 2018). Extending the concept of trust to brands, and in turn, companies managing such brands results in brand trust—"the confident expectations of the brand's reliability and intentions in situations entailing risk to the consumer" (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003, p. 37). Here, the brand's reliability is important in meeting the consumer's (trustor's) expectations, as well as the brand's intentions of protecting the consumer's welfare during unexpected problems (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). Consumers trust a brand that they equate with good service. Trust in a brand means that they believe in its intention and ability to deliver on its promises (Rajavi et al., 2019).

In web-based contexts, brands signal quality and consistency, which engenders consumer trust (Shankar et al., 2002) through structural assurances that convey a sense of safety (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Similar to e-commerce, branded SE platforms generate institution-based trust through structural assurances, such as website reliability (Wang & Jeong, 2018); transaction security (Akhmedova et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019); service-provider standards, and non-discrimination, privacy and refund policies (Wu & Shen, 2018); verification systems (Shmidt, 2020); governance aimed at preventing peer exploitation (Sabitzer et al., 2018); and standard contracts and payment systems that reduce potential friction among users (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). These all create an appealing brand for the platform as it strives to acquire and retain users (Akhmedova et al., 2021), which in turn facilitates trust for consumers in the organisation's ability and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995). The brand embraces a cultural-cognitive institutional dimension because consumers form a taken-for-granted conception (Scott, 2014) of what they can expect as the platform becomes mainstream. This popularity is evidenced in the current discourse of using the brand's name as a verb, such as 'Ubering' (Soltani et al., 2021) and 'Airbnb-ing' (Krause & Aschwanden, 2020).

H2. The platform brand (B) positively affects consumers' trust in the SE platform (TP).

5.3.6 *Macro-level trust from (regulatory) independent reputation of service provider*

Institution-based trust is framed at a meso level for the platform business but is also "intrinsically linked to the macro-level arrangements of the business system" (Bachmann, 2011, p. 206) and can be conceptualised through the legitimacy obtained from a sector's standard-setting process. Drawing on institutional theory, regulatory support (Shao et al., 2020) and certifications (Lawrence, 1999) drive institution-based trust (Zucker, 1986). Accreditation institutionalises credibility, which is gained by complying with specific standards (Bartlett et al., 2013). When accreditation is conducted independently, it can reliably assess competence, act as a substitute for reputation (Pavlou, 2002) and alleviate information asymmetry (Martin-Fuentes et al., 2018). Such governance contrasts with service-provider certifications (Lu et al., 2021; Shao and Yin, 2019) conducted by platforms that lack the objectivity of independent institutions. Standard-setting and certification of SE services can act as regulatory mechanisms (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021). At a macro level, an official institution assesses service providers' offerings according to specific standards by assigning star ratings (Fang et al., 2016). Besides its reputational benefits (Sutherland et al., 2021), accreditation also influences trust and willingness to invest in a crowdfunding platform scenario (Kang et al., 2016). While independent bodies have employed the normative institution of accreditation, tensions between platform organisations and traditional sector incumbents are being met with certain regulators adopting a more coercive stance, wherein standard-setting is used to control the sector and interests of incumbents (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2020). In Scott's (2014) words, "institutions supported by one pillar [normative] may, as time passes and circumstances change, be sustained by different pillars [regulative]" (p. 62).

> *H3.* Independent reputation (IR) in the form of ratings of the SE service provider affects consumers' TSP.

> *H3a.* Low (1-star) IR ratings have a negative effect on TSP than medium (3-star) IR ratings.

> *H3b.* High (5-star) IR ratings have a positive effect on TSP than medium (3-star) IR ratings.

Could the formal rating become a 'hygiene factor' for market entry rather than discriminatory selection? "From a consumer perspective, is the trust engendered by reputation systems as strong as consumers' trust in formal regulators?" (Eckhardt et al., 2019, p. 11) because "in most empirically observed institutional forms, we observe not one, single element at work but varying combinations of elements" (Scott, 2014, p. 70). Informed by Eckhardt et al. (2019), an official institution's independent assessment of a service provider's quality (that is, independent reputation) provides a useful comparison to that derived from a platform (that is, platform reputation). Juxtaposing the two perspectives offers a novel view of consumers' trust perceptions in micro and macro contexts.

> *H4.* Combining PR and IR ratings affects consumers' trust in the service provider (TSP) at different rating levels.

5.3.7 Intention to participate in the sharing economy

Key drivers behind consumers' changing perceptions, intentions and actions are the evolving cultural, institutional and technological norms (Zhang & Chang, 2020), which have permeated consumers' lives through the SE. Consumers' intention to participate in the SE can be defined as their likelihood to request or use a sharing service (Mittendorf et al., 2019).

Sellers with better reputations tend to attract more customers (Tadelis, 2016). Consumers' intentions are influenced by their trust in a service provider in areas such as e-commerce (Fang et al., 2014), social commerce (Hajli, 2020), accommodation sharing (Mao et al., 2020; Nisar et al., 2020) and ride sharing (Mittendorf et al., 2019).

> *H5.* Trust in the SE service provider (TSP) influences consumers' intention to participate in the SE (IP).

When a service provider's rating was experimentally manipulated, higher values signalled a greater willingness to use the service (Rosenthal et al., 2020). Additionally, higher ratings strongly indicated that service providers would remain in the market, thus serving as an indirect proxy of consumers' support of participation in the SE service (Leoni, 2020).

H6. The relationship between PR and consumers' intention to participate in the SE (IP) is mediated by trust in the service provider (TSP).

Correspondingly, consumers value standard-setting as it leads to more bookings and greater market share (Ballina et al., 2020).

H7. The relationship between IR and consumers' intention to participate in the SE (IP) is mediated by trust in the service provider (TSP).

Consumers' intentions to participate in the SE manifest when they trust the platform. "Safety measures, guarantees, website quality, service quality, and reputation of the platform" (p. 494) are trust dimensions in a platform (Ter Huurne et al., 2017), which are part of the brand. Extant literature has demonstrated a causal relationship between trust in platforms and consumers' intentions to participate in the SE (Lee et al., 2018; Mittendorf, 2018; Mittendorf et al., 2019). Therefore, platforms can encourage consumers to use their services by signalling that their brand can be trusted (Akhmedova et al., 2020).

H8. Trust in the SE platform (TP) influences consumers' intention to participate in the SE (IP).

H9. The relationship between the platform brand (B) and consumers' intention to participate in the SE (IP) is mediated by trust in the SE platform (TP).

Figure 5.2 organises the nine hypothesises into a conceptual model.
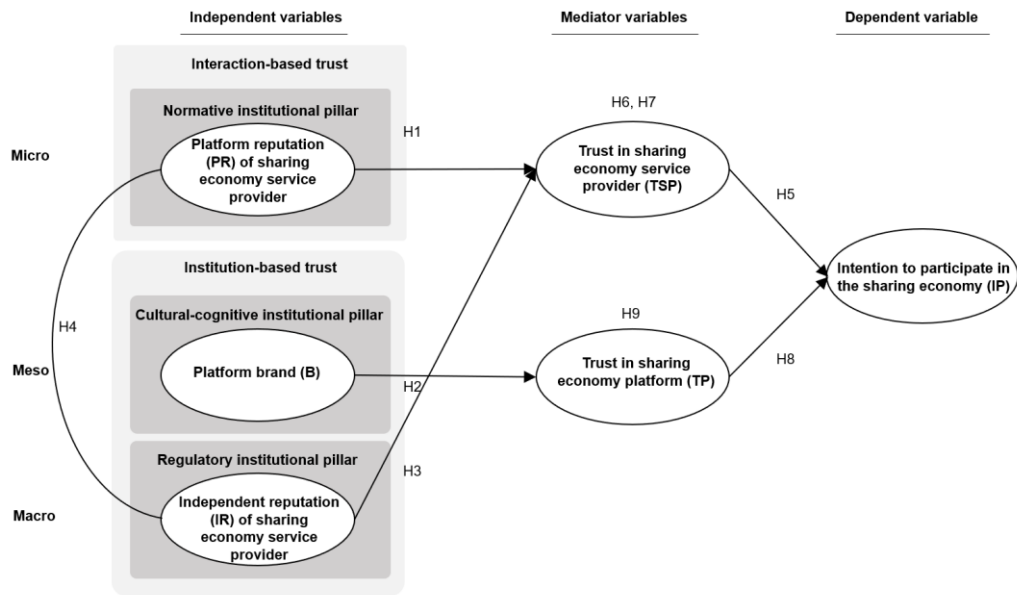
Figure 5.2: Conceptual model
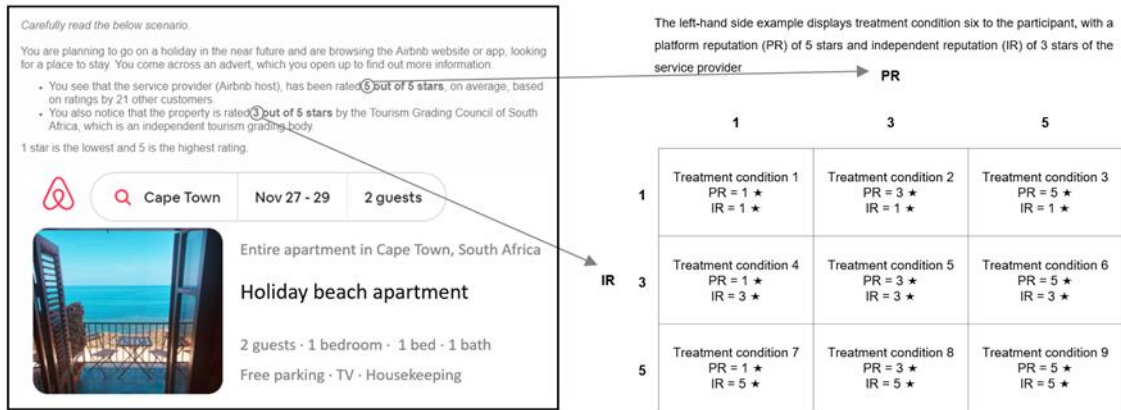
Note. Source: Author's own

5.4 Methodology

5.4.1 Research design

The research was based on the accommodation sharing-economy platform, Airbnb, in South Africa. A between-subjects experimental vignette (factorial design) was administered through an online, cross-sectional survey (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), which offset the low external validity of experiments and low internal validity of surveys (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). The study targeted individuals who knew what Airbnb offered; had stayed or were considering staying in short-term accommodation; and were familiar with South Africa. The population was estimated at 13.5 million individuals (including foreigners) by inferring the demand for short-term accommodation from publicly available data (Airbnb, 2018; Statistics South Africa, 2020).

Survey participants were recruited through self-selection sampling, primarily from the authors' email and LinkedIn networks. Using snowball sampling, participants who completed the survey were asked to pass it on to others that met the qualifying criteria. Out of 760 responses received during September and October 2020, 125 invalid responses were removed, yielding 635 responses for analysis.

The platform reputation and independent reputation of the service provider were operationalised with Airbnb's and the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa's (TGCSA) 5-star rating scales, respectively. Short-term accommodation incumbents operate in an institutionalised sector (Weber et al., 2019), where the standardisation of their services by the TGCSA constitutes an effective quality indicator (Du Plessis & Saayman, 2011). PR and IR had three levels each, with each participant exposed to one of nine (3^2) evenly presented and automatically randomised hypothetical vignette treatment conditions (Figure 5.3). Participants then responded to 14 Likert-scale statements, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), which were based on reflectively measured indicators (Appendix, Table A5.1) adapted from Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003) and Mittendorf et al. (2019).

Figure 5.3: Vignette and treatment conditions

Note. Source: Author's own

5.4.2 Data validation

First, an exploratory factor analysis (Bartlett's test of sphericity (χ^2=4734.473, df=66, p<0.001; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy =0.865) returned four factors that accounted for 69% of the variance during maximum likelihood extraction, while two cross-loaded indicators were removed after oblique rotation (Pallant, 2001). Second, multicollinearity was not an issue because for TSP, TP and B, the tolerance values were above 0.1 (0.865, 0.419, 0.450, respectively), and the variance inflation factors were less than 3 (1.157, 2.388, 2.221, respectively) and within the preferred boundaries (Hair et al., 2010). Third, non-response bias was minimal (Appendix, Table A5.2) as responses from those who completed the survey from the start were not significantly different from those who completed it towards the end, according to Levene's test for homogeneity of variance (Fulton, 2018). Fourth, although Harman's single-factor test indicated that the total variance explained by one factor was only 37%, common method bias (CMB) was reduced by introducing a common latent factor in both the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation model using the Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) software.

Regarding the suitability of the survey indicator data, factor loadings were significant and larger than the 0.5 threshold for standardised loadings (Appendix, Table A5.1), confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). The measurement model demonstrated an acceptable fit as all values complied with conventional thresholds (Appendix, Table A5.3). Convergent validity and reliability were obtained because the average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability per construct were above 0.5 and 0.7,

respectively (Hair et al., 2010; Hancock & Mueller, 2001). The AVE square root was above any inter-factor correlations (below bold diagonal figures in Appendix, Table A5.3), thus complying with Fornell and Larcker's (1981) discriminant validity condition. Furthermore, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) was below the 0.85 threshold (Appendix, Table A5.4), demonstrative of discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

5.4.3 Data analysis

Since the research included mostly normal data, a large sample and reflective constructs, covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) was performed in AMOS, which catered for control variables and mediation relationships (Appendix, Figure A5.1). Since experience and habits predict participatory intentions in online contexts (Abramova et al., 2015; Mittendorf et al., 2019; Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006), these were controlled. For the two mediators, the indirect paths for H6, H7 and H9 were calculated as the products of the paths that flow to and from the mediators with bootstrapping (Collier, 2020).

Indicator-coded dummy variables were created since PR and IR each had three levels. The 3-star dummies (for PR and IR) were zero-coded as the reference/control group (Collier, 2020) against which the 1-star and 5-star categories were compared in the direct-effects analysis. This research used multiple-indicator-multiple-cause (MIMIC) CB-SEM; however, the conventional multiplication of independent variables in a MIMIC model (Breitsohl, 2019) would not make sense with dummy variables. Therefore, to evaluate H4 in the factorial design, a model was created per treatment condition, complemented by ANOVA interaction graphs to aid visual interpretation.

5.5 Results

5.5.1 Demographics

Figure 4 shows that the sample included: more respondents who used the SE service (68%); slightly more men; a largely equivalent racial split; more individuals with tertiary education; mostly full-time, employed individuals; and almost all respondents having had online shopping experience. Just over half were aged 24–39 years, in line with previous studies (Mao et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019) and evidentiary of millennials being a target group for SE platforms (Amaro et al., 2019). The majority (83.94%) of the respondents were from South Africa, followed by Europe (5.51%), other African countries (5.04%), Asia (2.52%), North America (1.42%), Oceania (1.42%) and South America (0.16%).
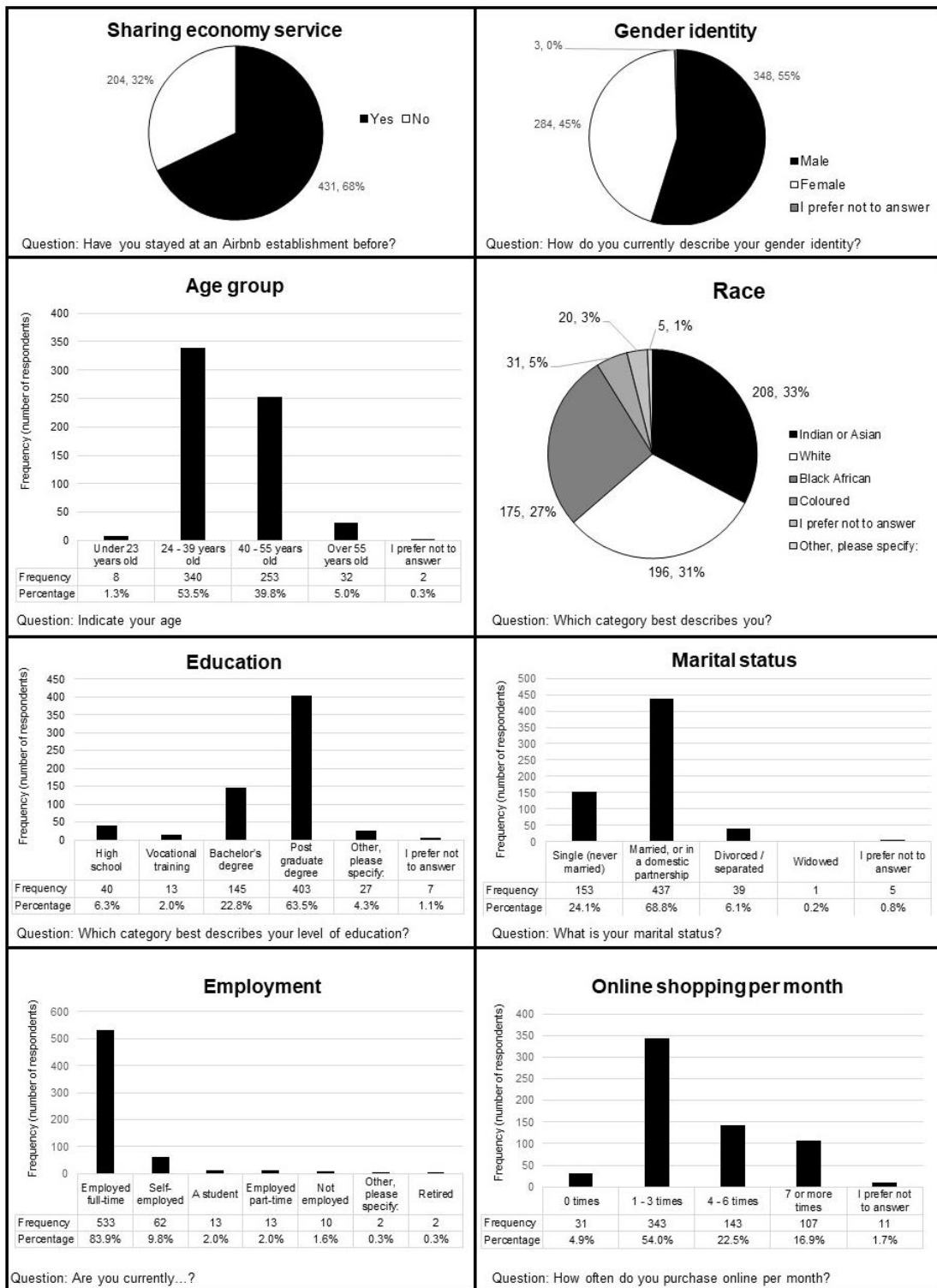
Figure 5.4: Demographic information

Note. Source: Author's own

5.5.2   Structural equation modelling results

5.5.2.1 Direct effects

Of the five direct hypotheses, *H1*, *H2*, *H5* and *H8* were supported; *H3* was not (Table 5.1). Relative to the PR 3-star reference, the 1-star rating (*H1a*) negatively influenced TSP. In contrast, the 5-star rating (*H1b*) had a stronger positive influence, underscoring that consumers have greater (lesser) interaction-based trust in service providers with 5-star (1-star) ratings relative to 3-stars. B had a positive effect on TP (*H2*), highlighting that consumers' institution-based trust in the platform organisation stems from the structural assurance of the platform brand. Relative to the IR 3-star reference, the 1-star rating (*H3a*) negatively influenced TSP, whereas the 5-star rating (*H3b*) was insignificant, demonstrating the inconclusive influence of IR on consumers' institution-based trust in the service provider. Although the weakening in trust in the service provider is expected for the IR 1-star rating (*H3a*), the non-significant result for the IR 5-star rating (*H3b*) is not. This is suggestive of consumers' reduced reliance on the rating determined by an independent body compared to the rating derived from the collective experiences of other consumers. Lastly, consumers showed a positive intention to participate in the SE when they could trust the service provider (*H5*) and platform (*H8*). The positive effect of TSP on IP was greater (*H5*: β=0.564) than the effect of TP on IP (*H8*: β=0.201), suggesting that consumers place greater weight on the service provider than the platform as far as trust is concerned in determining their intention to participate in the SE.

Table 5.1: Direct effects for structural equation model

Hypothesised relationships	Standardised estimates	Unstandardised estimates	Standard error	t-values	p-values
H1. PR → TSP					
H1a: 1 ★ compared to 3 ★	-0.295	-0.592	0.124	-4.784	***
H1b: 5 ★ compared to 3 ★	0.321	0.644	0.124	5.211	***
H2. B → TP	0.482	0.226	0.064	3.534	***
H3. IR → TSP					
H3a: 1 ★ compared to 3 ★	-0.303	-0.606	0.123	-4.914	***
H3b: 5 ★ compared to 3 ★	-0.003	-0.007	0.120	-0.056	0.955
H5. TSP → IP	0.564	0.607	0.078	7.811	***
H8. TP → IP	0.201	0.427	0.125	3.417	***
Controls:					
AIRNB USER → TP	0.227	0.234	0.071	3.318	***
ONLINE SHOPPING → TSP	-0.089	-0.225	0.131	-1.719	0.086
Squared multiple correlation (R^2):					
TSP	0.371				
TP	0.316				
IP	0.535				

Model fit: χ^2 = 161.668; df = 67; p = 0.000, χ^2/df = 2.413, RMSEA = 0.047, CFI = 0.980, IFI = 0.980, NFI = 0.966, TLI = 0.963, RFI = 0.939

Note.

Dummies used for 1 ★ and 5 ★ ratings necessities the analysis of unstandardised estimates for H1 and H3.

*** p < 0.001

The model demonstrated good explanatory power (R^2) and model fit was within acceptable parameters.

5.5.2.2 Mediation effects

Table 5.2 shows that each of the three indirect effects on IP was significant (*H6*, *H9*), with no confidence interval crossing over zero, except for the 5-star IR rating as part of *H7*. For *H6*, the PR 1-star rating relative to the 3-star reference negatively affected IP directly from PR and indirectly through TSP, indicative of the stronger 3-star reference. Relative to the PR 3-star reference, the 5-star rating positively affected IP directly from PR and indirectly through TSP, indicative of the weaker 3-star reference. Since both direct and indirect effects for the PR → TSP → IP relationship were significant and had similar directional influences, partial and complementary mediation was present. For *H7*, the IR ratings did not directly influence IP because of the insignificant effects of the 1-star ($p=0.922$) and 5-star ($p=0.727$) ratings, relative to the 3-star reference, demonstrative of the indirect effect occurring fully through TSP (*H7*: $\beta = -0.368$, $p=0.001$). Thus, at the 1-star IR ratings, relative to the 3-star reference, IP was fully mediated by TSP, demonstrating that the IR rating had no direct influence on intention to participate. For *H9*, B positively influenced IP indirectly through TP and supported complete mediation. The result for *H9* highlights that the platform brand is insufficient by itself to influence consumers' intention to take part in the SE and that trust in the platform is a key intervening construct in transmitting the assurance of the brand.

Table 5.2: Mediation test using bootstrap analysis with a 95% confidence interval

Relationships	Direct effect			Indirect effect				Conclusion
	Estimate	t-value	p-value	Estimate	Confidence interval		p-value	
					Low	High		
H6. PR → TSP → IP								
1 ★ compared to 3 ★	-0.334	-3.588	0.001	-0.359	-0.599	-0.181	0.000	Partial complementary mediation
5 ★ compared to 3 ★	0.202	2.114	0.035	0.391	0.231	0.623	0.000	Partial complementary mediation
H7. IR → TSP → IP								
1 ★ compared to 3 ★	-0.009	-0.098	0.922	-0.368	-0.635	-0.180	0.001	Full mediation
5 ★ compared to 3 ★	-0.029	-0.350	0.727	-0.004	-0.153	0.145	0.978	Non-significant
H9. B → TP → IP	0.023	0.588	0.556	0.096	0.025	0.239	0.002	Full mediation

Note.

Unstandardised coefficients reported. Bootstrap sample = 5000 with replacement.

5.5.2.3 Factorial design

For *H4a*, Table 5.3 provides varied results for the interplay between PR and IR on TSP across the nine treatment conditions (TC). One-star PR rating TCs 1, 4 and 7 negatively influenced TSP, consistent with *H1a*, but 3-star PR rating TCs 2, 5 and 8 yielded insignificant regression coefficients. Five-star PR rating TCs 3, 6 and 9 positively influenced TSP, consistent with *H1b*.

At 1-star IR rating TCs 1, 2 and 3, regression coefficients were negative and statistically significant, consistent with *H3a*. Three-star IR ratings positively influenced TSP for TCs 4, 5 and 6. Five-star IR ratings positively influenced TSP for TCs 7, 8 and 9, but this was inconsistent with the non-significance of *H3b*. The non-significance, and therefore rejection of TCs 2, 5 and 8, is suggestive of consumers' non-endorsement of PR ratings lower than five stars.

Table 5.3: Results across nine treatment conditions

| Hypothesised relationships	Unstandardised estimates	Standard error	t-values	p-values	Conclusion
Treatment condition 1 (PR = 1 ★, IR = 1 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	-0.908	0.113	-8.047	***	Supported
H4b. IR → TSP	-0.570	0.109	-5.211	***	Supported
Treatment condition 2 (PR = 3 ★, IR = 1 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	-0.036	0.113	-0.320	0.749	Rejected
H4b. IR → TSP	-0.583	0.114	-5.106	***	Supported
Treatment condition 3 (PR = 5 ★, IR = 1 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	0.932	0.111	8.410	***	Supported
H4b. IR → TSP	-0.625	0.108	-5.765	***	Supported
Treatment condition 4 (PR = 1 ★, IR = 3 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	-0.938	0.116	-8.084	***	Supported
H4b. IR → TSP	0.260	0.112	2.327	0.020	Supported
Treatment condition 5 (PR = 3 ★, IR = 3 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	-0.017	0.117	-0.148	0.882	Rejected
H4b. IR → TSP	0.270	0.117	2.316	0.021	Supported
Treatment condition 6 (PR = 5 ★, IR = 3 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	0.943	0.114	8.248	***	Supported
H4b. IR → TSP	0.336	0.111	3.028	0.002	Supported
Treatment condition 7 (PR = 1 ★, IR = 5 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	-0.952	0.116	-8.175	***	Supported
H4b. IR → TSP	0.325	0.112	2.894	0.004	Supported
Treatment condition 8 (PR = 3 ★, IR = 5 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	0.009	0.118	0.080	0.937	Rejected
H4b. IR → TSP	0.332	0.117	2.839	0.005	Supported
Treatment condition 9 (PR = 5 ★, IR = 5 ★)					
H4a. PR → TSP	0.927	0.115	8.089	***	Supported
H4b. IR → TSP	0.310	0.111	2.783	0.005	Supported

Note.

Dummies used for star ratings necessities the analysis of unstandardised estimates for H4a and H4b.

*** $p < 0.001$

To visually interpret the interplay between PR and IR, Figure 5.5 shows their interaction effects on TSP across the nine TCs. Service providers were rewarded with higher trust at higher PR ratings, but the gradient was steeper for 5-star IR ratings (TCs 7, 8, 9). Service providers were penalised with lower trust in the presence of 1-star PR ratings (TCs 1, 4, 7), even at the highest IR rating (TC 7), whereas this penalty was not as extreme at 1-star IR ratings (TCs 1, 2, 3).
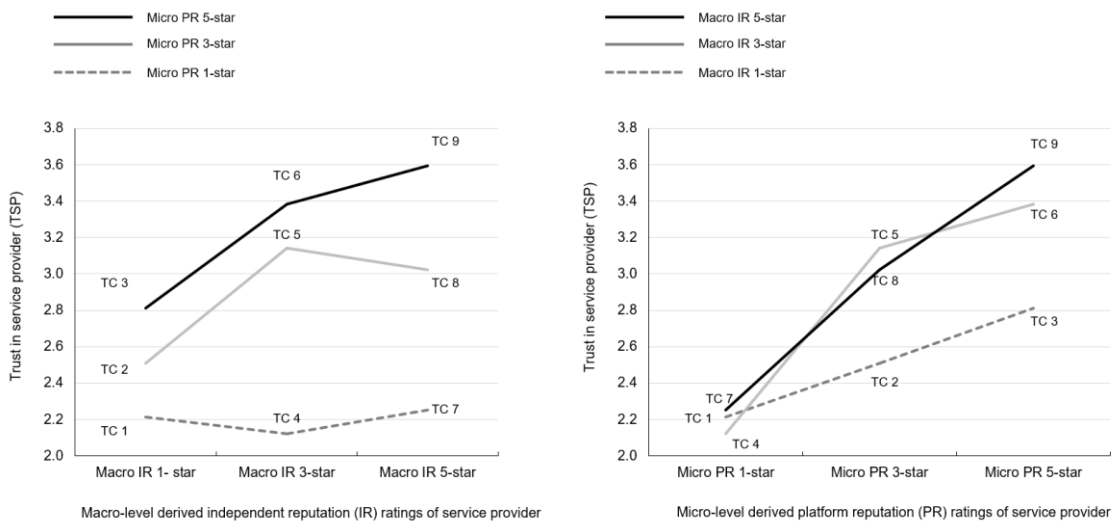
Figure 5.5: Interaction effects

Note. Source: Author's own

Consequently, Figure 5.6 outlines the structural model results with unsupported hypotheses (*H3*, *H4*) greyed out and partial mediation relationships (*H6*).
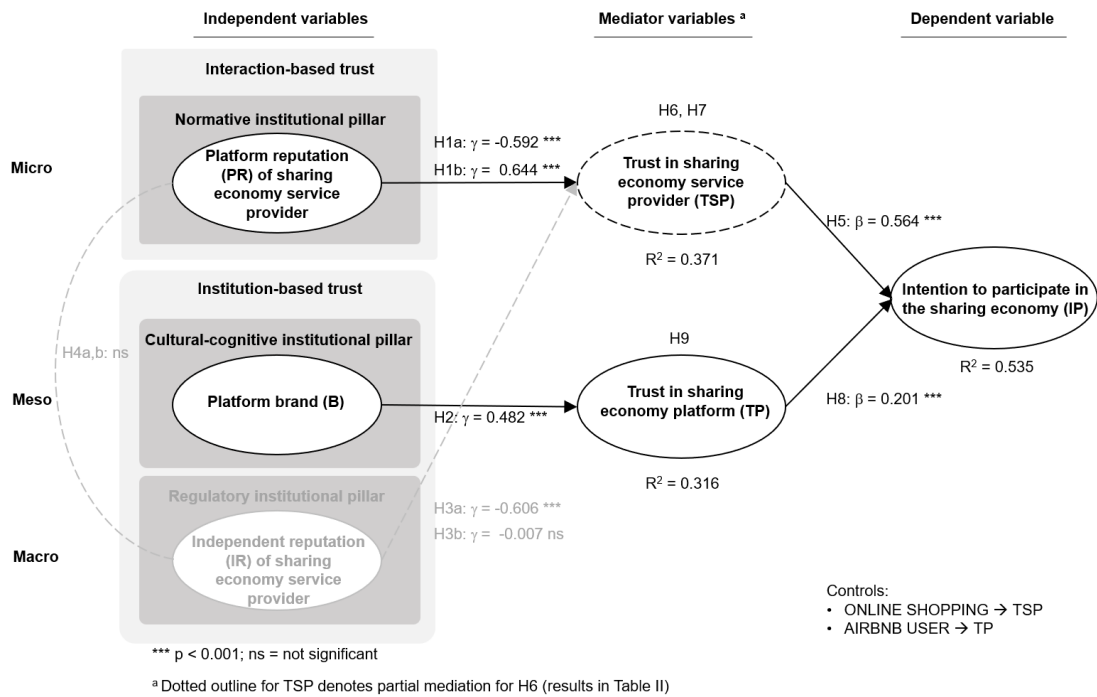
Figure 5.6: Structural model results

Note. Source: Author's own

5.6   Discussion and conclusion

This study responds to scholars' calls to examine trust in the SE (Ter Huurne et al., 2017) and the interplay at the micro, meso and macro levels (Breidbach & Brodie, 2017), as conceptualised in the platform reputation of service providers (Mittendorf et al., 2019), platform brands (Sundararajan, 2019) and independent reputation of service providers (Eckhardt et al., 2019), respectively. Although researchers have typically examined trust-generating antecedents at the micro (individual) level and meso (platform) level (see, for example, Mao et al., 2020; Mittendorf, 2018; Mittendorf et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2019), this is the first study to combine trust-generating mechanisms at the micro level (normative), meso level (cultural-cognitive) and macro level (regulatory), as well as to contrast their relative effects and impact on intent. In particular, the combined micro- and macro-level relationship, through PR and IR star ratings, respectively, has not been examined. Accordingly, the study clarifies which institutional mechanisms drive consumers' trust and intention to participate in the SE.

5.6.1 Contributions to theory

At a micro level, consumers' trust in the SE service provider and subsequent intention to participate are significantly influenced by the interactions among other consumers through the platform's normative reputational mechanism of star ratings of the service provider. First, the presence of interaction-based trust in the SE service provider (H1) supports the findings of other SE studies (Mao et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019), in which customer reviews influenced the level of trust in the service provider. Second, consumers' intention to participate in the SE, driven by interaction-based trust in the service provider (H5, H6), confirms the findings of some earlier studies (Mao et al., 2020; Mittendorf et al., 2019; Nisar et al., 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2020; Zloteanu et al., 2018) but stands in contrast to others (Ert et al., 2016; Li & Tsai, 2022). Ert et al. (2016) found no significance between ratings and booking intentions, as the former were overshadowed by another type of platform reputational capital – the service provider's photo.

At a meso level, this study confirms the risk-reducing role of brands in engendering institution-based trust in SE settings. First, the reliability associated with the platform's brand as a taken-for-granted cultural-cognitive institution supports the notion of institution-based trust in the platform (H2), in keeping with other SE studies (Akhmedova et al., 2021; Wang & Jeong, 2018; Wu & Shen, 2018; Yang et al., 2019). Second, consumers' intention to participate in the SE, driven by institution-based trust in the platform (H8, H9), mirrors earlier SE studies (Lee et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2020; Mittendorf, 2018; Mittendorf et al., 2019). Furthermore, consumers' intention to participate in the SE had a greater contribution from their trust in the service provider (derived from the platform reputation) than their trust in the platform (derived from the platform brand). This greater weighting towards the service provider underscores the peer-to-peer aspect of the SE through its primacy on individuals relative to the platform organisations responsible for the infrastructure. This result echoes the tendency for consumers to relate more closely to other individuals (service providers) rather than the platform (Costello & Reczek, 2020).

Contrary to expectations, institution-based trust conveyed through regulatory independent reputation in the form of star ratings of the service provider plays a limited role in fostering trust in the SE. First, the absence of institution-based trust in the service provider (H3) contrasts with prior SE studies (Kang et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2021), which found standard setting to influence trust in the service provider. Second, owing to

this insignificance (H3), trust in the service provider fully mediates the relationship with intention (H7); however, only at low ratings. This outcome contrasts with the notion of higher standard setting being linked to increased bookings (Ballina et al., 2020) and that "advanced socio-economic systems can hardly rely primarily on interaction-based forms of trust" (Bachmann, 2011, p. 206). It appears that "the changing peer-to-peer review internet platforms are challenging the need for quality assurance through such institutions [regulatory role players]." (Visser & Eastes, 2020). This suggests the power of informal (social) over formal (regulatory) rating systems and that trust is shedding its authoritative character and acquiring an interactive one (Botsman, 2015).

When the service provider's normative platform reputation and regulatory independent reputation from the micro and macro levels are combined, the resultant trust in the service provider (H4) is skewed towards higher platform ratings. The significant trust penalty on service providers for 1-star PR ratings (TCs 1, 4, 7) and the inconclusive results for 3-star PR ratings (TCs 2, 5, 8) suggest the existence of a rating floor approximating the 5-star level. Although the service provider's platform-derived star ratings appear to be more of a 'hygiene' factor, the SE's advent more than a decade ago has conditioned individuals to this form of platform-mediated exchange, such that this descriptive norm has become somewhat institutionalised. This is confirmed by Zervas et al. (2021) who found that 95% of service providers had an average 4.5- or 5-star PR rating. These highly positive skews in the SE can be attributed to the platform's minimisation of negative reviews (Zamani et al., 2019), consumers' reluctance to complain about individuals (Berg et al., 2020), the platform's behavioural conditioning function and the potential cost of service provider retaliation (Newlands et al., 2019). Additionally, service providers with low ratings often exit the SE due to reduced visibility from algorithmic prioritisation (Teubner & Glaser, 2018) and the demanding upkeep required to maintain high standards (Bosma, 2022), leading to a 'rich-get-richer' dynamic where well-rated providers thrive (Quattrone et al., 2022, p.19).

5.6.2 Practical implications

Minimising information asymmetry and improving conditions to trust service providers and platform organisations will enhance consumers' intentions to participate in the SE. As a result, consumer trust in and uptake of the SE will help contribute to this emergent form of sustainable consumption becoming further entrenched. Implications for practice are evident along micro (service providers), meso (platform organisations) and macro (policymakers) levels of the C2C ecosystem.

SE service providers should bolster their reputations by aiming for the high end of platform-derived star ratings to be considered legitimate and trustworthy in the eyes of consumers. Service providers' five-star ratings appear to be the norm rather than the exception, which brings into question the seemingly small margin differentiating outstanding providers from the rest in crowded SE markets. Consequently, service providers are held to very high standards determined by consumers and enforced through the platform, resulting in the pervasiveness of top-rated providers as others get 'voted' off the platform. Indeed, the SE cannot function without the supply of eligible service providers granting access to their underutilised assets; therefore, platform organisations should further invest in how the reputation of service providers is curated. Since service providers are the faces of the platform brand, platform organisations should continually train and engage with service providers to uphold high ratings from consumers. An expected outcome of high-performing service providers on the platform is a halo effect on the brand, further embedding the uptake of the SE.

Although some contexts may deem regulatory oversight necessary, objective reputation sources might be insufficient for trust in the SE. Policymakers should consider under which scenarios independently-derived reputation mechanisms will foster greater trust in the SE. One scenario relates to the offering type. The very nature of standard-setting bodies is to create consistent and standardised service encounters. Yet, SE services are heterogeneous by default as they are both provided and consumed by individuals, for example, Airbnb's authentic local experience offerings. Accordingly, these service providers are rewarded by consumers for their difference in terms of the atmosphere that their accommodation confers rather than the standard hotel-like experience of traditional incumbents. Thus, standardised SE offerings could benefit from regulatory mechanisms, whereas more nuanced offerings could benefit from prevailing branding (cultural-cognitive) and peer-driven (normative) mechanisms that may better strengthen consumers' trust. Another scenario where independent reputation may help is when new service providers who lack reputational histories join the platform. Such new service providers could draw on authoritative reputational sources, like the TGCSA 5-star rating scale, to signal their trustworthiness. A third scenario caters to unaccustomed users who have not participated in the SE before and may be reluctant to trust others.

5.6.3 Limitations and further research

First, this study uses self-report measures to determine intentions, which do not accurately predict behaviour, so the causal conclusions must be interpreted cautiously.

Although the current research design can be enhanced (for example, pictorially presenting the ratings on the vignette), future researchers should consider measuring actual behaviour through SE booking platforms with specific institutional mechanisms of interest in the form of experiments.

Second, drawing conclusions from the sample to the larger tourist population frequenting South African Airbnb establishments should be cautioned due to the predominance of South Africans in the sample. Culturally, South Africans could have a generally low trust level in macro-level regulatory institutions, which could explain the limited effectiveness of the independent reputation of service providers. Conducting the research in countries with greater trust in regulatory institutions would clarify whether institution-based trust originating at a macro level from regulators is country specific. Additionally, consumers familiar with the platform locally generally have similar expectations of the same brand in other countries. Granted that the platform's international brand could circumvent the need for country-specific regulatory mechanisms, future studies can investigate whether tourists prioritise more official and independent trust sources over ratings derived from the locals.

Third, since the sample was skewed towards people that previously used Airbnb (68%), these consumers were highly familiarised with the platform and service offering, suggestive of the greater significance placed on trust emanating from the platform reputation of the service provider and platform brand, rather than the independent reputation of the service provider. Future studies can investigate the extent to which such mechanisms shape the intentions of unaccustomed users to participate in the SE as they may seek the assurance of the independent reputation of service providers. Additionally, future studies can recruit respondents from customer databases of organisations in the tourism sector to improve sample heterogeneity.

Fourth, generalising the model to other SE settings depends on how institutional antecedents can be operationalised. For example, it can be extended to ride sharing by comparing drivers' independent reputations at a macro level with platform reputations generated through interactions at a micro level. Furthermore, future research can investigate the most impactful trust signals. For example, a service provider's photo does not offer any inherent value where previous consumers' interactions are concerned, but it could have a trust-moderating effect on other reputational sources.

Fifth, the independent reputation of the service provider was evaluated only in the SE and not the traditional economy. Independent ratings inform customers what to expect (for example, a 3-star versus a 5-star hotel), but accommodation-sharing establishments are heterogeneous. Thus, further research could compare reputational effects on trust in the sharing and traditional economies to determine differences in efficacy at the micro, meso and macro levels. Such research will clarify whether platform-driven mechanisms obviate the need for macro-level, institution-based trust generated by an independent regulator's standard setting, which is common in the traditional economy.

5.7   Appendix for Chapter 5

Table A5.1: CFA measurement model with standardised estimates

Table A5.2: Non-response bias assessment using independent samples t-test

Table A5.3: Internal consistency of measures

Table A5.4: Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) results

Figure A5.1: Full structural model

Table A5.1: CFA measurement model with standardised estimates

Code	Constructs	Standardised factor loadings (λ)*	t-values
Trust in service provider (TSP)			
TSP1	Because of the star rating from other customers, I trust the service provider (Airbnb host)	0.767	**
TSP2	Because of the star rating from the independent tourism grading body, I trust the service provider (Airbnb host)	0.729	14.048
Trust in platform (TP) (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003, p. 41; Mittendorf *et al.*, 2019, p. 1116)			
TP1	I trust Airbnb to continue to meet my expectations in the future	0.817	**
TP2	I feel confident in Airbnb's brand name	0.844	13.944
TP3	Airbnb's brand name guarantees satisfaction	†	†
Platform brand (B) (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003, p. 41; Mittendorf *et al.*, 2019, p. 1116)			
BR1	Even if not monitored by an independent body, I would trust Airbnb to do the job right	†	†
BR2	I could rely on Airbnb's brand name to solve any problem experienced with this accommodation	0.949	**
BR3	Airbnb's brand name would compensate me in some way for any problem with the product or service experienced with this accommodation	0.646	5.187
Intention to participate (IP) (Mittendorf *et al.*, 2019, p. 1116)			
IP1	Because of the star rating from other customers, I will book this Airbnb accommodation	†	†
IP2	Because of the star rating from the independent tourism grading body, I will book this Airbnb accommodation	†	†
IP3	I am very likely to request a booking for this accommodation on Airbnb in the future	0.862	**
IP4	I would not hesitate to request a booking for this accommodation on Airbnb	0.903	31.977
IP5	I would feel comfortable requesting a booking on Airbnb for this accommodation	0.935	32.259
IP6	I would use Airbnb to request a booking for this specific accommodation	0.890	31.065

Model fit: χ^2 = 93.923; df = 28; p = 0.000, χ^2/df = 3.354, RMSEA = 0.061, CFI = 0.984, IFI = 0.984, NFI = 0.977, TLI = 0.974, RFI = 0.963

Note.

* Factor loading significant at the 0.001 level

** Items constrained for identification purposes

† Items removed after EFA and CFA iterations

Table A5.2: Non-response bias assessment using independent samples t-test

Variable	Response type*	Mean	SD	Effect size (Cohen's d)	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means		
					F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
TSP	Early	2.769	0.989	0.045	1.207	0.272	-0.555	481.974	0.579
	Late	2.813	0.946						
B	Early	3.183	0.615	0.102	0.027	0.869	0.250	464.962	0.803
	Late	3.118	0.672						
TP	Early	2.433	0.603	0.022	0.877	0.349	1.195	430.446	0.233
	Late	2.420	0.602						
IP	Early	2.886	1.139	0.038	0.069	0.793	-0.455	472.411	0.650
	Late	2.929	1.116						
GENDER	Early	1.49	0.543	0.152	6.579	0.011	1.992	503.467	0.047
	Late	1.41	0.492						
AGE	Early	2.51	0.657	0.064	4.981	0.026	0.700	518.309	0.484
	Late	2.47	0.575						
RACE	Early	2.81	1.332	0.023	1.887	0.170	-0.311	472.737	0.756
	Late	2.84	1.303						
EDU	Early	4.71	1.363	0.047	3.995	0.046	-0.602	543.699	0.548
	Late	4.77	1.119						
MARITAL	Early	1.98	0.861	0.195	1.263	0.261	2.371	522.836	0.018
	Late	1.82	0.745						
EMPLOY	Early	2.23	0.735	0.133	7.934	0.005	1.715	579.323	0.087
	Late	2.14	0.548						
SHOP	Early	2.60	0.988	0.053	3.535	0.061	0.613	523.367	0.540
	Late	2.55	0.853						

Note.

* Early: Survey answered by 3 October 2020 (n = 409); Late: Survey answered from 4 October 2020 (n = 226)

Table A5.3: Internal consistency of measures

Correlation between constructs	B	IP	TP	TSP
B	**0.812**			
IP	0.276	**0.898**		
TP	0.545	0.317	**0.831**	
TSP	0.182	0.734	0.265	**0.748**
Average variance extracted (AVE)	0.659	0.806	0.690	0.560
Composite reliability (CR)*	0.789	0.943	0.816	0.718
Maximum shared variance (MSV)	0.297	0.539	0.297	0.539

Note.

Bold diagonal figures are the AVE square root and bottom-off diagonal figures are correlations.

* Alternative CR formula per Hancock and Mueller (2001), where i = number of indicators and λ= factor loadings:

$$CR = \frac{\left(\sum_{i=1}^{i} \lambda_i\right)^2}{\left(\sum_{i=1}^{i} \lambda_i\right)^2 + \left(\sum_{i=1}^{i} 1 - \lambda_i^2\right)},$$

Table A5.4: Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) results

	TSP	B	TP	IP
TSP				
B	0.202			
TP	0.279	0.567		
IP	0.737	0.292	0.328	
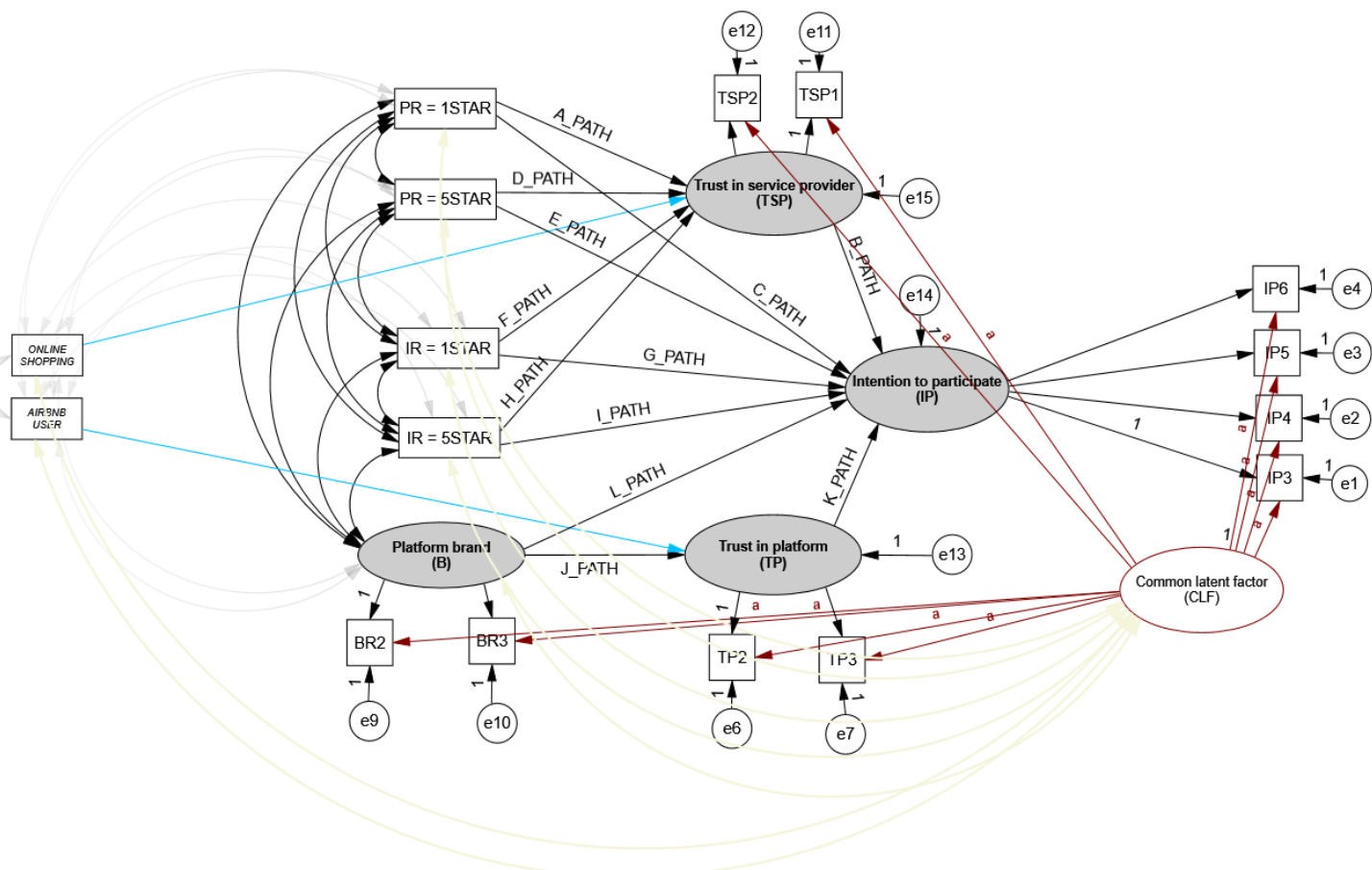
Key: Covariances with exogenous variables are marked as grey for control variables, yellow for CLF, and black for the main constructs. Paths prefixed with capitalised alphabets are for mediation analysis.

Figure A5.1: Full structural model

Note. Created with Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS)

6 Practitioner paper

HOW DO INSTITUTIONS SHAPE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

[1] HOW DO INSTITUTIONS....

LOW	MODERATE, VARIABLE	HIGH

← **INSTITUTIONAL DEGREE OF STASIS** →

INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND WORK	INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS	NEO-INSTITUTIONAL THEORY
✓		✓

[2] ...SHAPE...

FACILITATE OR HINDER SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION	IMPACT CONSUMERS' TRUST IN THE SHARING ECONOMY	(DE)LEGITIMATE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION
CONCEPTUAL PAPER	EMPIRICAL PAPER	PRACTITIONER PAPER ✓

[3] ...SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG

← **STRENGTH OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION** →

IMPROVE	CHANGE	REDUCE
✓	✓	✓

Key: ✓ *Focus of this chapter*

6.1　What this chapter does

6.1.1　Objectives

This chapter addresses the research question: How do institutions (de)legitimate corporate sustainability communication? Given that business communication about sustainability can influence consumer engagement in sustainable consumption, this chapter explores how such communication is perceived in terms of credibility.

6.1.2　Link to sustainable consumption

This chapter revisits the manifestations of improve, change and reduce strategies along the sustainable consumption continuum identified in Chapter 4 (§4.4.3). The company examples discussed in this chapter align with the themes identified in the previous chapter, as outlined in Table 6.1 and highlighted on the prior cover page.

Table 6.1: Link of companies to sustainable consumption continuum

Company example discussed	First-order codes	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Volkswagen	Green consumption	Consumer reliance	Improve
Frys	Labelling	Sustainability labelling	
DWS	Sectoral transformation	Domain-specific shifts	Change
Nestle Waters			
HSBC			
TotalEnergies			
Woolworths Holdings	Circular business models	Sustainable business models	
	Embedding sustainable options	Domain-specific shifts	
IKEA	Reuse	Sufficiency	Reduce
Patagonia			

Note. Source: Author's own. Code, themes and dimensions originally outlined in Figures 4.2, 4.4.

6.1.3　Link to institutional theory

This chapter employs neo-institutional theory to explore the stable, determinant factors influencing sources of organisational legitimacy in driving sustainable consumption. At the same time, the chapter acknowledges the more dynamic, interactive aspects of institutional work in the context of sustainability communication. These subfields are highlighted on the prior cover page.

6.1.4 Target journal

Chapter 6 is targeted for publication in the journal, Business Horizons, rated 2 by the AJG and B by the ABDC. The journal is orientated towards a practitioner audience, particularly business executives, making it an ideal outlet to engage with professionals who can translate theoretical frameworks into practical solutions for business challenges. Given that Chapter 6 explores the tangible aspects of sustainability communication through the lens of sustainable consumption and institutional theory, it aims to provide advice that can be readily implemented in organisational settings. This paper was also presented at the Academy of Marketing's 17th Annual Global Brand Conference on 22 April 2024.

Title: "How green is your valley?" – Charting a path from greenwashing to green transformation

Abstract

The growing emphasis on sustainability presents challenges for marketing and corporate communication professionals. As companies embrace sustainability, they often find themselves in a precarious position—striving for genuine improvement while not yet having perfected their sustainability profiles. This tension between aspiring for credible communication and the risk of greenwashing is at the heart of stakeholder scrutiny. We examine how companies navigate rules, norms and beliefs in their sustainability communication, the perceptions of legitimacy they generate among stakeholders, and the implications for companies. By analysing media coverage, including accusations of greenwashing and examples of sustainability transformations, we find a spectrum of sustainability communication practices. Our findings suggest that an awareness and appreciation of a company's interaction with the broader institutional framework of rules, norms, and beliefs can help communication professionals more effectively communicate their sustainability efforts and build trust with stakeholders.

Keywords

Greenwashing, green transformation, sustainability, corporate sustainability communication, institutional theory

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6.2 Showcasing sustainability

Alongside environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concerns and a deluge of sustainability information, companies find themselves at a crucial juncture where authentically communicating their sustainability credentials is essential to garner the support of advocates or face the scrutiny of detractors. With heightened consumer scepticism and the risk of being accused of greenwashing, corporate sustainability communication has increasingly become a strategic imperative (Dessart & Standaert, 2023). Companies at different stages of their sustainability journeys need to navigate this complexity, as uncredible claims can erode their reputation, stakeholder trust, and ability to capitalise on the sustainable products and services segment. On the other hand, corporate sustainability communication done right has the potential to catalyse a company's trajectory toward green transformation, along with the concomitant reputational and financial rewards (Blackburn, 2007; Schaltegger & Hörisch, 2017). This poses a conundrum for communication professionals – how do companies, particularly those that have initiated but not fully realised their sustainability journeys, differentiate themselves by authentically communicating about sustainability without being accused of greenwashing? Thus, we explore how companies legitimise their sustainability communication.

Sustainability refers to the balancing of social, economic and environmental concerns, which can be viewed as a path towards sustainable development outcomes, namely negotiating trade-offs between current consumption and production practices while ensuring the long-term preservation of resources (Ozili, 2022; M. A. White, 2013). As sustainability gains increasing attention, companies are expected to transform their value propositions, beyond eco-efficiency, to cater to the growing demand for sustainable products and services (Bocken, 2017; Michaelis, 2003). Yet, companies face a minefield of consumer, regulatory and technological pressures, which challenge the substance and legitimacy of their sustainability credentials (Berthon et al., 2023; Reilly & Hynan, 2014).

For communications professionals, the core issues are legitimacy and its institutional sources. Institutions are viewed as rules, norms, and beliefs, which shape consumer choices and legitimacy perceptions in sustainability (Boström, 2020; Scott, 2014). These institutions disseminate information that shapes how sustainability is talked about and understood (Markkula & Moisander, 2012). Resultantly, companies are embedded in a

web of institutional legitimacy that shapes their approach to sustainability communication.

While some discourses foster transparency and enable consumers to make informed decisions (K. White et al., 2019), others may obscure the true impacts and trade-offs of certain sustainability practices. Distinguishing credible sustainability endeavours from greenwashing is challenging. These false claims confuse consumers in their eco-conscious choices and undermine authentic sustainable businesses (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), leading to increased scrutiny of companies' sustainability communication.

We explore this issue by framing sustainability communication (§6.3), and the three institutions - rules, norms and beliefs - that companies lean on in their legitimacy-building activities, which can lead them down a path of greenwashing or green transformation (§6.4). We categorise companies reported in the media along the three institutions (§6.5) and offer a diagnostic (§6.6) for corporate communication professionals to evaluate their sustainability communication.

6.3   Sustainability communication

Corporate sustainability communication refers to how companies communicate about sustainability issues (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). While this field initially dealt with responding to environmental scandals, how companies now communicate about their sustainability journeys has evolved over the past few decades. Key triggers in this evolution can be attributed to the UN's proclamation for sustainable development through the SDGs, the triple bottom line approach of including social and environmental performance in addition to financial performance, Corporate Social Responsibility and latterly the concept of double materiality (Delgado-Ceballos et al., 2023).

When companies communicate about sustainability, their approaches can manifest in reporting on performance, educating about sustainability issues, promoting the company and its offerings, misleading communication (greenwashing) or intentionally intervening for transformative change (green transformation) (Golob et al., 2023). Contemporaneously, a company's legitimacy arises from such communication through complying with formal regulatory mechanisms (e.g., annual general meetings, sustainability reporting), and aligning with normative expectations (through eco-friendly advertising, product labelling, stakeholder dialogues, and media relations), to embodying

shared beliefs (such as 'green' buildings and digital and social media to propagate sustainability narratives) (Allen, 2016; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007).

In particular, communication for sustainable consumption can be conceptualised as modifying behaviour through behavioural science and marketing towards societal welfare-inducing outcomes, empowering consumers through capacity building and education, changing systems of provision and consumption through coordinating marketplace actors, and reflecting on how sustainable consumption is talked about and understood in society (Fischer et al., 2021). While mainstream media tends to still frame sustainability as a marketised problem solvable by buying green (Atanasova, 2019), critics argue that highlighting sustainability attributes is a form of 'weak' sustainability due to its focus on incremental changes rather than systemic transformation (Banerjee, 2001). Particularly when tactical greening does not align with a company's actual practices, reconciling communication with consumer expectations is crucial to avoid backlash (Polonsky & Rosenberger, 2001). Alternatively, longer-term initiatives aim to fundamentally challenge the dominant social paradigm and consumer lifestyles for intentional and mindful consumption, emphasising 'strong' sustainable consumption (Dessart & Standaert, 2023; Kilbourne, 2004).

In this context, corporate sustainability communication transmitted through and discussed in the media plays a central role in agenda setting (Holt & Barkemeyer, 2012) through shaping organisational identities, stakeholder perceptions and the sustainability discourses for societal change. The growing coverage of corporate sustainability in the media continues to influence public attention (Barkemeyer et al., 2014, 2018). This requires a delicate balance between informing, persuading, and empowering consumers to make more sustainable choices. Therefore, the influence of sustainability communication on sustainable consumption relies on a narrative that traverses promoting sustainable features of products or services, to engaging consumers in deeply understanding the importance of their choices on the environment and society.

6.4 Role of institutions: Path to greenwashing or green transformation

How companies respond to pressure to communicate about their sustainability influences stakeholders' perceptions of their legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy, which involves being perceived as right, just, or appropriate within a socially constructed system, is influenced by three institutions: rules, norms, and beliefs (Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995). When studied under institutional theory, we understand how these institutions shape companies' actions. Additionally, institutional work, a concept within this theory, considers individual and company actions to create, maintain, or disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The three institutions in Table 6.2 form the basis of legitimacy for companies, and while not consciously applied, shape their actions as it relates to how they communicate about sustainability.

Table 6.2: Role of institutions in legitimising corporate sustainability communication

Institutional sources of legitimacy	Basis of legitimacy from Scott (2014)	Examples through which sustainability is communicated
Rules	*Legally sanctioned through the 'rule book'*	Compliance with advertising (e.g., UK's Advertising Standards Authority) and environmental regulatory bodies (e.g., US Environmental Protection Agency)
	Laws, regulations, or other formal rules concerning the company	Incentives like tax credits or subsidies to promote investment in less carbon-intensive products (e.g., US Inflation Reduction Act of 2022)
Norms	*Morally governed through 'peer pressure'*	Adoption of industry standards and certifications (e.g., International Financial Reporting Standards and the International Sustainability Standards Board)
	Company statements or actions that align with societal norms, values, or expectations related to sustainability	Stakeholder expectations and demands (e.g., companies should reduce their carbon emissions, contribute to local communities, etc.)
		Corporate Social Responsibility commitments
Beliefs	*Comprehensible, recognisable and culturally supported through the 'belief system'*	Symbolic actions and rhetoric (e.g., using green-associated images and text in communications)
	Use of shared beliefs, narratives, symbols, or discourses to present the company as environmentally friendly or sustainable	Industry narratives and discourses (e.g., assumption of "green is good")
		Legitimating practices and rituals (e.g., events, conferences)

Note. Source: Authors' own.

While the first institution, representative of rules, laws, and sanctions, is clear, distinguishing between norms and beliefs is subtle as both involve shared expectations and understandings. Legitimacy arising from norms represents society's expectations of appropriate behavior, often explicitly articulated, and tied to a sense of obligation or duty, reflecting what society believes 'should' be done. On the other hand, legitimacy arising from beliefs involves implicit understandings shaping one's perceptions and interpretations of their environment, reflecting what society sees as natural and taken for granted. When companies align their communication with these rules, norms and beliefs, they gain legitimacy (Scott, 2014). For example, companies can gain legitimacy by communicating their compliance with relevant environmental laws (aligning with rules), publicly committing to reducing carbon emissions (aligning with the norm that companies should be environmentally responsible) and framing these goals with environmentally friendly narratives (aligning with the belief that 'green is good').

However, companies sometimes 'decouple' how they are perceived from what they actually do, by maintaining a semblance of conformity without fully transforming themselves (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A prominent illustration of this decoupling phenomenon is greenwashing. Greenwashing is "an umbrella term for a whole family of behaviours that induce people to hold overly positive views of an organization's environmental performance" (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015, p. 244). For example, companies make green claims at a product or service level (claim greenwashing), use nature-oriented cues like green landscape imagery (executional greenwashing), and renege on their future-oriented net zero carbon commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (future washing) (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Foerster & Spencer, 2023; Montgomery et al., 2023). As a form of institutional work, companies greenwash by drawing on the sources of legitimacy provided by rules, norms and beliefs. By conforming to environmental rules, adopting industry norms, or leveraging shared beliefs about sustainability, they can appear more sustainable than they actually are.

By contrast, companies utilise these institutions to communicate their journeys of transforming toward sustainable outcomes such as rethinking business models and incorporating sustainability throughout the organisation (e.g., Polonsky & Rosenberger, 2001). In this way, we show in Figure 6.1 how companies draw on these institutions in legitimising their sustainability efforts, which takes them down a path of greenwashing or green transformation.
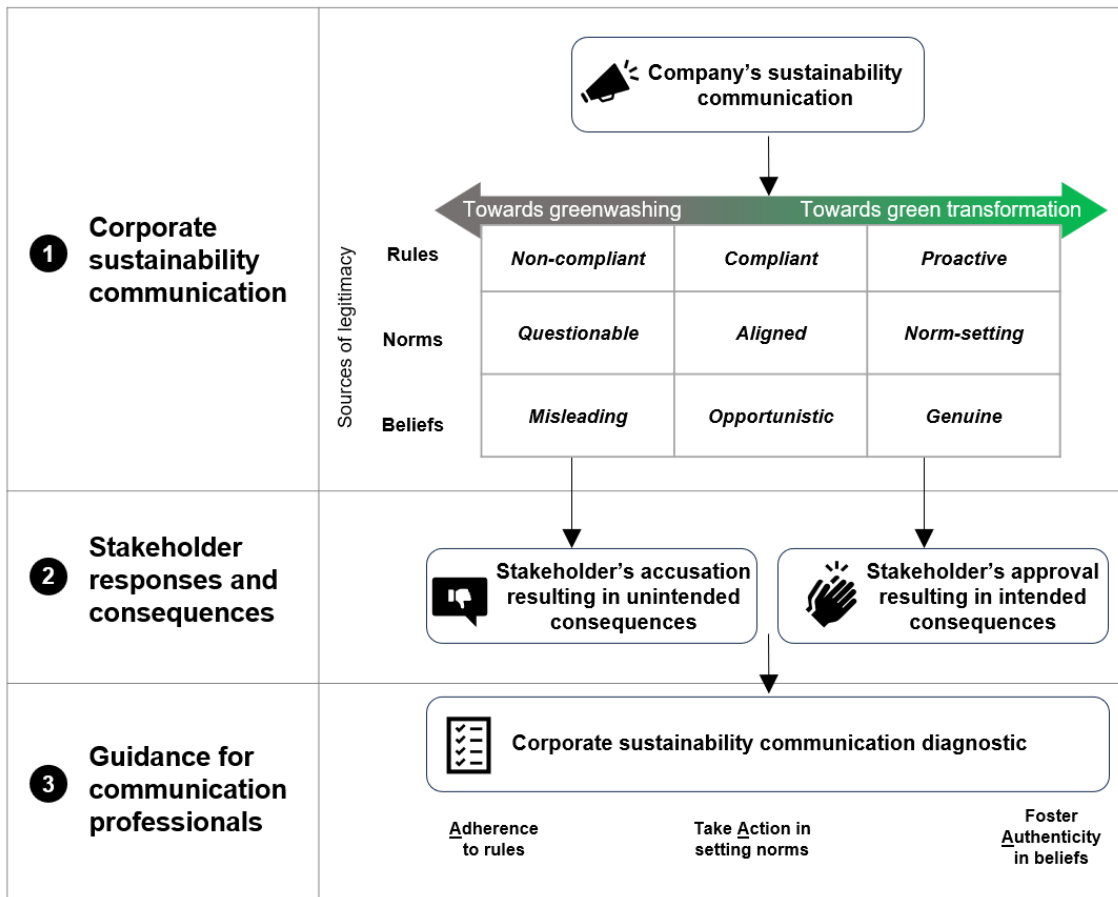
Figure 6.1: Role of institutions in corporate sustainability communication

Note. Source: Authors' own.

We concur with Seele and Gatti (2017) that greenwashing manifests under two situations: firstly, when a company's sustainability communication is seen as misleading or dishonest (#1 in Figure 6.1); and secondly – and more intricately – when such communication influences how the observer interprets them (#2 in Figure 6.1). The second condition is trickier, as it may have more to do with interpretation than company intent. For example, a company's abstract framing of its value can make it difficult for consumers to understand how it relates to value for themselves (Norris, 2023). Beyond the reputational damage and potential fines, greenwashing erodes trust in the organisation, impedes investment in actual sustainable endeavours, and undermines sustainable consumption (#3 in Figure 6.1) (Yang et al., 2020). However, when a company successfully communicates its sustainability efforts, alignment with stakeholders' values can benefit the company and contribute to sustainable development (Blackburn, 2007). Therefore, understanding the concept fully requires taking into account the observer's perception.

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The extent to which consumers adopt sustainable consumption in response to corporate sustainability communication as legitimate varies. Companies whose actions contradict their green claims are more likely to be perceived as greenwashing (Keilmann & Koch, 2023). When consumers are more aware of greenwashing, they are more cautious about purchasing green products (Jog & Singhal, 2020). Consumers' personal beliefs strongly influence their consumption behaviour based on how socially acceptable sustainable choices are perceived, while external factors imposed by companies and media can create confusion about which green options can be trusted (Gleim et al., 2019). For example, consumers found a company's sustainability content on social media channels more persuasive when shared from other consumers (Knight et al., 2022), while promoting sustainable fashion online during Black Friday negatively impacted consumers' evaluations of sustainable brands (Sailer et al., 2022).

Differentiating corporate sustainability communication between superficial (greenwashing) and substantive (green transformation) efforts is important for businesses, consumers and other stakeholders navigating the complexities of sustainability. Unlike greenwashing, green transformation represents a macro-level change of a strategic, inclusive shift towards sustainable practices and technologies, balancing economic growth with environmental care, and taking into account region-specific nuances (Cheba et al., 2022; Songwe & Adam, 2023). At a company level, green transformation embodies a commitment to environmental stewardship, which may involve rethinking business models, product design, supply chains, and incorporating sustainability into decisions at all levels (Islam, 2023; Sheehan et al., 2022). As such, transformation represents a map for sustainable change informed by a vision and values aligned and rooted in sustainability and the UN SDGs (Sebhatu & Enquist, 2022). Effective communication can distinguish green transformation from greenwashing to convey a company's tangible impacts of its sustainability journey in realising its strategic vision.

6.5 Shades of green

Building on greenwashing and green transformation concepts, we explore three areas of focus: *corporate sustainability communication*, *stakeholder responses and consequences*, and *guidance for communication professionals*. Firstly, the varied ways in which companies communicate their sustainability credentials, #1 in Figure 6.1,

demonstrates the characteristics underpinning corporate sustainability communication, perceived as greenwashing and green transformation. This is represented as a continuum mapped along the institutions that bestow or revoke legitimacy to a company's sustainability communication, creating the resultant 3 x 3 grid. The source of legitimacy provides the foundation for a company's sustainability communication. Secondly, the continuum denotes the credibility of such communication in the eyes of the stakeholders that respond to it and the resultant impact for the company in question as well as implications for advancing sustainable consumption and production (#2 in Figure 6.1). Thirdly, we offer guidance to communication professionals to genuinely adhere to sustainability rules (Adherence), take action in leading normative sustainability practices (Action), and foster authentic beliefs that substantiate their green claims (Authenticity)—the AAA framework.

The above three areas of focus and the resultant framework were achieved by analysing company examples of greenwashing and green transformation manifest through news articles in the media through a multiple case study methodology (Yin, 2003). Data were sourced from the Newspaper Source Premier (EBSCOhost) database and the Financial Times, selected for their reputational credibility and broad influence on both public opinion and business practices. Specifically, as a form of discourse, "texts have causal effects upon, and contribute to changes in, people (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), actions, social relations, and the material world" (Fairclough, 2004, p. 8). These sources offer a robust angle on the phenomenon of sustainability within the corporate landscape, from both negative and positive angles. We triangulated our data by delving further into related publically available documents, such as lawsuit filings, company reports and press releases, to understand the full extent of the companies cited in the news.

Utilising qualitative content analysis allowed for an exploration of the public discourse surrounding corporate greenwashing and sustainability efforts (Pournara, 2022). Given the study's focus on institutional pillars – regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive legitimacy – this methodology is well-suited for examining how companies leverage these aspects in their communications. Content analysis provides the capability to identify explicit references to rules, norms, and values, as well as uncover more implicit assumptions or taken-for-granted beliefs. While we uncovered several company examples, we only chose nine exemplary cases for in-depth analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). While the interplay of institutions shapes greenwashing or green transformation perceptions, we illustrate selected examples, exemplifying the

influence of each institution (rules, norms, beliefs) alongside stakeholders' responses, and consequences for the company.

To foster genuine sustainability efforts, linked to the legitimacy conferred by the three institutions, we propose a framework that encourages businesses to genuinely adhere to sustainability rules (Adherence), take action in leading normative sustainability practices (Action), and foster authentic beliefs that substantiate their green claims (Authenticity)—the AAA framework. We introduce each part of the framework next, with reference to the continuum from Figure 6.1.

6.5.1 Adherence

How companies defy or comply with rules embodies one of the foundational aspects of sustainability communication. Rules hold companies accountable and represent the 'ticket to the game'. As sustainability becomes popular in corporate discourse, the regulatory landscape is evolving to prioritise sustainability considerations in regulations (Teichmann & Wittmann, 2022). In Table 6.3 we summarise noteworthy examples of corporate sustainability communication along the adherence part of the continuum.

Table 6.3: Adherence – Role of rules in (de)legitimating corporate sustainability communication

Towards greenwashing ←————————————————————————————————————→ Towards green transformation

	VW	Fry's	IKEA
1. Corporate sustainability communication	▪ **Advertising claims**: Used slogans like "Diesel – it's no longer a dirty word" and claims of "Clean Diesel" vehicles meeting the strictest US Environmental Protection Agency standards" (Federal Trade Commission, 2016)	▪ **Product naming**: Used identical or similar naming of meat products for plant-based alternatives	▪ **Policy engagement**: Proclaimed climate-positive aspirations on a world stage at COP: "We will reduce the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the value chain in absolute terms by at least 50% by FY30…. aligned with the Paris Agreement and the Net-Zero Standard by Science Based Target initiative (SBTi)" (IKEA, 2023, para. 2)
2. Stakeholder responses and consequences	▪ **Research-based investigation**: University researchers uncovered VW's emissions cheating, leading to regulatory investigations ▪ **Financial repercussions**: VW suffered financial penalties ▪ **Industry scrutiny**: Broader auto sector endured stricter standards and regulations ▪ **Industry shift**: Noticeable shift away from diesel by auto sector	▪ **Incumbent pushback**: Regulatory bodies, lobbied by the meat industry, clamped down on plant-based product naming, citing potential consumer confusion ▪ **Legal appeal**: Fry's successfully challenged government's requirements for product naming ▪ **Industry standards**: Fry's victory in the appeal against naming restrictions prompted the development of specific naming rules for the plant-based sector	▪ **Equity concerns**: Peers argue that absolute emission targets favour bigger companies, like IKEA, and disadvantage smaller businesses that need to grow ▪ **Differentiation**: Science-based target disclosures help mitigate NGO scrutiny, meet investor demands for transparency, and associated with enhanced financial performance
3. Guidance for corporate communication professionals	▪ **Audits**: Recommend using independent third parties to validate claims and ensure adherence to regulations	▪ **Balanced information**: Emphasise the importance of adding disclaimers in product labelling that provide sufficient information but do not overwhelm the audience	▪ **Rule-based commitments**: Encourage proactively shaping, lobbying, and advocating for commitments to position the company as a market leader

Note. Source: Authors' own.

Deliberate deception – What if regulatory compliance is only for appearances?

Sustainability communication. Volkswagen's (VW) 'Clean Diesel' campaign became a notorious example of how not to communicate sustainability (Siano et al., 2017). VW drew on the authoritative legitimacy of emissions testing protocols to validate its sustainability credentials, by manipulating these tests to advertise their diesel cars as more environmentally friendly than they actually were.

Stakeholder responses and consequences. University researchers initially exposed VW's 'Dieselgate' (Nunes & Park, 2016). Their findings, which revealed VW's emissions cheating, precipitated a cascade of responses: environmental regulators launched investigations, the media covered the story extensively, and consumers expressed outrage. Such a backlash against VW, driven by the researchers' evidence, made it difficult for VW to fend off claims of greenwashing. While VW suffered financially and reputationally, the scandal impacted the stock market performance of VW's peers and suppliers to the diesel industry (Bouzzine & Lueg, 2020; Nunes & Park, 2016), but also catalysed a shift within VW and the industry away from diesel towards electric vehicles (Mele & Spena, 2021). Across the automotive industry, 'Dieselgate' lead to stricter emissions testing and regulations, thus contributing to the transition towards sustainable mobility solutions.

Guidance for communication professionals. Obtain independent audits for information that might be perceived as misleading when communicated. Communication professionals should be integrally connected to core business activities to fully comprehend the content they communicate, thereby avoiding disseminating untrue or exaggerated narratives.

Good intentions, lost in translation – How can good intentions be substantiated?

Sustainability communication. Companies like Fry's, specialising in plant-based food alternatives to meat, encountered regulatory obstacles in South Africa when using meat-associated terminology like 'burger' or 'sausage' for their products (South African Food Review, 2023). This scenario underscores the tension between aspiring to foster sustainable markets and the constraints posed by existing regulatory frameworks.

Stakeholder responses and consequences. The primary pushback was from regulatory bodies, lobbied by the meat industry, who perceive plant-based alternatives as threats to their business. Following US legislative trends (Gleckel, 2021), the South

African agricultural department clamped down on plant-based products, which used names that were technically reserved for meat products, citing that they could confuse consumers. The response illustrates how incumbents can leverage regulatory mechanisms to thwart emerging sustainable markets.

The uncertainty over product naming immediately impacted companies like Fry's, affecting their brand, stock, and sales as some retailers removed plant-based products from their shelves. However, Fry's won a legal appeal to maintain its products' names with the ruling directing the development of specific regulations for plant-based products (South African Food Review, 2023; Wilson, 2023). The victory underscores the importance of regulatory clarity to support sustainable product communication, ultimately facilitating shifts toward more sustainable consumption patterns.

Guidance for communication professionals. Emerging industries disrupting incumbents with sustainable alternatives can anticipate intensified scrutiny from those advocating for the status quo. Strategies could potentially include challenging draconian laws through benchmarking cases from other jurisdictions and adding disclaimers in advertisements. However, companies must balance communication to provide sufficient context and information without overwhelming the audience or detracting from the communication's primary objective.

Beginning a conversation – Where does a company start in addressing sustainability?

Sustainability communication. Furniture retailer, IKEA, is proactively engaging in policy-setting events like the annual climate summit – Conference of the Parties (COP) – to become climate positive by 2030 in line with the Science Based Targets Initiative (SBTi), a framework increasingly supported by regulatory bodies like the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) (Strand, 2024; United Nations Framework Conventions on Climate Change (UNFCC), 2018). Unlike companies opting for relative (intensity) measures of emission reductions, IKEA commits to absolute emission cuts regardless of its business growth.

Stakeholder responses and consequences. IKEA's proactive and ambitious stance has garnered support from environmental organisations and consumers. However, absolute reductions may favour larger corporations capable of making such commitments, at the expense of smaller businesses advocating for emissions reductions

relative to growth (intensity measures). In contrast, relative (intensity) measures normalise emissions against a business metric, like revenue, which allows for flexibility and growth but could lead to overall emissions rising. This distinction reflects the broader equity debate of how stakeholder responses can be influenced by perceptions of fairness, practicality, and the inclusivity of sustainability measures.

Companies aligning their emissions reduction targets with SBTi can differentiate themselves from peers and have been shown to enjoy higher financial performance (Bendig et al., 2023). This differentiation can offer first-mover advantages, reputational gains, and potentially reduce scrutiny from NGOs and activists. At an industry level, stringent commitments may encourage the adoption of more rigorous rules. IKEA's approach illustrates how adhering to rules, amplified with ambitious and transparent goals, can distinguish it in a crowded field of net-zero pledges.

Guidance for communication professionals. Companies can lead industry change by fostering dialogue with different stakeholders through proactive rule-based commitments. Communication professionals can advance from passively communicating business activities to actively shaping, lobbying and advocating for more sustainable rules, both within the company and in external interactions. Regardless of the chosen initiative, transparency and a clear action plan are essential to satisfy stakeholder expectations and drive meaningful progress towards sustainable production and consumption.

6.5.2 Action

Action represents how companies' sustainability communication reflects their commitment to lead and innovate in sustainability, actively shaping and contributing to sustainability norms and standards. Consequently, such communicative actions can influence society's expectations of what companies should do (C. B. Bhattacharya et al., 2011). Selected company examples in Table 6.4 illustrate the action part of the continuum from Figure 6.1.

Table 6.4: Action – Role of norms in (de)legitimating corporate sustainability communication

Towards greenwashing ← → Towards green transformation

	DWS	Nestlé	Patagonia
1. Corporate sustainability communication	• **Advertising claims**: Publicised promotional interviews with overstated claims like "Every DWS investment team uses [the DWS ESG Engine] to make investment decisions for their portfolio" (P&I Content Solutions Group, 2020, para. 7)	• **Advertising claims**: Advertised that "bottled water is the most environmentally responsible consumer product in the world" (Anderson, 2008, para. 4) • **Community initiatives**: Established 'Caring for water' water stewardship programme • **Industry membership**: Chairman joined the Water Resources Group's governing council	• **Norm-setting**: Challenged norms to encourage repair over purchase ('Don't Buy This Jacket' campaign) and advocating for a circular economy ('Buy Less, Demand More' and 'Worn Wear' campaigns)
2. Stakeholder responses and consequences	• **Internal accusations**: Whistleblower claims at DWS led to media exposure and regulatory investigations • **Financial repercussions**: DWS agreed to pay the SEC $19 million, with the case still ongoing • **Industry scrutiny**: Broader asset management sector faced stricter standards and regulations	• **External accusations**: Environmental groups lodged a complaint with Advertising Standards Canada, which was dismissed due to breach of confidentiality after the complainant issued a press release • **Enhanced legitimacy**: Recognised for creating shared value through societal ('Caring for Water') and industry initiatives (Water Resources Group)	• **Environmental consciousness**: Enhanced socio-ecological awareness among consumers • **Consumer advocacy**: Increased sales and longer use of high-quality items
3. Guidance for corporate communication professionals	• **Integration**: Recommend closer integration of communication professionals within core business operations to ensure accurate representation of sustainability credentials	• **Substantiated and comprehensive communication**: Back up green claims with evidence and align with recognised standards, seamlessly integrating these efforts with detailed action plans that address and bridge any gaps between industry standards and the company's actual environmental impacts	• **Challenge prevailing norms**: Encourage bold strategies that question and lead industry standards towards green transformation

Note. Source: Authors' own.

Succumbing to peer pressure – How does external influence affect green practices?

Sustainability communication. Companies are challenged to navigate expectations of the 'green' that is in vogue while managing their brand identity. In response to prevailing investor norms for sustainable funds, Deutsche Bank's asset management unit, DWS, overstated its ESG credentials in its promotional efforts and advertising (SEC, 2023).

Stakeholder responses and consequences. Greenwashing accusations surfaced through an internal whistleblower, who alleged that DWS exaggerated its asset management ESG criteria. The allegation prompted the media to delve into and publicise the discrepancies between DWS's public ESG claims and its actual investment practices, further attracting regulatory scrutiny. The case is still in process; however, DWS has agreed to pay $19 million to the SEC (Palma & Storbeck, 2023). The incident has also heightened industry-wide scrutiny on ESG investment claims, influencing tighter regulations for sustainable finance products.

Guidance for communication professionals. Companies need to interrogate what 'ingredients' constitute their products and align with recognised standards. When incorporating green elements in messaging or advertising offerings as green, communication professionals must challenge their colleagues to substantiate green claims with evidence. Companies may consider redesigning their operating model to ensure that communication professionals are not in a separate department but are embedded in the core business to be closer to the product offering.

Word, not deed – Do actions match words?

Sustainability communication. Companies adopt industry standards and best practices to conform to accepted norms, yet sometimes overlook deeper implications of their actions. Nestlé's water business advertised that its "bottled water is the most environmentally responsible consumer product in the world" (Anderson, 2008, para. 4) and its single-use plastic bottles are 100% recyclable (Fraser, 2024; Legget & Edser, 2023). On the other hand, Nestlé's water stewardship program, 'Caring for Water', aims to secure water sustainability in the areas where it operates by collaborating with stakeholders to create shared value (Bulcke et al., 2020; Galli & Vousvouras, 2020)

Stakeholder responses and consequences. The environmental groups' complaint with Advertising Standards Canada was dismissed due to a breach of confidentiality after

the complainant issued a press release. Despite Nestlé's water stewardship programs (Galli & Vousvouras, 2020), environmental activists criticise the company for its water extraction practices in water-stressed regions and for failing to address systemic issues related to water usage and pollution (Jaffee & Case, 2018). Nestlé's commitment to responsible water management demonstrates this intermediate level of its journey towards green transformation. The company has received accolades (e.g., the 2011 Stockholm Industry Water Award) and reputational gains as its chairman participates in thought leadership and advocacy for water awareness and conservation through a water industry group, 2030 Water Resources Group (Bulcke et al., 2020).

Guidance for communication professionals. Communication professionals face the dilemma of their communications being clouded by other aspects of the business which are not highlighted in the specific communication. An integrated communication ecosystem can help weave how different elements work in tandem in delivering the objective. Acknowledge that alignment with industry standards may not fully reflect environmental impacts and expect criticism from ideologically driven detractors. Companies should communicate holistically, acknowledging their role in environmental harm, and detailing concrete steps, targets and timelines for their actions. The challenge for regulators, stakeholders, and the companies themselves is to ensure that commitments to sustainability are not merely words but translate into meaningful deeds.

Leading the pack – Where do leaders excel?

Sustainability communication. Patagonia's dedication to sustainable practices and a culture of responsible consumption is demonstrated through its higher standards than industry norms (Sekhon & Armstrong Soule, 2020). The company's 'Don't Buy This Jacket' campaign encouraged customers to think about the environmental cost of consumerism, reflective of reducing consumption, contrary to existing business norms of prioritising sales (Hwang et al., 2016). Furthermore, the company's 'Worn Wear' initiative promotes a circular economy and reduces waste by encouraging customers to repair and reuse their products, (Michel et al., 2019).

Stakeholder responses and consequences. Patagonia's discursive strategies enhance how consumers view their own consumerist footprint making them reimagine their engagement with the product and its interaction in the environment. Although sales increased from its demarketing campaign, the company's customers have become advocates for Patagonia and the environment as they aspire to Patagonia's

environmentally conscious values of becoming more mindful of the products they invest in (Rattalino, 2018).

By directly challenging the prevailing norms of consumerism and disposability, Patagonia positioned itself as a vanguard of green transformation. Patagonia's initiatives have contributed to broader societal discussions about sustainable consumption and production. Its emphasis on the repairability and second life of products challenges the throwaway culture and promotes a shift towards a more circular economy.

Guidance for communication professionals. Companies should not shy away from leveraging or challenging prevailing norms in their communication strategy. Patagonia's success shows that turning industry standards on its head can position a company as a leader in green transformation by setting new norms and practices. Highlighting investments in innovation, sustainable materials, and practices that support the environment can further differentiate the brand.

6.5.3 Authenticity

The authenticity of a company in its communication is deeply tied to its core beliefs, representing the most profound level rooted in subconscious, unquestioned understandings (Scott, 2014). A company's beliefs and values significantly influence behaviours, and in the context of sustainability, can result in superficial gestures or drive genuine transformation (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). We summarise the last part of the continuum from Figure 6.1 in Table 6.5.

Table 6.5: Authenticity – Role of beliefs in (de)legitimating corporate sustainability communication

Towards greenwashing ◄───► Towards green transformation

	HSBC	*TotalEnergies*	*Woolworths Holdings*
1. Corporate sustainability communication	▪ **Advertising claims**: Advertised positive actions without mentioning counteracting fossil fuel funding, for example, "$1 trillion in financing and investment globally to help clients transition to net zero" (ASA, 2022, para. 2)	▪ **Rebranding**: Updated the company logo and name from Total to TotalEnergies to reflect a shift towards including renewable energy	▪ **Community initiatives**: Embedded sustainability into its core business strategy with initiatives like Farming for the Future, improving environmental agricultural practices ▪ **New sub-website**: Interactive educational platform on regenerative farming
2. Stakeholder responses and consequences	▪ **Ruling**: Following complaints from citizens, the advertising watchdog ruled HSBC's advertisements as misleading for failing to acknowledge its contributions to greenhouse gas emissions through fossil fuel financing ▪ **Advertisement withdrawal**: HSBC had to retract its advertisements	▪ **Investor confidence**: Over 99% of shareholders supported the rebranding and name change ▪ **Legal challenges**: Environmental groups succeeded in taking TotalEnergies to court, but ruling remains unknown ▪ **Investment mix**: Critics highlight TotalEnergies' relatively small investment in renewables	▪ **Industry accolades**: Recognised as a sustainability leader in southern Africa and contributed towards the 17 SDGs ▪ **Environmental stewardship**: Improved environmental practices in its supply chain
3. Guidance for corporate communication professionals	▪ **Tailored communication**: Tailor messages to meet various stakeholder groups' informational needs while ensuring all material information is disclosed to prevent misinterpretation or nondisclosure	▪ **Context-driven approach**: Focus on owning the company's sustainability starting point, celebrating achieved milestones, and clearly outlining progress towards future goals while acknowledging the complexities of transitioning 'brown' industries	▪ **Brand differentiation**: Focus on highlighting the company's commitments and investments in sustainable practices to differentiate the brand in the market

Note. Source: Authors' own.

Green illusion of the value chain – Is green always as it seems?

Sustainability communication. Common to most greenwashing accusations are companies' broad statements, where they do not acknowledge the broader impacts of their business activities. Financial institution, HSBC, leveraged the cultural script of sustainability in establishing a belief through its advertisements that it was actively contributing to climate-friendly financing without mentioning counteracting activities of its continued funding for fossil fuel projects (Teichmann & Wittmann, 2022).

Stakeholder responses and consequences. Following civil society complaints, the UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) ruled that the advertisements could mislead customers' banking decisions because HSBC's own contribution to greenhouse gas emissions from financing fossil fuels was not adequately acknowledged despite this being disclosed in its annual reporting (ASA, 2022). HSBC had to retract its advertisements. The controversy highlights a broader issue: the complexity of corporate sustainability reporting and the challenges consumers face in understanding the full extent of a company's environmental impact. Despite HSBC's leading sustainability disclosure (Webb, 2022), the disconnection between its advertisements targeted towards consumers and the reality of its financing activities targeted towards investors, led to a credibility gap.

Guidance for communication professionals. Build trust by openly acknowledging their limitations and communicating the challenges they face in achieving sustainability. Moreover, transparency fosters accountability, encouraging companies to address shortcomings and work towards solutions. To minimise misinterpretation, recognise the informational needs of various stakeholder groups and tailor messages accordingly, while still disclosing all material information.

Heroes or villains – What if your core product is perceived as a climate villain?

Sustainability communication. As we witness a global push for renewable energy, oil and gas companies are navigating a transitionary phase to remain relevant. Diversification into renewable energy sources, as seen in rebranding and a name change from Total to TotalEnergies, reflects an acknowledgement of the changing context (Financial Times, 2021a; Mallet & White, 2021). TotalEnergies is seeking to entrench an implicit understanding of its role in the energy transition, where an integrated energy

approach of fossil fuels and renewables can operate alongside each other. The company leveraged existing beliefs of fossil fuels as dirty and renewables as clean, by symbolically demonstrating how integrating these two energy sources as part of the company's focus highlights a strategic shift that can be palatable.

Stakeholder responses and consequences. Despite the oil and gas industry's efforts to diversify into renewables, their actions fall under heavy scrutiny. Climate activists argue these efforts are neither credible nor rapid enough to facilitate a transition from extractive industries (Financial Times, 2021b) and have successfully brought TotalEnergies to court over alleged greenwashing of its rebranding; however, the lawsuit's outcome remains unknown (Hodgson & White, 2022). Critics point to fossil fuel companies' financial statements, highlighting the relatively small investment allocated to renewable ventures (Madhumita, 2023), a detail often not disclosed in advertisements and difficult for the average consumer to notice (Friedman & Campbell, 2023), compounded by the limited readership of sustainability reports (Rowbottom & Lymer, 2009). Others, however, note that significant change is a gradual process, hence the use of the term 'energy transition', noting that 'transformation' is closer to the desired end state. While the percentage of renewable energy investment may be lower than non-renewables, the absolute value is still significant (De Marie, 2023).

The name change was supported by over 99% of shareholders at its annual general meeting (Mallet & White, 2021). While this represents one segment of society, the agreement in the name change signals investor's confidence in the company's strategic direction of a more diversified energy portfolio. Despite the change being criticised by environmental activist groups, this development is better than no change at all. By changing its name to signal a shift in its focus, the name change is one element in moving closer to a cleaner energy future of sustainable consumption and production.

Guidance for communication professionals. While companies should not shy away from publicity opportunities, they must be transparent about their impact, actively seek ways to mitigate externalities, and demonstrate their commitment to transitioning toward sustainability. The key to effective communication and authenticity lies in acknowledging and owning a company's starting point and context in its sustainability journey. Companies in inherently 'brown' industries have to balance transformation with transition and are likely to receive scrutiny of any communications. Acknowledging that the company is not perfect but is dedicated to progress and transparency about its future direction, is a powerful message to convey.

Walking the talk – How deep is the commitment?

Sustainability communication. Other companies surpass symbolic gestures and embed sustainability into their values, culture, and decision-making processes. Woolworths South Africa has embedded sustainability into its core business strategy with its 'Good Business Journey' (Dos Santos, 2011) and 'Farming for the Future' program. In its farming initiative, Woolworths directly engages with farmers in its supply chain to drive regenerative agricultural practices, like soil health and pesticide reduction (Hamann, 2012), which has recently been promoted in an educational campaign with a new subsite, https://wooliesfarmingforthefuture.co.za/ (IOL, 2024).

Stakeholder responses and consequences. Woolworths has been recognised as a leader in sustainability in the southern African market. Its leadership impact has extended to better environmental agricultural practices in its upstream supply chain (Thorlakson et al., 2018) The company has been the subject of international sustainability best practice research (Hamann, 2012) and was awarded for its leading role in meaningfully contributing towards the 17 SDGs (Parker, 2023).

Guidance for communication professionals. Some companies are more mature than others on their sustainability journeys. When companies have earned their stakeholders' legitimacy, they have a unique opportunity to communicate their advancement in their sustainability journeys. Communication professionals can highlight this by demonstrating the company's self-awareness as an assessment of its sustainability capabilities and plans put in place to advance it over time.

6.6   Proactively plotting a path

As companies traverse the landscape of sustainability, they will encounter various shades of green, reflecting their degree of commitment and the credibility of their sustainability communications. In this paper, we have observed what not to do, and what good looks like. Firstly, we trust that communication professionals will use our framework to recognise how their communication strategies may be perceived as uncredible and thus, serve as a risk mitigation tool. By understanding what to avoid from cases of corporate sustainability miscommunication, businesses can better understand how they

may be inadvertently contributing to the problem and take steps to solve it. Secondly, our framework demonstrates how companies can strive towards green transformation. Incorporating our framework into their practices enables businesses to strengthen their reputation as sustainability leaders and connections with stakeholders who prioritise sustainable choices, including consumers, investors, and communities. This, in turn, can lead to customer loyalty, brand value, long-term profitability, and the health of our planet.

We summarise this guidance in the form of a diagnostic (Table 6.6) for companies to assess their sustainability communication. **Adherence** to sustainability rules is a foundational aspect for companies. Taking **action** beyond the minimum requirements in sustainability initiatives and leading the industry by setting new norms and practices showcase a company's dedication to making a positive impact. And understanding the context is the foundation of **authentic** sustainability communication. It requires embracing the starting point, charting a credible path for change, and being transparent about the company's purpose to deliver value responsibly. The key lies in balancing transparency with aspirational messaging and showcasing tangible progress while acknowledging the journey ahead.

Table 6.6: Diagnostic

Instructions: Choose the option (A, B, or C) that best describes your company's current approach to each statement.

1. Adherence: References to laws, regulations, or rules applicable to our company and sector

Company's sustainability communication – How we communicate about sustainability by drawing on rules:

A   Our messages suggest compliance more in theory (*de jure*) than in practice (*de facto*)

B   We say we meet most requirements but struggle with being completely open about certain rules

C   Our communication clearly shows we meet all requirements and are transparent about it

Stakeholder responses and consequences – How do stakeholders respond to our sustainability communication:

A   Stakeholders suspect us of paying lip service to regulations

B   Stakeholders acknowledge our compliance but could challenge us on certain rules

C   Our stakeholders trust us and support our initiatives

2. Action: Statements or actions that align with societal norms, values, or expectations related to sustainability

Company's sustainability communication – How we communicate about sustainability by drawing on norms:

A   Our sustainability communication is influenced by industry norms but lacks credibility

B   We publicly support sustainability but are perceived as falling short of fully integrating it into our business

C   We are industry leaders, setting new sustainability norms

Stakeholder responses and consequences – How do stakeholders respond to our sustainability communication:

A   We receive criticism, especially from environmentally conscious consumers

B   Stakeholders notice the gap between our words and actions in certain areas of our business

C   We are recognised and sought after by customers, peers, policymakers and the media

3. Authenticity: Use of shared beliefs, narratives, symbols, or discourses to present the company as environmentally friendly or sustainable

Company's sustainability communication – How we communicate about sustainability by drawing on beliefs:

A   We are on a sustainability journey, having communicated the intent

B   Our value chain has sustainability gaps that we are trying to address

C   Our beliefs and actions in sustainability are in harmony

Stakeholder responses and consequences – How do stakeholders respond to our sustainability communication:

A   Different stakeholder groups challenge our sustainability communication with varying interpretations

B   Some stakeholders agree with our communicated intent while others do not find it credible

C   We receive support across stakeholder groups and are seen as having a positive impact

Scoring, interpretation, and guidance:
This assessment does not replace the detailed standards and requirements mandated by various jurisdictional, sectoral, and company-specific regulations.
Predominantly A's: Indicates a tendency towards greenwashing. The company needs to significantly improve its sustainability communication to be more honest and transparent.
Predominantly B's: Suggests an intermediate stage. The company has made some efforts in the right direction but still needs to work on aligning its communication more closely with its sustainability actions.
Predominantly C's: Reflects a green transformation trajectory. The company demonstrates strong, transparent, and responsible communication that is well-aligned with its sustainability efforts.

7 Conclusion

The following sections revisit the theoretical constructs linking the papers (§7.1), summarise the main results (§7.2), outline theoretical contributions (§7.3), practical implications (§7.4), limitations and further research avenues (§7.5). The chapter concludes with a summary table of the main points from the thesis (§7.6).
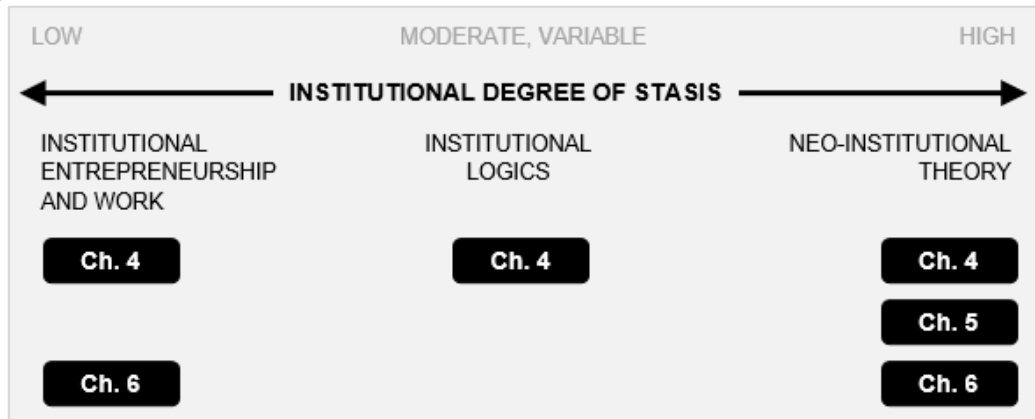
7.1 Theoretical linkage

The research set out to explore the interplay between sustainable consumption and institutional theory, an under-examined nexus in academia. Although Chapters 4, 5, and 6 can be read independently, they collectively explore this relationship through two key dimensions. First, they explore the diverse ways in which sustainable consumption manifests along the sustainable consumption continuum's improve, change and reduce strategies (Figure 2.1, §2.1). Second, the chapters connect through how sustainable consumption is examined through the perspective of institutional theory, referencing the institutional theory continuum in terms of the degree of stasis (Figure 2.2, §2.2).

The relationship between sustainable consumption and institutional theory is complex, encompassing a spectrum from weak to strong sustainable consumption, and varying degrees of institutional stasis. Figure 7.1 synthesises the relationships between the three chapters, building on the concepts illustrated earlier in Figures 2.1 and 2.2. In Figure 7.1, the chapter numbers denote the specific strength of sustainable consumption addressed in each chapter, and the corresponding degree of stasis within the sub-field of institutional theory covered.
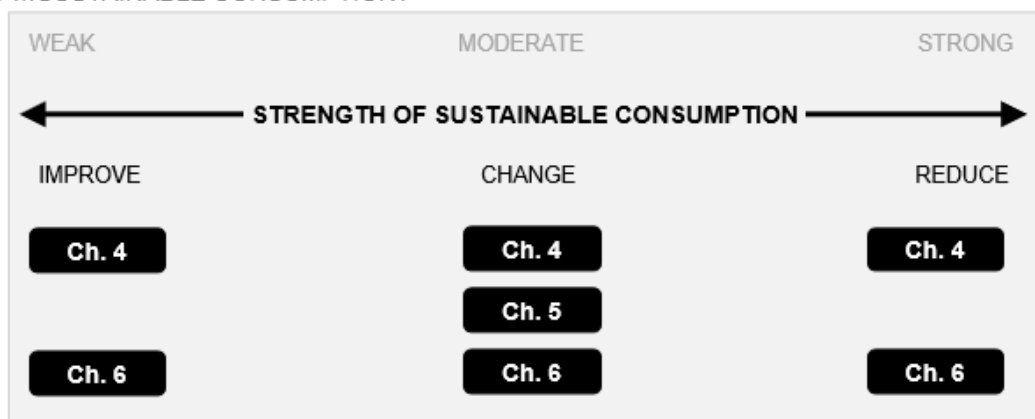
HOW DO INSTITUTIONS SHAPE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

[1] HOW DO INSTITUTIONS....

LOW	MODERATE, VARIABLE	HIGH

← **INSTITUTIONAL DEGREE OF STASIS** →

INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND WORK	INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS	NEO-INSTITUTIONAL THEORY
Ch. 4	Ch. 4	Ch. 4
		Ch. 5
Ch. 6		Ch. 6

[2] ...SHAPE...

FACILITATE OR HINDER SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION	IMPACT CONSUMERS' TRUST IN THE SHARING ECONOMY	(DE)LEGITIMATE CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION
CONCEPTUAL PAPER (CH. 4)	EMPIRICAL PAPER (CH. 5)	PRACTITIONER PAPER (CH. 6)

[3] ...SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?

WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG

← **STRENGTH OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION** →

IMPROVE	CHANGE	REDUCE
Ch. 4	Ch. 4	Ch. 4
	Ch. 5	
Ch. 6	Ch. 6	Ch. 6

Key: **Ch. x** *Link of each chapter/paper to the theoretical constructs*

Figure 7.1: Theoretical linkages of the three chapters

Note. Source: Author's own.

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The research questions were formulated and addressed in the corresponding papers by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to sustainability challenges, synthesising scholarly calls for sustainable consumption, and considering institutional theory within the framework of these theoretical perspectives

- How do institutions facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption? Chapter 4 systematised literature on the role of institutions in shaping sustainable consumption.
- How do institutions impact consumers' trust in the SE? Chapter 5 delved into how different institutions impact trust in one form of sustainable consumption, the SE.
- How do institutions (de)legitimate corporate sustainability communication? Chapter 6 outlined how businesses can leverage institutional sources of legitimacy to communicate about sustainability, thereby impacting sustainable consumption.

7.2 Summary of main findings

While a comprehensive exploration of each paper's results is best appreciated within the context of its own theoretical and empirical backdrop, the intent here is to distil the salient findings that, in aggregate, advance the understanding of sustainable consumption.

Two theoretical concepts – the strength of sustainable consumption and the degree of stasis of institutional theory subfields – form the foundation of the organising framework. The strength of sustainable consumption assesses the efficacy of various strategies, while the degree of stasis measures the stabilising or change-oriented effects of institutional contexts. By combining these concepts, this framework offers insights into the enduring and ephemeral structures either constraining or facilitating sustainable consumption.

These two concepts inform three overarching dimensions of sustainable consumption: improving consumption via consumer reliance and sustainability labelling, changing consumption through sustainable business models and domain-specific shifts, and reducing consumption through sufficiency and alternative economic models (Mont et al., 2022). These strategies face challenges within current institutional frameworks. Institutional theory themes were categorised into three sub-fields: neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, and institutional entrepreneurship and work, resulting in a 3x3 matrix of nine intersections, each representing areas for future research opportunities (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023).

Then turning focus to the change aspect of the strength of sustainable consumption as it manifests itself in the SE, and the neo-institutional sources of trust for driving consumers' participation intention in the SE. Consumer-to-consumer interactions, expressed through star ratings, significantly influence trust and participation intent. These descriptive norms set expectations and moral imperatives that shape future interactions and choices. Trust in the platform's brand as a form of institution-based trust also strongly affects participation intent. The platform's brand serves as a cultural-cognitive institution, shaping consumer perceptions and interactions based on shared mental models and assumptions about the platform's reliability and service quality. However, regulatory mechanisms, such as independent star ratings assigned by third-party bodies, have minimal impact on consumer trust-building processes. These regulatory institutions ensure service providers are evaluated on predetermined criteria and reflect the 'presence of governance in the absence of government' where non-governmental bodies pressure businesses to act responsibly (Nardella et al., 2023; Nolan, 2013). Trust in service providers can fully mediate consumer participation intent, especially when macro-level regulatory ratings are low.

Businesses influence consumer perceptions of their credibility through their corporate sustainability communication efforts, which in turn affects purchasing behaviour and contributes to sustainable consumption. Institutional sources of rules, norms and beliefs inform legitimacy in corporate sustainability communication. Companies, like people, are works in progress. Given the intense scrutiny brands face, adopting a non-binary perspective on sustainability can foster a more constructive environment for companies striving towards green transformation, rather than dismissing their efforts as mere greenwashing. In other words, viewing corporate sustainability communication as a continuum allows businesses to recognise and mitigate the risks of inauthentic communication while fostering a transition toward green transformation. The conceptual framework and diagnostic tool align institutional sources of legitimacy – rules, norms, and beliefs – with high-level advice for communication professionals in terms of 'Adherence', 'Action', and 'Authenticity', respectively.

Collectively, the results highlight the interplay of institutional, cognitive, and tangible factors shaping sustainable consumption and organisational sustainability efforts.

7.3   Contributions to theory

In unifying sustainable consumption, trust in the SE, and corporate sustainability communications the research takes on an interdisciplinary approach. By applying institutional theory across these fields, the research uncovers relationships and interdependencies, including how institutions shape individual consumer behaviours, organisational strategies and public discourse on sustainability.

Chapter 4 enriches the understanding of sustainable consumption by situating it within the broad framework of institutional theory. Through an SLR, the chapter categorises existing research and maps a path for future scholarly inquiry. Specifically, it invites further studies on the impact of different institutional theory sub-fields (neo-institutional theory, institutional logics, institutional entrepreneurship and work) on sustainable consumption strategies (improve, change, reduce) (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023; Mont et al., 2022). By systematising the intersection of sustainable consumption and institutional theory, the chapter's contribution emphasises the call for a more holistic, interdisciplinary dialogue that can unravel the interplay between institutional structures, individual behaviours, and broader social and environmental contexts.

Chapter 5 enriches the SE literature through a multi-level exploration of trust and participation intention in four ways. First, at the micro-level, trust in SE service providers is socially mediated rather than solely dictated by formal institutions, with community-based ratings (as a normative dimension of trust) significantly impacting consumer behaviour, corroborating previous findings (e.g., Mao et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2019). Secondly, at the meso-level, the study corroborates the influence of a platform's brand as a taken-for-granted cultural-cognitive dimension, substantiating its role as a risk-mitigating factor (e.g., Akhmedova et al., 2021; Wang & Jeong, 2018; Wu & Shen, 2018). This bolsters the concept of institution-based trust and begins to elucidate how platforms build and maintain trust. Thirdly, at the macro-level, the study questions the hitherto assumed significance of institution-based trust from formal regulatory bodies (Kang et al., 2016; I. Sutherland et al., 2021), challenging the notion that formal institutions are primary arbiters of consumer trust. Finally, by synthesising micro and macro-level factors, the research introduces the concept of a 'rating floor,' revealing an asymmetric trust dynamic that is disproportionately skewed towards higher ratings (Zervas et al., 2021). This suggests that SE platforms may be minimising negative reviews to optimise user engagement, raising ethical questions about their governance.

Chapter 6 offers organisations a practical guide for sustainability communication. This toolkit is tailored to address the pitfalls of greenwashing by recommending remedies and considerations in the journey towards green transformation, thus adding to the greenwashing and strategic story-telling literature (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Dessart & Standaert, 2023). It demonstrates how the institutional sources of rules, norms and beliefs inform corporate legitimacy in sustainability communication. This allows businesses to avoid common errors and craft more authentic narratives in their journey towards green transformation.

Taken collectively, the chapters unravel the impact of institutions on: sustainable consumption, the role of emergent technologies in shaping human interactions within these activities and shaping corporate sustainability discourse. Through its interdisciplinarity, it reframes institutional theory as a tool for both academic inquiry and practical action.

This interdisciplinary approach provides a holistic framework to understand and address the complexities of sustainable consumption. It identifies systemic barriers and opportunities for change, offering a roadmap for theoretical exploration and practical action. In doing so, it enhances the robustness and applicability of institutional theory, extending its reach into sustainable consumption research.

7.4   Practical implications

This research has implications for practice which could inform more effective policy frameworks and corporate strategies aimed at fostering sustainable consumption.

The conceptual paper (Chapter 4) primarily serves as a comprehensive guide for scholars interested in the intersection of sustainable consumption and institutional theory. It delineates the state of extant research and unearths tensions, setting the stage for future research. The framework emerging from the review acts as a conceptual tool for researchers, aiding in designing empirical studies or developing new theoretical models. By categorising sustainable consumption strategies and intersecting them with institutional theory sub-fields, the chapter enriches interdisciplinary dialogues toward a more integrated field of study.

The empirical paper (Chapter 5) yields insights for consumers, platform operators, and policymakers. For consumers, it highlights the importance of trust cues, encouraging informed decisions based on social norms and regulations. Platform operators can use

these findings to understand how social community-driven ratings and platform brand credibility influence trust. Enhancing features that spotlight shared values or community endorsements could enhance trust and user engagement. The research challenges traditional regulatory practices by highlighting the importance of social and community-driven perspectives for policymaking. Therefore, by integrating social and community-driven perspectives into existing regulations, policymakers can create balanced models that benefit consumers, service providers, and platforms. For instance, different institutional sources of trust can be incorporated into platform accountability policies and consumer protection laws.

The diagnostic developed in the practitioner paper (Chapter 6) offers organisations a structured approach to avoid greenwashing, thereby contributing to more ethical and transparent business practices. This could lead to more stringent disclosure requirements or the establishment of third-party auditing systems to verify sustainability claims. In this manner, the research offers insights that could be directly applied in the realms of policy formulation and business strategy.

Each chapter contributes uniquely to sustainable consumption. Chapter 4's organising framework offers academics a structured approach for furthering research in sustainable consumption. Chapter 5's findings inform consumers, service providers, platform operators, and regulators on how to build and maintain trust in the SE. Chapter 6 equips businesses with a toolkit to avoid greenwashing in their sustainability communication.

7.5 Limitations and further research

Acknowledging the limitations of the research helps identify opportunities for further investigation to advance the intersection of sustainable consumption and institutional theory. This research utilises institutional theory to understand sustainable consumption. While institutional theory explains the resilience of societal norms and structures, it is less equipped to detail the dynamics of change needed for sustainable consumption. Despite lacking a built-in 'theory of change', institutional theory is useful in uncovering barriers to sustainability and suggesting where targeted interventions might be promising. The insights gained highlight potential areas for further theoretical exploration to better capture the processes of change in sustainable consumption, which can be complemented with more change-focused approaches, such as social practice theory, the multi-level perspective and sustainability transitions literature.

Chapter 4 acknowledges an eco-modernist bias that overlooks deeper systemic issues in sustainable consumption. Future iterations can include alternative paradigms like deep ecology and eco-feminism, acknowledging the interdependence between human and non-human value creation (Press, 2021). Research should also scrutinise existing socio-political structures that perpetuate unsustainability, extending the conversation beyond technological and market-based solutions. A key research theme is the inherent contradiction of market logics and sustainability logics that underpin improve, change and reduce sustainable consumption strategies. Recent advances in this conversation draw on the area of organisational sustainability frames, wherein Dzhengiz and Hockerts (2022) synthesised literature to categorise how organisations frame their objectives relating to the three capitals of society, environment and economy. Their review categorises organisational sustainability frames as either dogmatic (capitals are compartmentalised, not integrated and mutually exclusive), instrumental (capitals represent a means-end relationship towards economic capital ends) or paradoxical (capitals are simultaneous and integrative). Understanding the complexity of these frames in organisational theorising as it relates to driving sustainable consumption can offer insights into the hybridity and prioritisation of logics.

Research in the reduce strategy as part of the review demonstrates the paucity of research adopting a strong sustainability stance with respect to institutional theory. Editorials in sustainability-focused journals stress the importance and the need to address the lack of research in this regard: Although "the need to reduce consumer demand—still holds" (Brown, 2014, p. 1), "the question of how to change values and norms in society to promote a *reduction* [emphasis added] in resource consumption continues to loom large" (Rau & Lorek, 2023, p. 2). Additionally, marketing research needs to take the next step towards a more deliberate strong sustainability plan. The review by Press (2021) outlines a substantive research agenda for future scholars traversing the intersection of marketing and sustainability. Specifically from a reduce strategy perspective, research that 'explore[s] radical models of product and market exchange' is critical in advancing strong sustainability research (Press, 2021, p. 104). While not explicitly researched through the lens of institutional theory, scholars are exploring the role of sufficiency-oriented business models that helps to address the reduce strategy (e.g., Gossen & Heinrich, 2021; Niessen & Bocken, 2021).

For future inquiries, methodological enhancements and empirical validation of the organising framework is encouraged. Since an SLR has future research areas as its primary goal, Chapter 4 develops a research roadmap based on the unresolved tensions

across nine categories emanating from the institutional theoretical perspective of sustainable consumption.

Chapter 5 contributes to a multi-layered understanding of trust's changing landscape in a technologically mediated SE. It challenges pre-conceptions in institutional theory by illustrating that, contrary to conventional wisdom, trust in the SE is progressively being decoupled from traditional regulatory bodies and is increasingly predicated on social interaction and platform brands. This cognitive shift provokes new questions about the implications for sustainable consumption. For example, if trust is generated through social rather than regulatory mechanisms, what does this imply for the ethics and sustainability of consumption patterns? Can a platform's brand, engineered for commercial gain, adequately replace the safeguards typically provided by independent regulatory bodies? Additionally, the predominance of a 'rating floor' offers future inquiries into how such biases may impact sustainable consumption. Lastly, from an institutional isomorphism perspective, how do successful platforms in the SE set the tone for what attributes are associated with trustworthiness, thereby affecting consumer perception and adoption across the sector?

Additional avenues for future research, not originally discussed in Chapter 5, include the following. The cross-sectional research design captures only a snapshot of consumer behavioural intentions. Thus, longitudinal studies could reveal how trust evolves over time and how changing institutional dynamics influence it. While the study is situated within the business and social sciences research, future studies might benefit from incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives (e.g., computer science), particularly as algorithmic decision-making becomes more prevalent in the SE (Basukie et al., 2020). Given the dynamic nature of regulatory environments as well as the increasing importance of data privacy, worker and consumer rights, future research could incorporate the ethical dimensions of trust and regulation in the SE from service provider and consumer perspectives, which also has implications for well-being emanating from new sustainable consumption models (Culiberg et al., 2023; Duggan et al., 2020).

In Chapter 6, while the delineation between 'Adherence,' 'Action,' and 'Authenticity' introduces a new conceptual vocabulary that has the potential to reframe debates and practices in the field of sustainable consumption, the study is not without its limitations. First, the scope of data is confined predominantly to organisations within specific sectors and geographic regions, thus constraining the generalisability of the findings—an issue that could be addressed in future work through a cross-sectoral application of the AAA framework. Second, although the resultant AAA conceptual framework is novel, it has

not been widely validated. Third, the study is constrained by its snapshot-in-time nature, which hampers its applicability in the face of evolving corporate strategies and regulations; longitudinal analyses could provide a temporal dimension to this limitation. Third, the multi-dimensional construct of sustainability itself suggests that the AAA framework may not fully encapsulate all aspects, dimensions, or interpretations of sustainability. Therefore, comparative studies and operationalising the AAA framework in a practical toolkit for corporate practitioners could expand its scope and applicability. Lastly, what may seem like a communication problem is actually a strategic issue. The new role for chief marketing officers involves influencing the C-suite and board internally, not just focusing on external influence.

7.6   Concluding comments

This research explores how institutions influence sustainable consumption, examining their impact on consumers' trust and willingness to engage in technology-mediated SE services, as well as their role in legitimating or delegitimating businesses' sustainability communication efforts. The research maps out sustainable consumption strategies and their intersection with institutional theory, providing a roadmap for future scholarly inquiry and highlighting key tensions and research gaps (Chapter 4). It examines the cognitive processes behind consumer trust and participation in the SE, emphasising the importance of micro and meso-level trust antecedents over macro-level regulatory mechanisms (Chapter 5). Lastly, it introduces a framework for corporate sustainability communication, offering practical advice for businesses to avoid greenwashing (Chapter 6).

The research employs a multi-methodological approach, allowing for an exploration of how institutions shape sustainable consumption across different contexts and analytical levels. Guided by the overarching research question – how institutions shape sustainable consumption – the study integrates various research philosophies manifesting in an SLR (Chapter 4), an experimental vignette methodology survey (Chapter 5), and a multiple-case content analysis (Chapter 6).

The research contributes to the field of sustainable consumption by offering a conceptual framework informed by institutional theory. It enriches the understanding of sustainable consumption within broader institutional contexts through an integrated research roadmap (Chapter 4), brings into question the efficacy of regulatory institutions in trust-

building within the SE (Chapter 5), and surfaces the institutional sources of legitimacy behind corporate sustainability communication (Chapter 6). The insights advance theoretical understanding and offer practical implications for policy and business.

The research underscores the need for empirical validation of the proposed frameworks and suggests incorporating alternative paradigms and addressing broader socio-political and ethical issues related to consumption behaviours and corporate communication. Key research areas include:

- Moving beyond an eco-modernist bias to explore paradigms like deep ecology and examine socio-political structures that facilitate sustainable consumption (Chapter 4);

- Investigating institutional structures that build trust in SE platforms, mitigate rent-seeking and commercialisation rebound effects and preserve the intrinsic value of sharing (Chapter 5); and

- Examining how businesses with a history of reputational and legitimacy issues can engage in effective corporate sustainability communication to promote sustainable consumption (Chapter 6).

Table 7.1 summarises the key points across the thesis.

Table 7.1: Chapter summary

Chapter 4 (Conceptual paper)	Chapter 5 (Empirical paper)	Chapter 6 (Practitioner paper)
Theoretical background: Strength of sustainable consumption		
Weak — *Moderate* — *Strong* Improve ✓ Change ✓ Reduce ✓	*Weak* — *Moderate* — *Strong* Improve Change ✓ Reduce	*Weak* — *Moderate* — *Strong* Improve ✓ Change ✓ Reduce ✓
Theoretical background: Institutional theory degree of stasis		
Low — *Moderate, variable* — *High* IEW ✓ IL ✓ NIT ✓	*Low* — *Moderate, variable* — *High* IEW IL NIT ✓	*Low* — *Moderate, variable* — *High* IEW ✓ IL NIT ✓
Research questions		
How do institutions facilitate or hinder sustainable consumption?	How do institutions impact consumers' trust in the sharing economy?	How do institutions (de)legitimate corporate sustainability communication?
Research methodology: Philosophical underpinnings		
Overall: Pragmatism		
▪ Social constructivism	▪ Social constructivism ▪ Post-positivism	▪ Pragmatism ▪ Social constructivism
Research methodology: Research strategies, data collection, approaches		
▪ Systematic literature review ▪ Academic journal articles ▪ Inductive, deductive	▪ Experimental vignette survey, structural equation modelling ▪ Survey respondents ▪ Deductive	▪ Qualitative content analysis, conceptual framework ▪ Online newspaper articles ▪ Inductive
Results		
▪ Three strategies for sustainable consumption are shaped by three sub-fields of institutional theory ▪ Resultant 3x3 matrix from intersection of the two fields ▪ Nine key areas of future research	▪ Regarding consumers' intent to participate in the SE: – Consumer-to-consumer interactions, through star ratings, are significant – Platform brand is significant – Independent star ratings are limited	▪ Questions of organisations' institutional sources of legitimacy for sustainability communication mapped to corresponding advice – Rules: Adherence – Norms: Action – Beliefs: Authenticity
Contributions		
▪ Systematises sustainable consumption and institutional theory fields ▪ 3x3 conceptual organising framework ▪ Synthesises tensions to be resolved as areas of future research	▪ Affirms normative institution of community-based reputation and cultural-cognitive institution of platform brand ▪ Challenges regulatory institution of independent reputation ▪ Affirms presence of 'rating floor' skewed towards higher reputational ratings	▪ Extent to which institutional sources of rules, norms and beliefs inform corporate legitimacy in sustainability communication ▪ The "AAA" sustainability communication framework
Practical implications		
▪ Roadmap of future research areas for scholars	▪ Consumers: Trust cues to inform participation ▪ Platform: Design features for trust and increased adoption ▪ Policymakers: Multi-tiered approach to regulation	▪ Risk mitigation tool so communication may not be perceived as greenwashing ▪ Alignment of sustainability communication in organisation's green transformation journey
Limitations and future research areas		
▪ Limited deep ecology or eco-feminist perspectives	▪ Sample homogeneity and methodological refinements ▪ Trust evolution, ethical considerations ▪ Interpretation of SE as sustainable	▪ Limited sectoral and regional scope ▪ Framework may not cover all sustainability dimensions

Note. Source: Author's own. IEW: institutional entrepreneurship and work; IL: institutional logics, NIT: neo-institutional theory.

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