



Roles of consumer-citizens in food waste reduction

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and analyses the roles of consumer-citizens in reducing food waste. As one of the most crucial sustainability challenges, food waste provides a theoretically interesting context to explore the roles and responsibilities given to and taken by consumer-citizens. Reducing food waste provides opportunities for consumer-citizens to change their own consumption decisions and practices as well as influence others in pursuit of a more sustainable consumer society. We review literature on consumer-citizenship and identify three main roles of consumer-citizens in sustainable consumption at the micro, meso and macro levels: decision-makers, communal consumer-citizens, and change agents. We illustrate the key characteristics of these roles by constructing three narratives based on insights gained from an ongoing qualitative research project that examines consumer-citizens as active reducers of food waste. The paper provides a contribution to research related to sustainable consumption, political consumerism, and food waste. It also has implications for policy-makers.

Introduction

A considerable body of literature in consumer research has paid attention to consumption as a form of citizenship and political engagement (see e.g., Arnould, 2007; Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015; Rokka & Moisander, 2009; Soper, 2007; Trentmann, 2007). Consequently, consumers are today seen as key subjects in societal transformation (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). This paper investigates consumer-citizenship in the context of food waste, one of the most crucial global sustainability challenges today. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations has estimated in 2011 that globally about one third of food produced for human nutrition is lost or wasted (FAO, 2015). In consumer research, food waste has recently been identified as an important topic for study, creating possibilities to contribute to theory, practice and the society more broadly (Porpino, 2016). In terms of sustainable consumption and lifestyles, food is one of the most impactful areas where changes can be made, alongside transport and energy use (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014).

Food waste creates environmental and economic, but also social and ethical concerns. From an environmental perspective, the carbon footprint of food waste is almost equal (87%) to global road transport emissions (FAO, 2015). The later in the supply chain food waste occurs, the greater the carbon footprint. Thus,

reducing food waste in the later stages of food supply chain, i.e. at retailers and households, is especially impactful for the environment. Since we all have to eat every day, (potential) food waste concerns most consumers' daily lives, irrespective of the diet they follow. This is also the reason for why consumer-citizens have been increasingly urged to change their behaviour in order to waste less food (Evans, Welch, & Swaffield, 2017). Compared to many other sustainable consumption practices such as avoiding air travel or purchasing an electric car, reducing food waste can be relatively easy to implement and without major economic or social sacrifices in the consumer's lifestyle.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse the roles of consumer-citizens in reducing food waste. First, we review previous research related to consumer-citizenship. Then, we introduce three main roles of consumer-citizens: decision-makers, communal consumer-citizens and change agents. These roles operate at different levels (micro, meso, macro) in society and markets, thus offering an illustrative framework for understanding sustainable consumption and consumer-citizenship. We illuminate the characteristics of these roles by constructing three narratives based on insights from an ongoing qualitative research project on food waste. The research materials include blog posts, interviews of food bloggers and "born sustainable" startup representatives, media texts on food waste related initiatives, and political documents. In the conclusion, we discuss the theoretical and policy implications of the study.

Theoretical underpinnings

Unpacking the concept of consumer-citizen

The concept of consumer-citizen (or citizen-consumer) has attained an increasing and multidisciplinary academic interest, becoming a keyword also in discourses on environmental policy and sustainability (Trentmann, 2007). It is a composite of two terms, namely consumer and citizen - and a hyphen separating these two spheres, implicitly emphasising their impact on each other. Put together, the concept brings forward a contrast between pleasure seeking, self-interested utility-maximizing "consumer behaviour" taking place in the market and a willingness to serve the common good through "citizenship" taking place within the context of the nation state and civil society (Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015).

As argued by the consumption historian Frank Trentmann (2007), citizenship and consumerism used to be positioned in social theory as opposites - the argument being that with the advance of commerce, division of labor and mass marketing, "civic life was in danger of being hollowed out by jostling private interests" (ibid.: 148). Citizenship was considered the sphere of morality and altruism whereas the market was portrayed as an alienating sphere of self-interested exchange and fulfilling individual desires. Furthermore, in the writings of Baudrillard and other critics of consumer society, consumers began to be portrayed as "dupes" or victims of the capitalist system, unable to escape the neverending consumption of

commercial signs (see Arnould, 2007). Consumer researchers have, however, for a long time analysed consumption as a symbolic and expressive activity, much more manifold than either the "dupe/victim" or "economic man" stereotypes suggest (Rokka & Moisander, 2009). It can be argued that the "homo oeconomicus" – the rational, utility-maximizing individual – is and has always been a fictional abstraction (Soper, 2007). Rather than seen as opposites or alternatives, consumer and citizen roles are increasingly overlapping and complementary. The citizen's altruistic and moral concerns over the environment, for instance, need not be confined to the traditional political sphere of activism. Instead, he or she may engage in "alternative hedonism" (ibid.), consuming products and services that revise the definition of "good life" into a more sustainable one. Thus, altruistic and self-interested motivations are not so clear-cut and ethical consumption practices may be informed by both.

Consumption has also gained momentum as a site of political action and mobilization that complicates the strict division between consumer and citizen roles (Trentmann, 2007). Various forms of political consumerism have been studied in consumer research ranging from boycotts and buycotts to consumer resistance movements, anti-consumption and consumer activism (see e.g., Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015; Halkier & Holm, 2008; Jacobsen, 2017). Hence, the political sphere has been gradually extended from the formal domain of the state toward a renaissance of civil society (Trentmann, 2007). Another influence has been the political neoliberal ideology that has emphasised responsabilising consumers – obliging them to enact their lives through independent and free (consumption) choices rather than as directed by the government or other central authority (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

However, finding a balance between consumerism and citizenship can create conflicts (Frank, 2018) as well as contradictions and ideological tensions (Johnston, 2008). For example, the stress induced by consumer-citizen role conflicts can impede consumers from making ethical purchase decisions despite having ethical purchase intentions (Frank, 2018). Identifying with both roles simultaneously is challenging and hence the consumer-citizens must make compromises in their everyday lives in order to navigate these tensions and cope with them (see also Pecoraro & Uusitalo, 2014).

To sum up, in discussing consumer-citizenship, it must be noted that both concepts (consumer and citizen) are continuously contested and unstable. As argued by Trentmann (2007: 151), it may be better to approach citizen-consumers in terms of "multiple identities that are only slowly (and unevenly and incompletely) fused into a universal subject". For instance, a continuous debate is taking place over who can be considered as a consumer and who can represent the voice of "the consumer" in various public debates (Evans et al., 2017; Trentmann, 2007). Various actors from social movements to businesses to consumer researchers can claim to be speaking for the consumer, protecting and serving their interests without really addressing the question of what exactly these interests are.

Three roles of consumer-citizens in sustainable consumption

With the help of existing literature on consumer-citizens and sustainable consumption, three different roles can be identified: consumer-citizens as decision-makers and choosers, as communal consumer-citizens, and as change agents.

The first role, consumer-citizens as decision-makers, is closest to the rational consumer archetype – consumer-citizens are viewed as making consumption decisions and choices that are more or less sustainable. The rhetoric goes that consumers as autonomous actors are making these decisions individually. The neoliberal discourse promotes this role as it primarily views consumer-citizens as “free” – and simultaneously obligated – to choose (e.g. environmentally sustainable) goods and services (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). By making more sustainable consumption choices, consumer-citizens can implement change at the individual micro level. Earlier, this role has been identified in a typology of green consumer-citizen involvement and motivation as “the individual green citizen” (Prothero, McDonagh & Dobscha, 2010).

From this perspective, the route to large scale change is for different kinds of authorities and experts to inform and educate consumers about the impact of their individual choices and behaviours (cf. Shove, 2010; Southerton & Evans, 2017). However, it has been questioned whether consumers can actually ‘buy’ themselves into a more sustainable society or is “ethical consumption choice” framed as such only to promote the commercial interests of companies (Jacobsen, 2017). Also, the decision-making focus relies on cognitive assumptions of consumers (the ABC model – see Shove, 2010) which in reality do not predict actual consumer behaviour very well. Indeed, the existence of the so called attitude-behaviour gap is a well known and researched phenomenon in sustainable consumption studies (Prothero et al., 2011). Even with a strong positive intention to act sustainably, consumers’ actual behaviour does not always reflect this. Furthermore, many argue that the focus has been too much on the acquisition stage of the consumption cycle rather than taking into account usage and disposal as equally important (Geiger, Fischer & Schrader, 2018; Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014). It has also been suggested that a micro-focus “at the expense of a more systematic, structural, and institutional perspectives is insufficient to address the sustainability challenge effectively” (Prothero et al., 2011).

In the food waste context, consumer-citizens as decision-makers can make more sustainable purchasing decisions by shopping discounted food items that have an approaching expiry date or items that are not in perfect condition but still edible. Studies have documented for instance that if the price is right, i.e. an appropriate discount is given, consumers are willing to purchase any type of suboptimal food item from retailers (e.g. odd shape, brown spot, past best-before date, or dented packaging) (de Hooge et al., 2017). In addition, there are currently many start-up companies around the world that offer deformed and suboptimal vegetables and fruit or completely new items made out of surplus food (see e.g.,

<https://foodwin.org/>). A recent study suggests that such value-added surplus foods are becoming an attractive product category of their own (Bhatt et al., 2018).

The second role, communal consumer-citizen, draws from a practice theoretical understanding of consumers (Shove, 2010; Warde, 2014). This understanding has been fruitfully utilised in studying sustainable consumption (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014; Warde, 2014). These studies have for example focussed on water consumption (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017) and energy consumption (Butler, Parkhill & Pidgeon, 2016). The focus is extended from the consumer as "shopper" toward everyday practices and routines (see also Halkier, 2009). The focus also moves toward taking into account all phases of the consumption cycle: acquisition, use, and disposal (Geiger et al. 2018). According to the proponents of practice theory, it enables looking at (un) sustainable everyday life as dynamic. Furthermore, practices can only be changed through changes in their elements (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017) such as the body, objects and infrastructures that are used in the practice as well as the social and cultural context (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014). The social nature of practices is emphasised in the role of the communal consumer-citizen, because practices are adopted and learnt in social contexts. Hence, participating in sustainable practices in specific social contexts with peers may be influential in changing an individual's practices (ibid.: 31).

The potential scale of change from the perspective of this role is broader, extending to meso level of households, communities, and groups that share social practices. In Prothero et al.'s (2010) typology, this role corresponds to the "collective green consumer" who engages in individual consumption choices to improve the wider public and environmental wellbeing. However, even though the scale of change is wider than in the first role, the communal consumer-citizen perspective can still be criticised for not sufficiently taking into account the macro level. While bottom-up changes in consumption practices are needed, changes in public policy and market systems are vital in order to normalise and stabilise more sustainable practices (Prothero et al., 2011).

In the case of food waste, research has found that ordinary practices of everyday life, being able to plan and manage routine aspects of grocery shopping, cooking, food storage, preservation, and display are central (Evans, 2011, 2012; Närvänen, Mesiranta & Hukkanen, 2016). However, the focus has not been on food waste reduction as a communal practice - with the exception of a few studies that discuss social media and blog communities in the context of food waste (Närvänen, Mesiranta & Hukkanen, 2013; Närvänen et al., 2018). These studies suggest that consumer-citizens may collectively inspire each other to change their consumption practices related to food waste.

The third role, consumer-citizens as change agents, draws from the new forms of political consumerism (see Jacobsen, 2017): concerned consumer-citizens may engage in various activities to try to change not only their own behaviour but also that of others and of the society more broadly. Consumers are seen more in their

citizen role as concerned over the environment and the sustainability of the society as a whole. Critically evaluating the current system, consumer-citizens are aware that changes need to be implemented by all actors – companies and politicians included – and the responsibility should not be only on the consumers' side (Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015). In the change-agent role, consumer-citizens may be able to push for changes in public policy or markets that would not be made unless there was a strong enough pressure. McShane and Sabadoz (2015) argue that moving away from the 'choice-as-power view' is required to question the existing marketplace structures and "link their consumption practices to broader social issues" (549). Examples of phenomena related to the change-agent role are already widely studied in sustainable consumption research, ranging from boycotts (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) to anti-consumption and voluntary simplicity (Pentina & Amos 2011; Shaw & Newholm, 2002) as well as more recently, alternative market arrangements (Gollnhofer & Schouten, 2017; Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015).

Earlier studies on food waste have identified consumer-citizens as change agents in the movement of freeganism (e.g. Edwards & Mercer, 2013; Gollnhofer, 2017a; Pentina & Amos, 2011) or food sharing initiatives (Gollnhofer, 2017b). The change agents can also aim at making the often invisible food waste more visible. Examples of this type of activism include highlighting food waste through popular culture (e.g. the movies 'Just Eat It' and 'Wasted - the Story of Food Waste') as well as campaigns and events promoted by influential food waste movement leaders (e.g. Tristram Stuart and the Feedback organisation).

Consumer narratives of food waste reduction

Inspired by the three roles, the authors constructed three fictional narratives illustrating the different roles in food waste reduction. We drew inspiration from the tradition of narrative research (Riessman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988) and in particular, narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) as well as 'creative analytical processes (CAP) ethnography' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005: 962). This approach uses narrative knowing to produce stories that synthesise knowledge (Heikkinen, 2000). Here, our approach is in line with research writing that combines academic and fictional conventions. This kind of writing has been suggested as beneficial for consumer research to better take into account the 'poetics' of writing (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). In this type of research, the 'truth' of the narratives is not a meaningful criteria to judge their quality. Instead, the 'verisimilitude', the ability of the narrative to capture the reader emotionally and experientially, is at stake (Heikkinen, 2000).

To construct the narratives, we first discussed and decided on the characters and the key elements of the narratives. In deciding the key elements, we utilised recent food waste studies that focus on consumer characteristics (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2018) and practices (Mattila et al., 2018; Närvänen et al., 2016, 2018). Then, each author independently wrote one narrative. Finally, the authors discussed and

refined the narratives together. Hence, our method resembles a 'collaborative method' of writing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005: 963). As each author used their subjective interpretations gathered from insights and materials generated during the research project, the narratives were socially constructed through language.

Greg - making more sustainable purchasing decisions to avoid food waste

Greg is a high-school history teacher in his fifties, and he has become recently widowed. He has two adult children. He lives in a small city, but has always spent summers in the countryside. Greg is an outdoor enthusiast and spends a lot of time fishing and hiking in the nature. After his wife's recent passing, Greg has had to learn to cook and do the grocery shopping for himself. These household chores have previously been taken care of by his wife.

Recently, Greg noticed in the newspaper an article about the large amount of food waste that is created globally. In the article, the reporter had interviewed researchers who had measured the impact of this food waste on the climate and nature. Greg was shocked to learn about this and went online to look for more information on the issue. After becoming aware of the severity of the problem, he has decided to try to change his own behaviour in order to avoid food waste.

Greg buys a lot of ready-made meals, since he has not been accustomed to cooking. Therefore, he is pleased to note that he actually does not cause a lot of food waste at home. In general, Greg has always been quite a price-sensitive shopper - he has learnt the frugal lifestyle from his own parents. Hence, in order to reduce food waste, he has now begun to purchase discounted food items that have their expiry date approaching. Doing this makes him happy, since he is able to "kill two birds with one stone": to save money and reduce food waste. He also chooses the single bananas and the vegetables that are perfectly good to eat even if they do not look perfect. He feels that by specifically selecting these products from the grocery store shelves, he is helping retailers address the food waste problem. A week ago, Greg's grown-up children visited him and told him that there is a new mobile application available where you can purchase and pick-up restaurants' surplus meals for a discount. Greg is very eager to try out this service, since it would also save him the trouble of cooking.

Amy - practising food waste reduction in everyday life

Amy is under 40 years old and lives in a leafy suburb on the outskirts of a big city. She is married and has three children and two dogs. She works as an accounting manager in a subunit of a big multinational forest corporation. Before meeting her husband and establishing a family, in her childhood, she lived in a countryside with her family, including two sisters and brothers. Her parents had a small farm where they grew wheat. In her leisure time, she maintains a food blog. She also participates in different kinds of activities organised by a local dog club.

Amy has always been interested in food. She has lots of good memories of preparing food with her mother for the rest of the family. Her mother was very thrifty and always reminded Amy that all food ingredients were to be fully used and not wasted. This included turning potato peels to crisps as well as utilising the leftovers of a half eaten grilled chicken in next day's dinner soup and finally in a chicken stock. Also, she feels obliged to eat everything that is on her plate and reminds her children to do so as well.

The amount of food waste in Amy's household is low, because she pays a lot of attention to the issue. Before going to the store, Amy plans the weekly menu carefully. When shopping, she often wonders why there has to be so much variety in grocery stores and why some fruits need to be available all-year-round. She uses a lot of creativity in cooking, inventing new recipes out of food that is going to expire, and sharing these recipes with the readers of her blog. Also, in assessing whether food is still edible or not, Amy uses her senses: she smells and tastes the food rather than just trusting the date labels. She habitually eats the food left on her childrens' plates and gives scraps also to the family dogs who are happy to help her in the battle against food waste. Due to her busy lifestyle, sometimes food waste is, however, unavoidable.

Amy has become well known amongst her extended family for organising the sharing of food after family parties so that all the food is taken home rather than thrown away. She also sometimes takes food to her office co-workers. She has discussed the issue of food waste several times with her friends and acquaintances, giving them tips for using leftovers. Amy has participated in food waste related events and challenges in social media.

Robin - critically communicating about pitfalls of current food system

Robin is a 32-year old chief development officer in a clean-tech company. He lives with his journalist wife in a big city in a townhouse with a garden where they grow vegetables and keep hens. He refuses to eat factory farmed meat due to ethical and environmental reasons. Over the years, he has also become critical of the existing food system and the amount of food waste created by the system. He became aware of the problems already in his childhood from his parents working as researchers in environmental politics. However, the greatest awakening came when he was working in a grocery store to finance his environmental technology studies. There, he witnessed the piles of edible food being mindlessly thrown away.

More recently, he has established a start-up company with his wife and some of his closest friends. The startup would utilise food that otherwise would end up as waste, for example by brewing beer from wasted bread. He is willing to quit his current job as soon as the startup is up and running. Some of his friends are freegans, and occasionally he organises parties together with his friends that utilise mostly food saved from dumpsters. Even though he understands and supports

freeganism, he sees that more radical changes are required to change the current system.

In his free time, he is an active volunteer worker in an organisation that collects surplus food from supermarkets, cafeterias, and bakeries and directs them to those in need. He also produces humorous Youtube videos with his wife about sustainable lifestyle. These videos occasionally challenge their viewers to change their daily life towards more sustainable. Their videos have received millions of views on Youtube. Recently he received an invitation to give a public speech about his thoughts on alternative food system and food waste in a food waste-related festival together with one of his idols, the Danish food waste activist and movement leader Selina Juul. Having met Selina Juul earlier, he feels privileged to be speaking in the same event with her.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to describe and analyse the roles of consumer-citizens in reducing food waste. Utilising previous research on consumer-citizens and sustainable consumption, we identified three different roles that were then illustrated in the food waste context through three researcher-constructed narratives. The stories of Greg, Amy, and Robin illustrate the different levels at which consumer-citizens may operate in society and markets in order to reduce food waste. Hence, the article offers an illustrative and applicable framework for researchers studying various aspects of sustainable consumption and consumer-citizenship.

Firstly, Greg's story describes a traditional portrait of the consumer as a decision-maker: after becoming informed and aware of the environmental effects of food waste, he engaged in more sustainable purchasing and consumption decisions. However, his actions mainly take place at the individual or micro level and he operates within the current food system without questioning it.

Amy's story, on the other hand, depicts a communal consumer-citizen who pays attention to the food waste issue more holistically as part of her everyday life: from planning purchases to shopping, cooking and storing. Furthermore, Amy's slightly more reflexive attitude toward the food system as a whole has resulted in her participating in different social initiatives to reduce food waste at the meso-level of groups and communities. Amy's story also reflects the impact of social norms and groups on food waste reduction - one feels more inclined to reduce food waste if their immediate social groups also do so (Van Geffen, Van Herpen & Van Trijp, 2017).

Finally, Robin's story illustrates the consumer as a change agent: the food waste issue has become a matter of great concern for Robin who devotes many of his pursuits and interests, in both working life and free time, to fixing the issue. His efforts are thus directed at a system level change, manifesting the need to situate

consumer-citizens' consumption practices in a broader frame where more sustainable practices should be facilitated by transformed infrastructural arrangements (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Jacobsen, 2017). Robin's story also illustrates how social media can provide the means to spread influential messages that come from peers rather than traditional authorities (Närvänen et al., 2018). Robin operates as an agent for change, inspiring many actors instead of just consumer-citizens to participate. Hence, the responsibility for reducing food waste is no longer only on consumer-citizens but on a wider set of stakeholders (see Evans et al., 2017).

Many earlier studies on food waste (see Porpino, 2016) portray an image of a consumer indulging in opportunities created by the market, thus also being a 'victim' of the market (e.g. when food waste emerges due to excessive purchasing or blindly following best-before dates). In contrast, our paper draws further attention to the 'citizen' part of consumer-citizenship, seeing consumers as capable of driving change on multiple levels (see also Halkier & Holm, 2008). Wider change to more sustainable consumption requires consumer-citizenship to be manifested in everyday practices along educating and mobilizing others (Chaudhury & Albinsson, 2015), therefore highlighting the importance of communal consumer-citizens and active change agents.

The paper also has implications for policy-makers. While many campaigns and initiatives have been implemented in the recent years to inform and educate consumers about food waste (see e.g., Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2017; Principato, 2018), there is still a need for more efficient solutions to address the problem. Recent research has recommended putting more emphasis on the positive aspects of ethical consumption, i.e., empowering the 'consumer' more than the 'citizen' role (e.g., Frank, 2018; Närvänen et al., 2018). This means focussing less on blaming the consumer through a discourse of citizen's obligations but rather empowering them through opportunities for sustainable consumption.

Our findings suggest that when trying to affect the food waste related behaviour of consumers, it is important to understand the level on which consumer-citizens are operating. Thus, our paper complements recent approaches of segmenting consumers based on their food (waste) behaviours and lifestyles (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2018). Many of the past informational campaigns are directed at the consumer as decision-maker - somebody who may not even be aware of the extent of the problem. More initiatives could hence be directed at the communal consumer-citizen in the future, since many consumers are already aware of the food waste problem, but lack the skills or abilities to change their everyday practices (Van Geffen et al., 2017).

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