

Unfolding Sustainability

An Empirical Study into a Sustainable Student Community in the Netherlands: Exploring National and Gender differences of Dutch and Spanish Students

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Introduction

Human activities have been shown to have a catastrophic impact on our world, therefore living according to a sustainable lifestyle can help reducing the risk of environmental disasters while simultaneously countering the ongoing climate crisis (Upton, 2021). People who lead a sustainable lifestyle and carry out sustainable practices have less environmental impact than people that do not (Akenji & Bengtsson, 2014). Environmental concern, environmental risk perception, environmental knowledge, and environmental attitudes are all associated with pro-environmental behaviours and several studies have focused on these aspects as antecedents of green consumption (Saari et al., 2021). These aspects differ among European countries and many studies have focused on the socio-demographic aspects (e.g. sex, age, nationality) that influence sustainable consumerism as different understandings of sustainability may depend on a person's characteristics such as nationality and gender (Bloodhart & Swim, 2020; Bonera et al., 2017). In fact, people make meaning of sustainability in different ways and different types of consumers may have different understandings of sustainability (Royne et al., 2011). In recent years, researchers have highlighted a rising need for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of sustainability's components and the processes which conducting a sustainable lifestyle involve (Catlin et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2020; Barone et al., 2020).

The European Social Survey, Round 8, 2016-2017 on European attitudes to climate change and energy tackled European differences in this regard (Wouter et al., 2018). From this survey it emerges that concern about climate change is particularly high in southern countries, such as Spain and Portugal, with Portugal being the most concerned country. More than 50% of the Portuguese population are strongly concerned with climate change, and in Spain this figure reaches almost 50%. In Balkan and Eastern countries, and in the Netherlands this level of concern is lower than 25%. Such numbers show heterogeneity across Europe and are indicative of national differences in attitudes toward climate change, as well as national differences in the understanding of sustainable living to counteract the climate crisis. However, they fail to account for people's different understandings of climate change and its repercussions, leaving a knowledge gap that must be filled.

A strand of research on green consumption has focused on young consumers as young people are reported to be more likely to be aware of the environmental crisis and to engage with sustainable lifestyles because of concern about its consequences (Saari et al., 2021). Another stream of research has focused on gender differences in green consumption as women have been reported to be more concerned about the environment than men. Sustainable consumption can also be influenced by factors such as environmental knowledge, level of

concern for the environment, and personal attitudes (Mostafa, 2007). Moreover the social construction of gender roles seem to play a role on these aspects. This is an intriguing aspect and that is why there is the need to better understand the connection between the meaning of sustainability and gender.

Little research has been done on the subjective experiences and the processes through which young consumers construct meanings of sustainability. In this light, the present thesis aims at filling this gap and investigating the nuances of sustainability and the potential distinctions of its meaning-making process through exploratory qualitative research of Droevendaal, a Dutch sustainable community of university students. Consumers show their commitment to sustainability issues through their consumption decisions (Long & Murray, 2013). Therefore, Droevendaal inhabitants, in having green mentalities and being interested in sustainability issues engage in consumption practices that are allegedly sustainable. However, they may do this differently, presenting differences not only in the interpretations of sustainability but also, in the sustainable consumption practices they consequently perform. Considering the wide gap between the Dutch and Spanish in their attitude towards climate change, and that Dutch and Spanish people are numerous within Droevendaal, the present study sets out to answer the following research question: “how do Dutch and Spanish students, who live in a sustainable community, frame their commitments to consume sustainably?”. The research question is aimed at understanding how students make meaning of sustainability and determine what it means to them to consume sustainably. This research will also consider the influence of national differences and gender in students’ understanding of sustainability and sustainable consumption through the subsequent sub-question: “are there differences in the students’ representation of sustainability according to their nationality and gender, and how do they emerge?”.

Academic interest in anthropogenic factors and their effects on the planet is expanding as more scholars agree that humans are contributing to the worsening of the environmental crisis, impacting both ecosystems and the people who rely on them (Lockie, 2022). From a sociological standpoint, climate change has been studied in a variety of ways and disciplines, including studies on consumption practices, climate beliefs and attitudes, climate politics, sustainable transitions and the more general sustainability, and the interaction between economic, social, and environmental processes (Koehrsen et al., 2020; Lockie, 2022). Shedding a light on green students interpretations of sustainability and how it relates with gender and nationality can be fruitful to understand how the social construction of gender is experienced by the students and how their understanding of sustainability might depend on nationality.

Indeed, this research will furnish empirical data on this topic and fill the existing academic gap on the different forms of understanding sustainability giving new insights on national and gender differences without using a pre determined set of antecedents but by understanding the students meaning making processes. Therefore, findings emerging from this research could be useful in devising and implementing effective measures to target different type of consumers.

The following is the outline for the thesis: first, a review of the literature on the concept of sustainability, then a look at how nationality and gender have been explored in relation to sustainable consumption. After that, the research methodology will be outlined, and the findings will be presented in three thematic categories, followed by a conclusion and a discussion of future research possibilities.

Literature Review

a) Sustainability, an ambiguous concept

In literature, the definition of sustainability can be traced back to several sources. Two conceptions of sustainability can be considered the most established. On the one hand the United Nations World Commission on Economic Development (WCED), provides a definition of sustainable development stating that it means that current generations' needs should be accomplished without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their needs. On the other hand, many scholar have adopted the view that sustainability encompasses three pillars, the economic, the social, and the environmental dimension. While the former definition implies a cause-effect relation between past, present, and future and emphasises sustainability's inter-temporal aspect, the latter underlines its multidimensionality. When these definitions are combined, the urge to tackle sustainability issues in the present in order to safeguard the future emerges (Garud & Gehman, 2012), and the areas where damage should be prevented are widened (Gibson, 2002; Robinson, 2004). Bangsa & Schlegelmilch (2020) outlined the different attributes of the three sustainability dimensions, with social sustainability being about social justice (which includes issues such as equity and inclusion), about the welfare of workers, e.g., in guaranteeing them fair salaries, and about protecting consumers and communities. Environmental sustainability attributes, instead, are about preserving natural systems and biodiversity and reducing and correctly managing waste and energy, while economic sustainability attributes relate to the improvement of the economic wellbeing ((Purvis et al., 2019; Harju & Lähtinen, 2021).

Sustainability is often associated with the climate crisis as it could be a solution to curb climate change, however this term is often treated differently by research projects, or policy

makers, emphasizing its ambiguity and the varying features attributed to it in the literature (Lockie, 2016). Research on sustainability has been varied in the type of approaches that are used in its conceptualisation. Research projects on this topic have ranged from treating sustainability either solely in its environmental dimension or social dimension (Cotte and Trudel, 2009; Catlin et. al, 2017) to the use of the all-encompassing multidimensional definition of it (Kohtala, 2017). The United Nations have developed a list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), comprising 17 goals towards a better future for everyone. These goals have been integrated in academic research and scholars have pointed out the necessity to make a priority of sustainable production and consumption within the sustainable development goals (Akenji & Bengtsson, 2014). Throughout this thesis, sustainability will be treated following its multidimensional definition, an exploratory approach will be applied to search for constructed meanings of sustainability. In this regards, the interview questions of this research will not reflect a pre-set definition of sustainability, rather attention will be paid to the way students make meaning of it.

b) Nationality and Sustainable Consumption in Europe

In Europe the number of green consumers is increasing, Europe is also home to the most unsustainable consumer lifestyles (Vita et al., 2019). Several cross-national studies have been conducted to understand national differences regarding environmental attitudes, values, and perceptions, through survey programs such as the International Social Survey Program, the Eurobarometer, and the European Social Survey. Evidence stemming from these surveys is showing that the level of concern towards climate change varies considerably between European countries. Nonetheless, these programs are not flawless, and there is a degree of scepticism towards the type of methodology they use, especially for the differences in understanding of the meaning of concepts across countries (Mayerl, 2016a). Indeed, countries are not equally vulnerable to the impact of climate change, for instance. And environmental risk perception might differ based on this and the participants' responses might be influenced by it.

Moreover, research has linked national wealth with the level of concern for the environment, following the hypothesis that national affluence is positively linked with environmental concern because being concerned with the environment is considered a privilege instead of having to worry for basic needs (Franzen & Vogl, 2013). Other studies have tested this on the micro-level, revealing a positive relation between the socio-economic status of an

individual and their environmental attitudes (Mayerl, 2016b). Heterogeneity across countries in the extent of environmental concern exists, but it may be due to different motivations. Indeed, Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) identified a difference between poor countries that are environmentally concerned for problem-driven reasons and rich countries that are value-driven. Inglehart (1999), developed a post-materialist theory, for which individuals who are raised in a system of economic prosperity are more prone to put emphasis on post-material values, such as freedom and self-realization. Following this, the wealth of a nation would moderate the level of post-material values, which in turn may contrast sustainability ideals. This research will focus on the nationality of the students to better understand the influence this determinant have on their understanding of sustainability.

c) Gender and Sustainable Consumption

In literature, there is evidence that men have a larger carbon footprint than women (Räty & Carlsson-Kanyama, 2010), and that men and women show differences in energy and food consumption. For instance, men consume more meat than women and are more resistant to become vegetarian (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2021). Robust scholarship reports less eco-friendly behaviour by men across ages and countries performed (Räty & Carlsson-Kanyama, 2010). By comparison, women show more commitment or willingness to take care of the environment or to engage with green/sustainable practices. Gender therefore arguably plays an important role in relation to sustainable consumption, and it has been studied as a predictor of attitudes for many years based on the notion that males and females possess distinct characteristics (Bloodhart & Swim, 2020; Royne et al., 2011).

Furthermore, several studies pointed out a positive relationship between environmental concern and the level of education (Tranter, 2010), in this regard female students have been reported to have higher perceptions of environmental risk than male students (Riechard & Peterson, 1998). Olivas & Bernabéu (2012), in a study on the attitudes toward organic food consumption in Spain, found that women's consumption of organic food is dictated by their interest in pursuing a healthy diet, while men are motivated by the social function of it and to a lesser degree by their respect towards the environment. While this study does not inform us on the differences of the amount of organic food consumed depending on gender, it corroborates the fact that there are differences between men and women in their motivations to consume sustainably. Newman & Fernandes (2016), found out that female students in the U.S. were more likely to be concerned with the environment but still knew less than men about the

causes, consequences, and solutions to tackle the problem, therefore owned less environmental knowledge than men.

Other studies have sought the antecedents of green behaviours in personality traits traditionally attributed to the sexes, such as women being more altruistic or empathetic than men (Dietz et al., 2002) and men being more self-focused, individualist, and hedonistic (Soper, 2009), hence less sensitive to social issues such as climate change. Women appear to be more socially responsible and other-oriented than men (Zelezny et al., 2000); pro-environmental behaviours are frequently motivated by a desire to preserve the environment for the benefit of the neighbour. However, more recent studies have studied the role of the social construction of gender on green consumption, identifying gender status and norms as influencing sustainable consumption (Bloodhart & Swim, 2020; Brough et al., 2016). According to these studies, being a green consumer is generally seen as having an unpopular status as it may mean owning fewer things or traveling less and therefore being a less active person, hence people concerned with their status appearance might refrain from green options. Moreover, people who engage in sustainable consumption are stereotypically ascribed feminine traits rather than masculine (Bloodhart & Swim, 2020). Therefore, men can perceive the social pressure of fitting in the masculinity model and avoid green consumption decisions. Moreover, men are more concerned than women with gender-identity maintenance (Brough et al., 2016). This is not to say that women are unconcerned about maintaining their gender identity; in fact, other studies have shown that women tend to avoid "masculine items" like meat (Rozin et al., 2012). Elliott (2013) examined the potential for status differentiation through green consumption, viewing sustainable consumption as appealing but non-fully deliberative practices that enable status signalling. She reports that being female increases the odds of finding green consumption desirable because it accords with gender roles, confirming the idea that sustainable consumption is indeed feminized.

To date, the research that critically reflect upon the meaning of sustainability and its relationship with gender do not put particular emphasis on whether gender differences emerge once one reveals affinity towards environmental causes. The goal of this study is to explore into green students' definitions of sustainability to better understand what it means to live a sustainable lifestyle from their perspectives and to determine whether their subjective experiences differ based on their gender and depending on their nationality differences.

Methodology

a) Sampling

Data for this research project has emerged from in-depth interviews with green students in the Netherlands. Green students are university students who are aware of the environmental crisis and decide to engage in sustainable practices and conduct sustainable lifestyles, making them suitable informants for this type of research. According to Perera et al. (2018), interviewing people who care about the environment can be useful to reveal their perceptions of the environment and their subjective experiences on living a sustainable life. Considering the positive relationship between level of education and environmental concern (Ito & Kawazoe, 2018; Robelia & Murphy, 2012), university students are ideal informants to provide useful insights on the various forms of green consumption they engage with, as these practices represent a key aspect of their consumption patterns. Purposive sampling was utilised to find participants for the interviews (Maxwell, 2013). A sustainable community of students in the Netherlands - Droevendaal

Next to Wageningen University, in the Netherlands, a sustainable community of students is located, called Droevendaal. According to the Droevendaal website, which is directly managed by the inhabitants, the community is composed of students who are interested in sustainability and have "green minds" (Droevendaal | Droevendaal student housing community, Wageningen, Netherlands, n.d.). However, this claim is rather vague as each person decides for themselves how to apply various approaches to sustainable consumption. Therefore, some people are vegetarian, while others eat meat, and place a greater or lesser focus on energy consumption. Furthermore, given the positive international appreciation of the university, almost 25% of Wageningen university students are international (WUR, 2022), so the students that inhabit the community are in large part international. Hence, students who live in Droevendaal have different ways of consuming, affected not only by the community setting but also by their pre-existing backgrounds, and represent a unique case in the research on the interpretation of sustainability and sustainable consumption because of its "green" commitment, its international diversity, and the confrontational perspective this offers.

In particular, interviewees who had lived in Droevendaal for at least six months and still reside there were invited to participate in the study, as this period was regarded sufficient to familiarise oneself with the context of the community. Participants were chosen based on their gender and nationality as the purpose of this research was to investigate the respondents' framing of sustainability and sustainable consumption practices and how they differ based on

gender and nationality. Dutch and Spanish students were compared because of their national disparities in their attitudes towards climate change. Access to the community was guaranteed by the fact that the researcher of this project had lived in the community and had connections within the community. Despite this, participants were selected avoiding the researcher's close acquaintances to prevent encountering responses influenced by the personal relationship with the respondent.

b) Operationalisation

Individuals make meaning of their lives in storied terms, so an adequate way to understand how individuals make meaning of sustainability is to conduct in-depth interviews in which they can tell their stories by recounting situations, contexts, and events so that researchers can collect reliable data to analyse on the ways they effectively construct meanings (May, 2002; Rapley, 2004). Key-topics important to explore during the interviews were identified to maintain consistency across interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was devised to obtain similar types of data from all participants (see Appendix). This required establishing a series of pre-determined questions without neglecting the conversational style of an interview, therefore allowing for digressions and flexibility based on the interactions during the interviews. 11 in-depth interviews were conducted, ranging in length from 41 minutes to 48. The sample was composed by 6 males and 5 females, with 6 of the participants being Spanish and 5 Dutch. The interviews took place in April and May 2022. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants gave consent to have their interview recorded and to participate to the study through an informed consent that was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. Excerpts from the interviews are included in the present thesis and pseudonyms were used to respect the privacy of the respondents.

During the interviews each key-topic and question in the interview guide was posed to the participants and the semi-structured interview guide was refined and adjusted to better reflect the way the participants were answering. Each interview started with a question on the reason why they decided to live in a sustainable community to let them tell stories about their understanding of sustainability. Questions such as "What was the last thing you bought?" and "Why do you think it is important to engage in practices such as recycling?" were posed to reveal information on their consumption patterns and underlying beliefs. Furthermore, because these are people who engage with habitual green consumption practices, it may have been

difficult for them to reveal personal information because they might have been too familiar with them. Hence, questions about their opinions on other people's lifestyles were also asked, as well as why they thought other people in and outside of the community acted sustainably or not. Research participants were chosen according to their nationality and gender so that it was possible to detect from their answers how aspects of these determinants affected their understanding of sustainability and their sustainable consumption.

c) Analysis

The data analysis consisted of a thematic analysis of the interviews' transcripts integrated with theoretical constructs emerging from the literature on green consumption and sustainability. Thematic analysis consists of a process of identifying recurring patterns and themes from the beginning of data collection (Evans, 2018). In this context, the themes were outlined to capture relevant information on the participants' meanings construction of sustainability and on their national and gender differences. Thematic analysis is fruitful for theorising across cases and uncovering common themes and differences across research participants and the events they describe. It allows the researcher to connect the underlying meaning of respondents' remarks with the context in which they were made. The use of thematic analysis was suitable for this research project aimed at discovering the meaning that individuals assign to the notion of sustainability, for it allows to evaluate the relevance that sustainability has in the students' lives, and more broadly, the social construction of it. Simultaneously, it allows to examine how these constructions reflect the reality of participants' daily experiences, as well as the material and social conditions in which they live, and which limit and permit their participation in sustainable lifestyles. After familiarizing with the data through the transcription of the interviews' audio recordings, the data was interpreted through a process of open coding, which entails assigning labels to relevant pieces of text, followed by axial coding, which entails linking the codes, and finally the codes were developed into categories and subcategories. The findings were organised in three thematic categories, and they will be presented in the following section.

Findings

The results of the analysis are divided in three thematic categories presented below: 1) scepticism on sustainability, 2) pragmatic sustainable consumption, and 3) being sustainable is a privilege. The first category focuses on the students' attitudes towards sustainability, the second on why and how sustainability should be implemented according to them, while the last

one accounts for the elements that facilitate the students to hold sustainable principles. National and gender differences are discussed within the categories. In fact, nationality and gender were found to have an impact on aspects such as the students understanding of sustainability dimensions, the students political engagement, the motivations for which students make exceptions in their consumption habits, and the reasons to pursue a vegetarian diet.

1. Scepticism on sustainability - national influence on conceptualising sustainability and gender roles in political engagement.

The first thematic category focuses on the attitudes of the students towards sustainability, throughout the interviews a high level of scepticism characterising the students' views on sustainability was detected. Indeed, central to their judgement, and consistent across interviews, regardless of gender or nationality, is the recognition of a core feature of sustainability issues: ambiguity. Students attribute this ambiguity not only to the concept of sustainability but to a certain distrust of any sustainability claim, whether it being about a sustainable product or about their own statements to lead a sustainable lifestyle. For example, Paola, when explaining what it meant for her to be a sustainable consumer and to purchase a sustainable item at the supermarket, said:

So, when I think does it matter to me that it's sustainable? I mean, it's a plus, but I don't really trust the statement that it's sustainable, or I don't quite understand it.

Paola - Spanish, female

Francesco echoed this sentiment, confirming sustainability complexity and multidimensionality:

So, if we talk about for instance the sustainability of the books that I buy I kind of will have to analyse where they come from and whether it is a circular thing in the sense that they are planting trees and kind of repopulating whatever forest they might come from, right, but it is not only confined in the material realm of paper and trees, but also of course, it has to do with the labour associated with the entire thing. Are people exploited to do so? Because if they are, I would recommend is not sustainable socially.

Francisco – Spanish, male

In order for the students to declare that something is sustainable, it is required to apply different levels of analysis while integrating aspects ranging from the environmental to the social dimension. However, it was possible to observe a difference between Spanish and Dutch students in their attitudes towards sustainability components. In fact, both female and male Spanish students seem to be more concerned with social issues than the Dutch, who seem to care more about the environmental repercussions of climate change. Dutch students find it harder to find an immediate connection to different sustainable dimensions of their lives such as social justice, instead their idea of a sustainable lifestyle narrows down mainly to their environmental impact. When asked if they were familiar with the multidimensionality of sustainability, a Dutch student replied:

I'm not too comfortable with those concepts in my view because I don't do that style of science. Maybe you can elaborate a bit more on what you exactly mean with it...I think in my life it doesn't paint the biggest picture. I've been confronted with it in some ways, but I've never been fighting, this is not something I interact with so much myself.

Robert – Dutch, Male

The Netherlands is a more affluent country than Spain and people might not consider social issues (e.g., income inequality) to be so close to them as in Spain, where these issues might play a more prominent role in people's life (OECD, 2017). On the other hand, Spanish students did not show less environmental concern than Dutch students, they demonstrated comprehension of sustainability mainly through the environmental dimension but presented a broader interest in topics that they regarded to be intersecting with the environmental problem. National disparities represent an important aspect that belongs to this category, namely circularity. According to the participants of this study, the concept of circularity is what best defines a sustainable system, which expands the definition of this concept. In literature, the difference between circularity and sustainability is sharp, as it is claimed that circularity is about the cycle of production and it is seen as a tool to reach sustainable development, while sustainability is broader and comprises more dimensions such as the social one (Walker et al., 2021). For the interviewees, however, these are two concepts that are not only related, but actually coincide. This tendency to believe that sustainability is circularity is associated with the graphic visualisation that circularity furnishes to the minds of the student. Nonetheless, even within this tendency, Dutch and Spanish students differ. Dutch students in fact tend to see

circularity defined solely in its environmental terms, while for the Spanish it is understood as a broader concept. In this regard Greta, who is Spanish, said:

I mean, it depends on who's saying that word. No? and what is sustainable? Like, even the word is it sustainable, sustainable? What is sustaining? I mean, I think that word has to change, in some way I find it's very general. That's why I like circular...for me it's much, much more graphic. No? like there's nothing that's going out of the circle.

Greta – Spanish, female

Susan, who is Dutch, said:

I think for me it's circularity. So, trying to make it all into a loop instead of a one-way train to the trash.

Susan – Dutch, female

The ambiguity and confusion around sustainability is consistent with theoretical constructs and critiques made by scholars around this issue (Lockie, 2016). The analysis revealed that students find the process of evaluating something as sustainable to be very complex and that although they believe to have sufficient environmental knowledge to correctly assess the sustainability of their lifestyles, they are hesitant to declare themselves sustainable because they believe that one cannot really be sustainable. Moreover, the concept of sustainability seems to be dependent on nationality as Spanish and Dutch students make meaning of it through different dimensions.

Academics and experienced consumers criticise sustainability ambiguity, finding it difficult to give meaning to the concept but also criticising the institutions that use it, not only because of the ease with which it can be applied to almost anything, but also because of the way policy actors, private firms, and non-profit organisations use the term. Students are harshly critical of popular strategies such as greenwashing, which they believe have tainted the good intentions underlying sustainable ideals. Moreover, informants feel that a paradigm shift should occur in society from the top down, and that individuals should be relieved of their own environmental responsibilities. This type of disapproval implies a sense of political engagement among the students, who consistently stand against capitalism and consumerism. Even though this is a common opinion among all students and categories, it was possible to observe that female and male students expressed this disapproval differently when they talked about their participation in different forms of activism related to climate change (e.g., campaigns to raise awareness on climate change). In fact, female students reported a desire to

join political or climate change awareness campaigns, seeing lack of time as the only impediment to their effective participation. Male students, on the other hand, did not see themselves as suitable actors to participate in such initiatives, even though they indicated support for the issues promoted by those. To emphasise their inadequacy, male students provided instances of female activists they knew and expressed admiration for them. Robert used the example of the purple group of Droevendaal, which is an awareness organisation on sexual harassment and consent that was founded by a group of girls, to express his inadequacy but also his support:

I feel very good that we have these initiatives here and I feel that I support them in a way but I'm not a very active leader or like I don't have an active role in it, we try to create a purple group which is more like a protective agent which I think is a beautiful concept. I won't help out necessary, I won't be someone who's setting it up or like being active in setting up these conversations as well. I will be there to promote it at least if you ask about it. I will say it's really good to go there... They have stuff to say for sure, but I don't think it's my expertise because I don't study that stuff so I feel it's better to leave it to the people who are more involved in that sense, but I feel it's very important.

Robert– Dutch, Male

Mario, who is Spanish said about a friend of his that also lives in the community:

I put the example of Clara. She's an activist with Greenpeace, and she puts the face. And she has been in the how do you call it? la comiseria...the, the police station she's been in a ship in summer, like doing activism and really doing action.

Mario – Spanish, Male

Individualism, which is usually ascribed as a men's characteristic, is found to be heavily criticized by both sexes, still female students seem to believe they could take the responsibility of playing an active role to defend environmental causes, while men do not believe they would fit in that role. This finding suggests that taking part in activism initiatives is seen by male students to be, to some extent, as a feminine activity. Therefore, given the students different attitudes towards political activism, political participation seems to be dependent on the students understanding of their gender roles. From a gender-identity maintenance perspective, for a man to participate in a feminine activity might mean putting in danger his perceived

identification with his gender group. Indeed, through seeing political activism as a feminine activity and by resisting it, male students may be seeking to prove the legitimacy of their masculine identity.

2. Pragmatic sustainable consumption – national influence and gender differences in meat consumption.

The students revealed a set of elements for which they believe it makes sense for them to consume and act sustainably while discussing the meaning they attribute to sustainability and sustainable consumption in general. Sustainable consumers are people who adopt sustainable practices, such as recycling, purchasing clothes and furniture from thrift stores, and replacing meat and fish with plant-based food. In their review of studies on the environmental impact of products, Tukker & Jansen (2006) identified three primary categories accounting for 70% of the environmental impact: housing, food, and transportation. The students apply sustainable criteria in each of these spheres, however they allow themselves some exceptions as they believe their responsibility is anyhow limited. Therefore, students may feel justified in deviating from the rule because they see their commitment to consume sustainably as an endeavour that necessitates sacrifice. However, they may also be willing to make exceptions precisely because of the effort required to buy only what they need in a consumer-oriented culture. Driven by their principles, students believe that making exceptions is the only way to safeguard their mental health, as consuming sustainably and worrying about the environment requires energy. Therefore, they sometimes buy food wrapped in plastic or eat the typical dish of the country they are visiting because they see it as an exceptional occasion. The students, on the other hand, communicated their exceptions in different ways. In particular, the students' flexibility in eating meat appears to be influenced by their countries' cultural norms.

Sometimes I make an exception for cultural things. So, if I'm on a holiday, and there's something there that is really this thing of the place, then I can make an exception.

Susan – Dutch, female

It was possible to detect a perceived higher degree of conservatism in Spain. For instance, in recounting their own experiences with vegetarianism, Spanish students reported coming from a country in which meat is extremely ingrained in the culinary culture and that this often

leads them to renounce to their vegetarianism when they return home to their families or friends in Spain. Thus, they are influenced by their native culture only when they are in their home-country, as they feel it is harder for them to keep up with their usual habits. However, this aspect has a limited influence on the sustainable consumption practices of Spanish students, who always favour making exceptions in their consumption habits as not to impose their lifestyle, suggesting that a sustainable lifestyle is not nationally defined. At a primary analysis, it appears that the students do not want to fail their families' expectations; rather, they believe that fighting against engrained views is too time consuming, requires additional effort and can be achieved through communication. Hence the inhibitory effect of conservatism seems to partly affect the students (Usslepp et al., 2022).

It's very hard to have dishes in Spain sometimes that do not have meat, which is an essential part having fucking food in your life. No, but it's just not a thing thinking "oh, but some people don't want to eat meat" ...You know, so it's much more difficult I think to follow that type of lifestyle there.

Francisco – Spanish, male

On the other hand, Dutch students described a national environment that accepts variations and felt less engagement from their family or friends in their consumption patterns.

The respondents pay attention to their diet in a sustainable way, in fact they have replaced almost all animal products with plant-based food. However, women choose to not consume meat mainly for ethical reasons and to support animal rights, while men reported doing it for the environment and to be less sensitive to this topic than women. The consistency of meat, such as meat being bloody, was reported to be disgusting only by some women while for men this is something that did not emerge. These reactions were reflected in some studies that sought out to assess the maleness of meat (Rozin et al., 2012). In this study this aspect was not significant, but as suggested by Vincent and Paola's remarks, gender plays a role in their motivation to not consume meat:

I'm not even so much against like, killing animals or like, if I would maybe like go surviving for a week or something and I had to like, catch my own meat I would eat it I would say, but I just don't like the unsustainability of the industry of the meat industry.

Vincent – Dutch, Male

And then I started getting informed. And then started, you know, going into a very dark part of the internet of, of animals that are used for laboratories and for cosmetics and for everything. And I mean, after seeing those things, I could not continue like I didn't see it, I had to make a lot of rearrangements with my own conscience.

Paola - Spanish, female

Another cornerstone the students believe is critical to sustainable consumption is the notion of sharing. They believe that sharing is important and possible not only in the social context of a community, but also, they believe that living sustainably should be possible in all circumstances. This might include sharing the use of bulky or expensive instruments with programs that promote these types of activities. Researchers have previously discussed the sharing economy and collaborative consumption as solutions to address unsustainable consumption, pointing to a social phenomenon that in recent years has been increasing, namely the culture of swapping, gifting, and bartering, all of which are strategies that can aid in the deconstruction of a capitalist system (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Curtis & Lehner, 2019).

A lot of things here are shared. You don't need to have everything for yourself. Like if I need some, I don't know some kind of tool. I don't need to buy it. I can just like ask around. So that makes you just consume a lot less because you need a lot less. And, yeah, those are things like, clothing wise, I was already like not really buying things new, maybe secondhand. Yeah, I think I became a bit more aware of it, but I think yeah, I think Droeendaal gives a lot of opportunity to make sure that you don't need everything new. Because you can share a lot.

Greta – Spanish, female

As a result, for students, it is sustainable to undertake efforts that include sacrifices while avoiding extremism that could negatively affect mental health, or other aspects of their lives. Therefore, exceptions and flexibility are essential components of the endeavour to consume sustainably, and they are permissible because consumption is recognised as personal across the students and not subject to social judgement. Furthermore, it appears that being a sustainable consumer is nearly impossible without engaging in practices such as communication, collaboration, and sharing.

3. Being sustainable is a privilege

Privilege refers to the position the students feel to hold within society. Overall, there is a tendency among the participants to think that they can lead a sustainable lifestyle because they have all the prerequisites to do so. It was possible to identify what these prerequisites are, namely time, space, and economical resources, through the students' accounts of their experiences. Below follows a description of how these aspects enable the students sustainable lifestyle.

Time plays an important role in the students' life; indeed, it was found to be an important requirement that enables them to pursue a sustainable lifestyle. Scholars previously asked themselves how practices with different rhythmic properties can enable, or amplify, practices that are sustainable, starting from the bottom line that time is a scarce resource consumed by practices (Shove, 2009). According to the students "you have to think about it twice if you want to buy something". Leading a sustainable lifestyle entails a shift from a consumer culture that fosters consumerism, therefore instead of following the normal path, sustainable students have to dedicate a lot of their time, and mental space, to their decision-making processes.

So, I was working a lot with kids. And I was seeing as well other realities, you know, which not for everybody is so easy like, oh, yeah, you have to be sustainable. Maybe first they have to, like, have money to raise their kids or whatever. And then, okay, you can tell them that you don't need to use the aluminium foil for your sandwich.

Greta – Spanish, female

In this example it is possible to see that having a kid is seen as being time consuming and that it takes priority over sustainable practices. When time and space are linked, they become markers of social differences. The students saw that their living circumstances, which included living in the countryside, having a garden, and being in a socially active environment that does not require too much effort neither to socialise or organise activities, made it easier for them to engage in sustainable practices. People who live in cities lead faster lifestyles and are compelled to consume more since there are more activities to participate in or that might require time-consuming transfers, therefore they have less time to consider sustainable options.

According to the students, living a sustainable lifestyle also necessitates financial resources. Having a modest rent in comparison with the Dutch standards, permits them to invest their money in a more sustainable manner (depending on the energy consumption of the houses the

rents range between 320 to 350 euros per month). Products labelled as "green" or "fair trade" are perceived by the students to be more expensive and intrinsically privileged products, therefore, as students, it is not always possible for them to purchase them.

Because I think a lot of the sustainable ideas that they make right now are very much catered towards richer people. Because it costs a lot of money. And you think of this way, yeah, being sustainable is almost being what do you call it conventionally sustainable is a very expensive thing to do.

Susan – Dutch, female

The students feel different from the general consumer. In fact, they recounted stories of them being the weird ones of their group of friends before going to live in Droevendaal, or the ones called “the hippy of the group” as one of the participants mentioned. Perera et al. (2018) found that green consumers tend to negatively label mainstream consumers. The participants in the present study confirm this argument by seeing the normal consumer as being unable to follow sustainable paths because in thrall to the dominant system that constantly persuades them to consume. Subjective norms, such as perceiving a social force to carry out a particular behaviour, are felt by the students (Liobikiene et al., 2016). In fact, having a positive social image is important to the students as they believe that by demonstrating sustainable behavior and participating in sustainable activities, they can provide a good example for those consumers who do not question their consumption habits and live in accordance with the dominant culture. Indeed, the importance they place on sustainable practices stems from their ability to provoke a feeling of inadequacy in the normal consumer who is unconcerned about these issues. As a result, communication becomes both a necessity and a form of activism that should be pursued in all aspects and contexts of one's life. In this regard, Peter said:

So I think that the most important for me, the most important part of the environmental problem is that whatever your standpoint is, whatever your profession is, or whatever, that you try to deliver your values in all the different aspects of your life, that you as a professional, you as a person, you as a family member, you as a civilian, you as all these things, because the environmental problem is present in all of them.

Mario- Spanish, male

Sustainability is a privilege in the sense that the possibility of being sustainable is not given to everyone, as being sustainable requires time, space, and economical resources. At the same time, being privileged means, for young environmentalists, to have the responsibility to act sustainably because of the awareness of their privileges. Students make meaning of this privilege by acknowledging it but also by looking down on the general consumer who owns the same set of privilege and is not able to change their consumption pattern.

Conclusion

This research was driven by a research question on the meaning making processes of young environmentalist students and a related sub-research question on the effect of gender and nationality on their understanding of sustainability. To answer these questions, the answers of the students were analysed and integrated with theoretical constructs emerging from the literature on sustainability and its relationship with gender and nationality. The aim was to develop a better and deeper understanding of how students make meaning of sustainability and how their understandings differ based on their gender and nationality. The findings were based on 11 interviews with the students and that yielded three thematic categories.

The first category was labelled ‘scepticism on sustainability’ because according to the respondents, sustainability is a vague, complex, and difficult to define concept. However, it was possible to see that some dimensions of sustainability are more important to some types of students than others. In fact, from the analysis it was found that Spanish students are more sensitive towards social issues than Dutch students. This finding is consistent with theories that see the affluence of a country to play a role on a person’s environmentalism (Mayerl, 2016b). Moreover, the importance of the social dimension was reflected on the political engagement of female students, who revealed to be more active in this regard. Male students, on the other hand, saw political activism to be a feminine activity and felt less actively engaged in those activities than women. The male students’ hesitance towards an activity that is seen as feminine confirms their concern towards their gender-identity maintenance and that the social construction of gender plays a role on the students’ sustainable behaviors (Bloodhart & Swim, 2020).

The second category was labelled ‘pragmatic sustainable consumption’ because of the flexibility showed by the students towards their consumption practices. It was possible to see that students make meaning of their sustainable consumption through the effort it requires to them to be consistent with their principles when living in a society where the dominant culture is unsustainable. Nonetheless, this flexibility can vary depending on the students’ nationality.

In fact, Spanish students only partially feel the pressure of Spain conservatism on their meat consumption and find it harder than Dutch students to be consistent with their principles when they are in Spain. Furthermore, motivations to not consume meat varies between gender, with female students more concerned than male students with animal welfare than the environmental impact of meat production. However, gender and national differences are not so impactful on the students' flexibility, as they anyway allow themselves exceptions and sometimes eat meat or buy products that are not sustainable.

The third thematic category refers to the social identity of the students and it was labelled as 'sustainability is a privilege'. Both Spanish and Dutch students, regardless of their sexes, see their position of sustainable consumers to be of a privileged person. Therefore, they make meaning of their sustainable lifestyle by differentiating themselves from the general consumer, who is in turn seen as less competent (Perera et al., 2018). Students see other consumers to be victim of a consumer society, but also, they see the privilege they have in the time and space and knowledge they own to live sustainably. Overall, students who reveal affinity towards sustainable lifestyles are disapproving of contemporary society individualism, regardless of their gender or nationality. This might be due to the community environment they live which is highly based on a shared and collaboration ethos.

Some of the findings emerging from this research suggest that the feminine stereotype around green consumption is present also among students who are committed to consume sustainably, nonetheless it points out specific areas in which this emerge, that are meat consumption and political engagement. Moreover, previous research on nationality and green consumption has focused on national values that influence sustainable consumption, such as conservatism, this though, seems to play a little role for green students.

This research suffers from some limitations that weakens the generalizability of the findings. First, it is subject to an attitude-behaviour gap, namely, people can claim something but act differently (Young et al., 2010). Second, the sample that was analysed was rather small and more interviews could add consistency to the research. Moreover, the interviews were conducted with Dutch students living in their home country and Spanish students that had to move from their country. This could have played a role on the adaptation of Spanish students to a Dutch mindset. Following the green-feminine stereotype it should be expected that men who engage in green behaviors may experience a heightened sense of femininity but is rather impossible to assess this through exploratory interviews.

Sustainability is confirmed as a vague concept, policies should focus on promoting and implementing projects that make possible for citizens to engage in sustainable practices based

on sharing, collaborating, and communicating, which, in turn, all foster social sustainability, possibly flattening social differences. Moreover, the role of gender and nationality should be addressed by research in a way that prioritize the subjective experience of sustainable consumers to better target actions to promote sustainable consumption. Future studies on this topic should also include a macro perspective on how public policies can tackle the problem of unsustainable consumption through the integration of policy plans that account for a shift from the mainstream Western worldview of abundance of resources to an environmental paradigm, as proposed by Prothero et al. (2011).

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Appendix

Interview guide

- Sustainability

1. How did you end up living in Droevendaal and why? How did you first learn about this place?
 2. Does it mean something to you the fact that Droevendaal is a so-called green community? Why is it, or isn't important for you?
 3. How did you first learn about sustainability and sustainable lifestyles? How do you inform yourself about it?
 4. Can you tell me what sustainability means for you? Why is it important?
 5. Do you think many people think like this? Do your friends think like this?
 6. It is sometime claimed that sustainability is composed of different dimensions such as the social and economic sustainability. Does this mean anything for you? Why?
 7. Which aspects of sustainability do you think are more important and should be prioritized?
 8. Are you involved in any form of activism to raise awareness on climate change or related issues?
- Nationality background (useful to understand what type of background they come from).
 9. Where do you come from? From which region? Did you grow up in a city or in the countryside?
 10. Are you still friend with the people of your hometown, do some of them live in Droevendaal?
 11. How do you organize your meals? How often do you clean your room? How do you organize your vacations? What is important for you in that context?
 - Community setting
 12. How did your consumption change when you decided to commit to a sustainable lifestyle and come to live in Droevendaal?
 13. When you go back to your family house are you persistent with your consumption habits?
 14. Do you think you conformed your consumption habits to the ones of your housemates and fellow community members?
 - Consumption patterns, what is the reasoning behind what they purchase/consume

15. Can you tell me what was your last purchase that you would consider a form of sustainable consumption?
16. What kind of criteria do you apply when you purchase something? Are there some exceptions?
17. What consumption practices enable you to implement your view of sustainable consumption, and what don't?
18. Do you personally buy, or don't buy, products made using recycled materials, that don't use chemicals, or that will decompose naturally after being used?
19. Are you vegetarian/flexitarian or so? (what's your meat consumption?)