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**Environmentally and socially responsible consumption?
A study on food sustainability discourses**

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities

2018

Ulrike Ehgartner

School of Social Sciences

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Abstract

This thesis explores how ideas of 'sustainable food consumption' are conceptualised and rhetorically contextualised by UK stakeholders such as businesses and NGOs. Drawing on discourse studies, 'sustainable consumption' is considered as a contested field, pertaining to a variety of issues and is instantiated, institutionalised and expressed through varied descriptive, normative and instrumental framings of 'sustainability' and 'the consumer'.

Social science studies that hold a critical stance towards consumer agency and the 'responsibilisation' of the consumer are crucial to the underlying theoretical framework of this thesis. However, existing studies concerned with such issues, including those drawing on practice theory, are limited with respect to the rhetorical mobilisation of both 'the consumer' as an agent and 'consumer agency' as a concept. This research is concerned with how the notion of consumer agency is utilised discursively and how the consumer is mobilised as a rhetorical figure in the context of contested framings of sustainability.

The thesis empirically explores notions of 'sustainability' and 'the consumer' in expert debates on 'sustainable food consumption' in the UK and investigates their constitution in different temporal and contextual settings. Discourses within the time period 2005-2017 were analysed using three types of data: articles published in *The Grocer*, the major trade magazine of the UK food industry; interviews with key representatives of retailers, non-profit organisations and consultancies; and policy papers.

Firstly, the thesis addresses how notions of 'sustainability' and related ideas of consumption and production are conceptualised within expert discourse and how those conceptualisations change over time in relation to markets and innovation. Three 'external' discursive strands ('premium produce', 'healthy diets' and 'efficiency') are identified as influencing discursive changes in the period studied. Secondly, it is suggested that three interpretative frames ('consumer sovereignty', 'economic rationality' and 'stewardship') constitute a discursive framework of expert discourse on sustainable food consumption. This framework restricts the ways in which issues can be interpreted and addressed in order to become established as themes within discourses. Thirdly, the findings are positioned with reference to social science debates on consumer agency for sustainability. It is argued that through the interpretative frame of 'consumer sovereignty', 'choice' constitutes an all-encompassing concept in expert discourse on sustainable consumption. Although 'consumer choice' is attributed little potential for social change, the consumer nevertheless constitutes a central figure of reference in arguments, explanations and legitimisations of other agents' conduct. Even where institutional actions could be understood as contrary to consumer choice, for example, 'choice editing' by retailers, such activity is framed as a response to consumer demand for sustainable consumption.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

Questions on responsibilities for environmental and social issues constitute central concerns to wide policy arenas and discourses. Policymaking processes on this field developed from the 1990s concurrently with two trends, which both point towards the realm of the market as the central arena of action and agency. Firstly, responsibilities traditionally ascribed to governments have increasingly become shared with non-governmental actors, and in particular businesses. Secondly, matters of concern for global civil society are increasingly addressed through market-oriented policy instruments (Held et.al 1999, Kooiman 2000).

Related commercial, political and civil society debates are thus often held with a focus on ways of production and consumption, whereby in particular corporate and consumer conduct are subjected to socio-moral and political contestations. On the one hand, corporations are subject to a “broadening ‘moral gaze’” (Caruana and Chatzidakis 2014) in relation to their conduct. On the other, consumers are “increasingly expected to treat their consumption practices as subject to all sorts of moral injunctions [...] through their capacity to exercise discretion through choice” (Barnett et al. 2011, 89).

These considerations of ‘responsibility’ are particularly prevalent in the contexts of the production and consumption of food. As a phenomenon within everyday social interactions, food consumption represents a special case. It is closely connected to morals and understandings of ‘care’, for example for one’s own body, for the family, for distant others, for animal rights, for the planet. Representing a “key private/public nexus” (Johnston 2008, 239), food is fundamental to social interactions and a substantial element of individual and collective existence and always interrelated to systems of value (Barlösius 1999). We must consume food every day. Its consumption is embedded in and interrelated with many other processes of social life. Related practices such as shopping, cooking, storing, serving and eating are rooted in habits and attached to symbolic meanings. The consumption of food is ingrained in social meanings that go far beyond the simple intake of meals. Thus, when researching consumption, food poses a “most instructive critical case study” (Warde 1997, 22).

From a macro-level-perspective on social structure and broader systems, food represents a particularly complex challenge. Over the past decades, the production of food has become ever more globalized and industrialized. The emerging complex supply chains come with severe environmental and socio-political implications. Not only do the current farming practices (e.g. methods of crop production and animal husbandry) constitute a major source of greenhouse gas emissions and significantly contribute to climate change, biodiversity loss and other environmental issues but also the manufacturing, distributing, refrigerating and retailing of food, as well as food preparation in the home and waste disposal contribute to these challenges (Garnett 2011, McMichael 2007). These are further deeply intertwined with social issues of global livelihoods and social inequality, and related labour and human rights, in particular to vulnerable social groups in the 'Global South'. Further, food insecurity in the context of a growing world population poses a major challenge related to industrial food supply chains and climate change (Bohle et al. 1994, Godfray et al 2010, Raynolds 2000).

'Sustainable consumption and production' (SCP) has become established as a major policy field and discourse through which responsibilities for environmental and social issues related to consumption and production (e.g. of food) are addressed. Its emergence on an international level began with its representation at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Since then, numerous initiatives of networks, organisations and individuals committed to a variety of social and environmental concerns have been commonly classified as efforts towards 'sustainable consumption and production'. The Rio Earth Summit was followed by two reiterations in the Johannesburg World Summit in 2002 and the Rio +20 in 2012. Both in 2002, as well as in 2012 delegates called upon the international community to encourage, promote and multiply a '10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production patterns' (United Nations 2012). In response and addition to these efforts, in the UK, the concept of 'SCP' was implemented in 2003, with the 'UK Government Framework for Sustainable Consumption and Production' (DEFRA and DTI 2003). Further, on an European level, in 2008 a 'Sustainable Consumption and Production and Sustainable Industrial Policy (SCP/SIP) Action Plan' was put in place, which included a series of proposals to improve the environmental performance of products and increase the demand for more sustainable goods and production technologies (European Commission 2008). In a wide policy context, issues of social and environmental

responsibility have thus persistently been associated with 'sustainable consumption and production'.

While 'sustainable consumption and production' constitutes a commonly agreed upon and pursued goal, 'sustainability', as a concept, is highly contested. In its most-cited definition, that of the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987), 'sustainable development' is assigned a causal link between economy, society and the environment. The Brundtland Report states that environmental and economic problems are linked to social and political factors, which all need to be addressed to foster a "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, 43). Adopted in the corporate context, a central concept to operationalise 'sustainability' poses the "triple bottom line" approach, which is concerned with performance in environmental, economic and social dimensions (Elkington 1997).

Based on these three 'basic principles', 'sustainability' has been defined by a combination of concerns with: nature and resources; economic measures of wealth, production and consumption; and societal aspects of institutions, social capital and the equity and education of communities and social groups. 'Sustainable development' has been associated with numerous goals and ideas of transitions, and manifold indicators to 'measure' achievements have been developed, for example indexes on the market share of certified products, indicators of current household and consumption trends and templates for corporations' reporting such as the Global Reporting Initiative (Brown et al. 2009, Milne and Gray 2013). Further, various values such as responsibility, solidarity, respect, etc. have been drawn upon in attempts to capture the essence of the concept. Viewpoints vary from strong ecocentric to strong anthropocentric/technocentric positions and allocate thereby varying levels of importance to social and environmental aspects and imply different levels of change (e.g. the preservation of the status quo, reforms and transformations). Related ideas draw upon a wide repertoire of interpretations and provoke different responses, such as community development and poverty alleviation, economic development, energy management, transportation, land use and biodiversity (Baker 2016, Hopwood et al. 2005). 'Sustainability' is thus by no means clearly defined and it goes without saying that the term is by no means

clearly defined and mobilised in diverse ways that inevitably encompasses inconsistencies and contradictions across societal contexts.

Businesses, multi-stakeholder fora, as well as governmental and intergovernmental institutions have established a variety of codes of conduct, certifications, social audits, corporate social investment programmes and schemes in order to work towards the fulfilment of responsibilities in relation to sustainable consumption and production (Whitehouse 2003). For businesses, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) became established as a mainstream approach to take social and environmental issues related to the production and distribution of goods and services into account, and to actively demonstrate accountability and transparency for their conduct. Many corporations publish annual reports which cover evidence on their social and environmental impacts and commitments. On top of these individual voluntary commitments, corporations cooperate and build alliances through business organisations and advocacy groups on a global level and engage in partnerships with multi-stakeholder organisations that bring together business and non-governmental organisations (Cashore 2002). Well established examples include the Marine Stewardship Council (Cummins 2004) or the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (Schouten and Glasbergen 2011). Governments in various countries are also introducing laws to institutionalise corporate efforts of this kind. In the UK, for example, sustainability reporting was made mandatory for listed companies, with a regulation to comply with the EU Non-Financial Reporting (NFR) directive being effective since the beginning of the year 2017 (Legislation [UK]. *The Companies, Partnerships and Groups [Accounts and Non-Financial Reporting] Regulations 2016, SI 2016 [Draft]*). The United Nations constitute a central institution in this context. In KPMG's most recent survey it is noted that four out of 10 companies link their corporate responsibility reports to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (KPMG 2017). The trend of corporations to engage with governmental bodies such as the UN Global Compact (Voegtlin and Pless 2014, Whitehouse 2003), demonstrates how governance structures of various global institutions are intertwined and how businesses are becoming co-creators of their institutional environment (Scherer et al. 2016). Arguably, they fill a regulatory vacuum caused by governmental failure, withdrawal, incapability or unwillingness (Scherer and Palazzo 2011).

Just as corporations are '(self-)responsibilised' to commit to CSR practices, so are consumers charged with a responsibility to show environmental and social engagement. Since the new millennium, policy objectives directed at activating or fostering consumer commitments have increasingly gained momentum. Notably these employ a perspective from neo-classical economics on consumer information, presupposing that consumer information would lead to consumers taking sustainable choices. Thus, for example in the European Commissions' Health and Consumer Protection Strategy for "healthier, safer and more confident citizens" which was in action until 2013, the aim is stated that

"consumers, through better information, are able to make informed, environmentally and socially responsible choices on food, the most advantageous products and services, and those that correspond most to their lifestyle objectives thus building up trust and confidence" (European Commission 2005, 12).

Similarly, in the current EU "multiannual consumer programme for the years 2014-20", the stated aim is "to create the right conditions to empower consumers by providing them with sufficient tools, knowledge and competence to make considered and informed decisions and by raising consumer awareness" (Regulation [EU] No 254/2014 and repealing Decision No 1926/2006/EC, L84/42, 6). The regulation further addresses "the growing level of complexity of decisions that consumers have to make" (Regulation [EU] No 254/2014 and repealing Decision No 1926/2006/EC, L84/42, 7). Some would claim that individuals themselves have developed a critical view on their behaviour as consumers, which they express through 'boycotts' and 'buycotts' of brands and goods for political, ethical or environmental reasons (Dickinson and Carsky 2005, Yates 2011). In particular the area of food consumption has been found to be a context in which "groups of consumers themselves [are] stepping into character and taking societal agency upon themselves" (Halkier 2010, 5).

There are examples of broad policy activities for 'sustainable consumption' which for example focus on consumption pressures and quality of life, as formulated in a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) ambition, or explicitly take understandings of consumption beyond market choices to the use, disposal and non-commodified goods and services, as it is the case in the OECD's definition of consumption (Fuchs and Lorek 2005, Welch 2015). However, many key mainstream policy initiatives, such as the EU initiatives noted above, largely employ a neo-classical economic perspective on consumer information,

presupposing that consumer awareness and empowerment would provide individuals with the 'right tools' to make 'desirable consumer choices' and 'build their trust' into responsible businesses and product segments. These policy approaches are often "framed in terms of improving the environmental performance of products and production technologies and increasing the demand for more sustainable goods" (Welch 2015, 841). Sustainable consumption is thereby simply conceptualised as the 'consumption of more sustainable products'. Further, the main mechanism to establish sustainable consumption is attributed to 'resource efficiency', holding it as an equivalent to sustainable production (Jackson and Michaelis 2003). Critical social science has held a sceptical stance towards strategies which hold such positions and merely apply top-down approaches (such as labelling and signposting) in which consumers respond as responsible agents, mobilised in order to change the market upstream. This "shifting of responsibility onto consumers, [...] the characterisation of human behaviour that has tended to go with it, and the ameliorative mechanisms [...] proposed" has been subject to consistent critique for "serving neoliberal ideological interests and obscuring the complex relations to production and macroeconomic issues" (Welch 2015, 841).

The empirical focus of this research is on the exploration of discourses on 'sustainable consumption' as a dominant interpretation within the wider field of 'responsible consumption'. Based on this, I acknowledge that within the policy field of 'sustainable consumption and production', 'responsibility' constitutes a key determinant through which agency for sustainable consumption is attributed and evaluated. 'Responsibility' is also inherently interrelated with elements of 'citizenship' and 'duty', which are central for 'consumption' being considered as 'sustainable consumption'.

There are diverse ways in which sustainability, and consequently, sustainable consumption, can be understood when representatives of businesses, NGOs or other stakeholders address associated strategies and implementations. The research approach I have chosen for this project thus inherently recognise that accounts of sustainable forms of consumption are expressed in descriptive, normative or instrumental framings. It approaches 'sustainability' and 'sustainable consumption' as a contested field which can label a variety of issues and aims and be instantiated and institutionalised in manifold ways.

Crucially, I further acknowledge the importance of understanding what these framings are and how they are constituted in expert debates at certain times and places. Rhetorical expressions and interpretations do not only represent actions in relation to a phenomenon but provide premises for action and thus constitute elements of agency and action by themselves. Policy papers and other texts and speeches produced by experts are constituted by arguments on problems and solutions with respect to an issue or set of issues. Jointly, these lines of argumentations represent discourses. As an element within policies, discourses overarch and (pre-) exist outside of particular arguments and present a cause for pursuing one line of action above another (Fairclough 2013). They can be understood as elements of social continuity and change in the way that they both, *are determined by* social structures and *have an effect upon* them (Fairclough 2001). Insights into how particular social actors and agencies problematise social conditions, how they imagine social change as well as on how these problematisations and imaginaries stand in relation to each other (Fairclough 2013) provide comprehensive understandings of ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable consumption’.

As noted, food constitutes a particularly critical element of sustainability. The consumption of food is interrelated with a wide conglomerate of environmental and social issues such as climate change, resource scarcity, carbon emissions, economic growth, ecosystems, population growth, waste, social justice, animal welfare or health. The issue of ‘food’ is embedded in large sets of fundamental societal issues and there are “clear links between food policy and other policy sectors, such as agriculture, transport, land use policy, health policy and environmental policy” (Baker 2016, 120). In this way, ‘food consumption’ constitutes both a core issue within debates on responsibility and sustainability and a field that is particularly suited to be studied in relation to argumentative structures that frame problems and solutions of sustainable consumption and production. In this thesis I thus explore how ‘sustainability’ is framed in food industry-related discourses, how multiple framings of sustainability are related, how such framings become associated with different forms of food consumption and how they contribute to understandings of desirable action towards a more sustainable food system.

Following this undertaking, I focus in particular on the involvement of retailers as well as the role that is attributed to them, given their significance in the supply chain. All particularities

of the case of food consumption and production are aggravated by the fact that supermarkets have established themselves in a powerful position as key agents in the food supply chain (Dixon and Banwell 2012). As the central 'site of action' for food consumption, supermarkets represent "a salient feature of contemporary economic and social life" (Evans et al. 2018, 640). With the globalisation of food provisioning and their growing in size and number since the past few decades, they have established as "the obligatory passage point for most food sales" (Oosterveer 2012, 153) and as the 'gatekeepers' between suppliers and the large majority of consumers (Rayner et al. 2008).

At the heart of policy considerations on sustainable consumption are questions on consumer behaviour change. Recognising processes of governing that involve a range of institutions and relationships beyond governmental bodies, questions related to the potential of consumer agency and responsibility for more sustainable food systems constitute a vital ongoing theme. Various social movements, corporations, academics and other groups have regarded consumers to have the power to change markets and to consequently change society for the better through their choices at the point of purchase. Others have contested this idea of the power of the consumer to deliver change and the 'transfer' of all responsibilities onto the consumer as individual or collective agent is criticised (Maniates 2002, Shove 2010). The research project at hand recognises the centrality of 'behaviour change' and the consumer as agent in debates on 'sustainable consumption'. However, rather than investigating the potentials of behaviour change-based initiatives of institutional agents or responsible consumer choice, this research takes a meta perspective, analysing how 'the consumer' is effectively created in current debates on sustainability in food systems. As a particular focus in the context of the exploration of framings of 'sustainable food consumption', this research thus seeks to interrogate the ways in which NGOs, corporations, policy makers, campaigners, lobbyists and third sector organizations construct the figure of 'the consumer' (Barnett et al. 2011), their ideas of how to mobilise 'the consumer' and how this relates to their understanding of processes of social change.

In the following, I outline the content of this thesis, which is divided into ten chapters.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

Chapter Two is dedicated to the identification and discussion of the practical field of enquiry: corporate and consumer responsibility at the intersection of economic rationality and

citizenship in the global economy and the realm of the market. It introduces normative and instrumental concepts that address the supposedly changing roles of corporations and consumers which are mutually developed by commercial, political, and civil society professionals, as well as academics. It goes on to place accounts of corporations and consumers within social science accounts of economic rationality and citizenship. After a brief introduction (Section 2.1), I first outline the emerging role attributed to corporations in society and the role that 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR) thereby plays (Section 2.2). I then introduce the idea of consumer responsibility (Section 2.3), which is seen as something that needs activation or some sort of external support in order to flourish (Section 2.3.1), but also as a force which demands responses from institutions and shapes business activities (Section 2.3.2). At the end of this section on consumer responsibility, I briefly discuss how retailers occupy a particularly critical position (Section 2.3.3), followed by an examination of scholarly work on the idea of 'citizenship' in the context of the market and corporations (Section 2.4) and consumers as political agents (Section 2.5). Following this, I outline critical accounts on the market as a democracy (Section 2.6). In a concluding section I summarise the key contestations in relation to corporate and consumer responsibility for responsible production and consumption (Section 2.7).

In Chapter Three, I introduce social science contributions to the research field of consumer agency for 'sustainable consumption', which is where my study is positioned. This chapter is divided into three parts following an introduction which gives a brief outline of social science approaches to 'sustainable consumption and production' as a research field (Section 3.1) In the first part, I portray scholarly work which aims to measure, mobilise and provide for the consumer and thereby, as I argue, conceptualises consumers as agents of change (Section 3.2). This section is divided into three subsections. First, I discuss research that aims at measuring sustainable consumption and thereby presupposes the possibility to quantify 'the sustainable consumer' (Section 3.2.1). Then I provide an insight on contributions that deal with ways to 'sell' (i.e. raise awareness of and market) sustainability and thereby presupposes that 'the sustainable consumer' can be mobilised, activated and persuaded (Section 3.2.2). Lastly, I present research that proposes the implementation of sustainable choice architectures, presupposing that 'the sustainable consumer' can and should be provided for (Section 3.2.3).

The second part of Chapter Three is dedicated to contributions which arguably depart from a focus on consumer agency as an approach to deliver change towards ‘sustainable consumption’ (Section 3.3). I firstly draw upon accounts of practice theory which approach matters of sustainable consumption ‘beyond consumer agency’ (Section 3.3.1). Secondly, I discuss the contribution of scholarly work that identifies the consumer as a ‘rhetorical figure’ and thus looks ‘beyond the consumer’ in addressing matters of sustainable consumption (Section 3.3.2) and thirdly, I deliver an insight into discourse analytical approaches to the field. Discourse analytical approaches problematise ‘sustainable consumption’ as a rhetorical space that pre-constitutes how issues around sustainable consumption for social change are framed, and thus look beyond ‘sustainable consumption’ as a self-evident context of action (Section 3.3.3). In the third part, I present the theoretical framework of the project at hand. I thereby explain how my research relates to the theoretical accounts delivered by existing social science contributions to the research field of consumer agency for ‘sustainable consumption’ and how, in line with discourse studies, I consider the knowledge base of sustainability policy as fragile and contestable (Section 3.4).

Chapter Four defends the discourse analytical approach that I have chosen to pursue in this project and explains how this undertaking can contribute to a better understanding of multiple framings of sustainable consumption and production, and their interconnectedness with notions of consumer agency. After mapping out the four research questions which guided my research (Section 4.1), I deliver some preliminary remarks to position this project in the field and explain how the applied methods allow the investigation of the ways in which notions of consumer (and other actors’) agency are reinforced in written and spoken texts (Section 4.2). I then describe how I collected and analysed the data: the data analysed in this project consists of three types of data: media articles, expert interviews and policy documents. Participant observations at key stakeholder events further informed the empirical research (Section 4.3). Thereafter, I explain how I approached the analysis of the data, i.e. what the guiding questions for the analysis of the materials were, and the steps I followed during the process of the analysis (Section 4.4). In a final section, I address the limitations of this project (Section 4.5).

Chapter Five is dedicated to the analysis of articles published in *The Grocer*, the major trade magazine of the UK food industry, providing an analysis of the changing discourses on food

sustainability between 2005 and 2015. It starts with a brief introduction (Section 5.1) and some preliminary remarks on the development of narratives over time that led to the selection of the four sampled years (Section 5.2). Subsequently, in the main body of the analysis, for each of the four examined years, the analysis is divided into: (a) the discursive conceptualisation and utilisation of 'sustainability'; (b) the description of competencies and actions ascribed to the consumer; (c) the discursive representation and interrelation of both within the food industry. It is shown that in articles of each year, different notions of 'sustainability' and 'the consumer' and industry approaches towards 'sustainable consumption and production' are in place. Over the years, a predominant account of 'food sustainability' as a response to environmental issues and questions on the resilience of the industry, with consumers being described as unaware and unconcerned, was replaced by the use of 'sustainability' as a self-explanatory term, in the context of issues far beyond environmental concerns. In this latter period, industry efforts for sustainability were portrayed as a response to consumer desires and demand (Sections 5.3, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6). A concluding section summarises the major discursive changes over time (Section 5.7).

In Chapter Six, I present the analysis of the second main data set: interviews with key representatives of major UK retailers, consultancies and non-profit organisations. Exploring the notions of 'sustainability' and 'the consumer' that the experts (re-)produce whilst sharing their knowledge, I approached the meanings, values and principles carried by interviewees as a linguistic expression of institutional practices and the social reality within which they operate. After an introduction (Section 6.1), I describe the three notions of sustainability that I have identified to underlie the interviewee's argumentations on strategies and implementations for a more sustainable food system (Section 6.2). Describing what sustainability is or should be, interviewees largely portray sustainability as a 'synergy' (Section 6.2.1). When it comes to debates on how to implement sustainability, the understanding of sustainability as a product attribute has been identified as a common denominator that is self-evidently assumed by all interviewees (Section 6.2.2). Interviewees thus employ narratives that presuppose that sustainable products can be differentiated from unsustainable products (Section 6.2.2.1) and that 'sustainability' is a product attribute that consumers trade off against other product attributes (Section 6.2.2.2). When they implicitly or explicitly justify implemented or suggested strategies for sustainability, they draw upon an understanding of sustainability as an economic value, presupposing efficiency or

profitability, and thus a higher monetary value to sustainable as opposed to unsustainable products (Section 6.2.3). Most significantly, underlying notions of food sustainability in argumentations on strategies and implementations for sustainability (as displayed in Section 6.2.2), as well as in arguments that legitimise the 'cause' of sustainability (as displayed in Section 6.2.3), are based on rather narrow accounts of 'sustainability'. As such, these stand in conflict with descriptions of sustainability as a synergy, a point reflected upon in the concluding section (Section 6.2.4).

Further I address which notions of the consumer are drawn upon by the interviewees (Section 6.3). This is most dominantly the notion that consumers do not make responsible choices for sustainability, which is explained and legitimised in varying ways (Section 6.3.1). Closely related to this is a more active account of consumers, a notion which depicts consumers requesting initiative from experts and decision makers, in particular retailers, to implement sustainability on their behalf (Section 6.3.2). In two less prominent, but nevertheless apparent accounts, some interviewees further describe consumers as agents of change through choice, referring back to stories of success (Section 6.3.3) and describing consumers as being 'disconnected' from food and farming (Section 6.3.4). This section concludes by summarising the findings on notions of 'the consumer' (Section 6.3). Finally, the chapter closes with remarks on the analysis presented in Chapter Five and Six (Section 6.4).

Chapter Seven represents the first out of three discussion chapters and addresses how 'sustainable consumption and production' is conceptualised in expert discourses and approached under changing circumstances of markets and innovations over time. The results of both the analysis of articles in *The Grocer* and expert interviews is brought together and complemented by policy papers (which were analysed separately without being presented in a separate analytical chapter). After an introduction (Section 7.1), I first outline the interaction of discursive strands within debates on sustainable consumption and production 'in the past' – over the time period from the year 2005 to about 2015. I thereby draw on articles published in *The Grocer* during the years 2005, 2007 and 2010, which I interpret in the context of policy developments in reference to key documents published during this time period (Section 7.2). On this background, I then describe the dynamics of the recent discourse from about 2013 to 2017, which is mainly informed by the interviews with experts

that were conducted in 2016, by articles from *The Grocer* published in the year 2015 and a variety of policy documents published from the year 2013 onwards (Section 7.3). A final section summarises the varying impact of discursive strands of 'premium produce', 'healthy diets' and 'efficiency' on notions of food sustainability throughout the years. Following the ways in which these key discursive strands function within discourses on sustainable consumption and production, I demonstrate how they depict sustainability as a matter between consumer and business agency. I show how each of these discursive influences thereby enhance notions of 'sustainability', create tensions within and between these notions and, lastly, constitute core meanings that subsume notions of 'sustainability' (Section 7.4).

Chapter Eight is concerned with how the discourses outlined in Chapter Seven function as common-sense practices of institutions. After an introductory section (Section 8.1), I describe three interpretative frames of 'sustainable consumption' that I have identified as constituting the 'discursive framework' of sustainable consumption: 'consumer sovereignty', 'economic rationality' and 'stewardship'. These represent the argumentative/interpretative conditions that have to be satisfied for a theme to enter and remain in the realm of 'sustainable consumption and production' (Section 8.2). Thereafter, I exemplify their performance and their significance by discussing the discursive dynamics (i.e. the ways in which they associate and disassociate with 'sustainable consumption') of three themes of sustainable food consumption: 'organic consumption', 'protein diversity' and '(food) waste reduction' (Section 8.3). A brief conclusion closes this chapter (Section 8.4).

In Chapter Nine, the third and final discussion chapter, I locate the findings within established social science debates on consumer agency for sustainability. There I discuss the notions of consumer agency for social change and the related claims on, and descriptions of, mechanisms of social change that have been found in the analysed expert discourses. After a brief introduction (Section 9.1), I discuss the role that consumer responsibility and 'blame' plays in the analysed expert discourses and find that responsibility is attributed less to consumers and largely to retailers, manufacturers, governments or other institutions. The rhetorical figure of 'the consumer' does, however, play a critical role in the legitimisation of the responsibility assumed by or attributed to institutions (Section 9.2). In the section that follows, I identify a linguistic and methodological separation of 'consumer attitudes' and

‘consumer behaviour’, which indicates an attitude-behaviour gap constituted by the ways in which both are discursively mobilised (Section 9.3). Thereafter, I discuss my findings in relation to accounts on consumer information, which, as I have found is commonly interpreted in the narrow sense of a method to ‘activate’ individuals to choose certain products over others (Section 9.4).

In the subsequent section, I address how references to attitudes, behaviours, roles and responsibilities of ‘the consumer’ in relation to social change for sustainability are continually embedded in concerns about ‘choice’ and how argumentations in support of a ‘sustainable choice architecture’ are dependent upon evidence for consumer desire for sustainable products (Section 9.5). Drawing on these findings, the concept of ‘political consumerism’ is discussed in the context of ‘choice architecture’-based activities as opposed to ‘consumer choice’-based activities. I suggest that in arguments that utilise the underlying idea of ‘choice architecture’-based strategies for social change, consumers’ civic activity is detached from the physical act of choice in the marketplace and instead substituted by consumer surveying and polling (Section 9.6). With a brief comparison between previous and recent narratives, a concluding section closes the chapter (Section 9.7).

In the concluding Chapter Ten, I start by summarising responses to the four research questions. While changing notions of ‘sustainability’ constitute the starting point from which I approach the first three questions, it is in particular in response to research questions two and three that I demonstrate the significance of accounts of ‘the discursive figure of the consumer’ to ideas on strategies for social change. In relation to research question four I argue that the presented evidence in itself reinforces and perpetuates an understanding of ‘sustainable behaviour’ with ‘sustainable choice’ at its core (Section 10.1). I proceed by contextualising my findings on the ‘discursive framework of consumption’ (as discussed in Chapter Eight) in relation to the ‘triple bottom line’ (Elkington 1997), and provide further reflections on theoretical findings in relation to discourses on sustainable food consumption (10.2). Further, I briefly reflect on the ‘new’ (rhetorical) focus on choice editing on behalf of the consumer as opposed to active individual consumer choice for sustainability and its potential implication of the role of the consumer as a political agent (10.3). The chapter is closed with some ideas for potential avenues for future research (Section 10.4).

Chapter 2 – Perspectives on responsible production and consumption

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature from business, policy and civil society addressing the field of enquiry and contextualises that within social scientific accounts of economic rationality and citizenship whereas the following Chapter reviews social scientific contributions to the research field in which my study is positioned.

The practical field of enquiry addressed here concerns perspectives on responsible consumption and production that have arisen in the context of the development of several inter- and trans-national initiatives and policy-making processes in the name of ‘sustainable consumption and production’. In the wake of the globalisation of markets, the erosion of the divide between public realm and private enterprise and increasing concerns with the fragility of planetary systems, normative and instrumental concepts to address the supposedly changing roles of corporations and consumers have been established by economic, political, and civil society institutions, as well as by academics (Kooiman 1993, 2000, Lafferty 2004, Meadowcroft 2007). Public events such as corporate scandals and consumer boycotts have furthered large scale debates on ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ (CSR). In addition, following anti-consumerist movements (Gabriel and Lang 2006, Shaw and Newholm 2002) and anti-globalization campaigns (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), debates on responsible forms of individual consumption have found their way into in the public domain (Klein 2001, Mohr et al. 2001). As outlined in the Introduction, the attribution of responsibility to corporations and consumers has been established through regulatory arrangements on an inter-institutional and international scale.

In the following, concepts addressing these emerging roles and responsibilities of corporations and consumers are presented. This chapter firstly gives an insight into core understandings of the concepts of corporate and consumer ‘responsibility’ as established in the commercial, political, civil society and academic sphere (Sections 2.2 and 2.3) and thereafter locate them within accounts of critical social science (Sections 2.4, 2.5, 2.6). The first two sections address both corporate and consumer responsibility as core concepts inherent in wider policy contexts. Section 2.2 thus gives a brief introduction to the emerging role attributed to corporations in society, which is most commonly addressed through the

umbrella term of ‘corporate social responsibility’ – CSR. Section 2.3 is concerned with the idea of consumer responsibility and introduces two major perspectives: responsibility as something that has to be ‘activated’ and as something that has to be responded to by other agents, such as businesses (Sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2). It further points out the critical role of retailers in the context of both these perspectives (Sections 2.3.3).

The subsequent sections represent scholarly work that embeds the concept of ‘citizenship’ in the context of the market and conceptualises corporations (Section 2.4) and consumers (Section 2.5) as political agents. Section 2.6 outlines critical accounts of the market, and in conclusion the key contestations in relation to corporate and consumer responsibility for responsible production and consumption are summarised (Section 2.7).

2.2 The responsibility of corporations

Contemporary challenges arising from climate change, the internet and financial markets are of a global nature and cannot be addressed sufficiently by governments alone. Existent national regulations are challenged by the free movement of goods, services and information, increasing global economic integration and independence from national economies. Many services, such as the provision of water or health care and the supply of infrastructures such as roads, housing and schools, are in the hands of private companies. Recognising these conditions, and the increasing size, influence and power of global corporations, practitioners and scholars have identified a blurred line between business- and governmental responsibility (Matten and Crane 2005, Matten et al. 2003, Scherer and Palazzo 2011), with many arguing that corporations increasingly take a role in society that overlaps with the responsibilities of governments (Crane and Matten 2016).

Asserting the establishment of a “changed [...] social contract between business and society” (Mark-Ungericht and Weiskopf 2007, 286), the occurrence of a ‘paradigm shift’ towards a consideration of ‘business ethics’ (Crane and Matten 2016, Joyner and Payne 2002) is widely acknowledged. In associated debates, the validity of the private/public division is questioned (Palazzo and Scherer 2008) and a vision of corporate accountability for a firm’s shareholders is extended to accountability towards its multiple ‘stakeholders’ (Matten et al. 2003, Valor 2005). Many see in these developments a form of ‘global governance’ and provide empirical and normative accounts (Jordan 2008) on the potential of this “polycentric and multilateral

process” (Scherer and Palazzo 2011, 900), to fill the regulatory vacuum that neither national nor international governmental institutions alone are able to sufficiently respond to.

In order to describe these ‘new’ externally or self-attributed roles and responsibilities of corporations in society, a large repertoire of terminologies around corporate ethics, social performance and accountability exists. Most commonly drawn upon as an ‘umbrella term’ to is ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR) (Scherer and Palazzo 2011). CSR as a concept is commonly being traced back as having originated in 1953 in Bowen’s *Social Responsibilities of Businessmen* (Bowen 2013). In particular from the 1990s onwards, various interpretations of the concept have taken hold in academic, political and corporate debates. The term as such has been developed by academics in attempts to systematise social demands and was soon mobilised by social movements (Valor 2005). Often raised as a concept that opposes Friedman’s famous claim that the social responsibility of the firm is to increase its profits for stockholders (Friedman 1962, 2007), consensus on the meaning of CSR is found on what it disassociates from, rather than what it associates with: a narrow focus on economic, technical and legal requirements (Davis, 1973).

Although there is no clear single definition of CSR, a common understanding is widely shared through frequently cited definitions of political institutions such as the European Commission and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. As such, CSR is largely considered as a self-regulatory business approach to complement legal requirements and to overcome the inefficiencies that derive from regulation (Dahlsrud 2008, Valor 2005). Academic and political debates generically describe the responsibilities and engagements of corporations beyond their economic performance. Over time, the area of concern has altered, expanded and has been adopted to various socio-political frameworks, which means that no clear register of areas of responsibility exists (Mark-Ungericht and Weiskopf 2007). The term ‘CSR’ thus encompasses numerous ideas, concepts and techniques of business conduct associated with environmental and social issues such as environmental degradation, labour and welfare standards and related moral values (Valor 2005).

Since the late 1990s, practitioners, including managers, consultants and the popular business press have “very much driven” a terminology of “corporate citizenship” to “chose to set their own agenda based around being a ‘good corporate citizen’” (Matten et al. 2003, 111) in

demarcation to the academically shaped term of 'CSR' (Valor 2005). As a "framework to talk about the relationships between businesses and society", the term of corporate citizenship:

"[...] is used on the one hand to connect business activity to broader social accountability and service for mutual benefit, and yet on the other it reinforces the view that a corporation is an entity with status equivalent to a person." (Waddell 2000, 107)

Corporate citizenship is, similarly to CSR, criticised for being unclear and ambiguous as a concept in itself (Valor 2005). Nevertheless, it is notable for the political implications inherent in the term 'citizenship', which indicates that:

"[...] corporations enter the picture not because they have an entitlement to certain rights as a 'real' citizen would, but as a powerful public actor that – for better or worse – can have a significant impact on those 'real' citizens' rights. That is, the failure of governments to fulfil some of their traditional functions, coupled with the rise in corporate power, has meant that corporations have increasingly taken a role in society that is similar to that of traditional political actors." (Crane and Matten 2016, 69)

The adaptation of the term 'citizenship' into matters of business conduct thus makes apparent the potential repertoire of corporate involvement and agency for the provision of public goods. Crucially, it recognises responsibilities and rights, which are reflected in the need to engage other communities but also to protect and further corporate interests (Waddell 2000).

2.3 The responsibility of the consumer

Within commercial, political, academic and civil society debates on 'sustainable consumption and production', there are two principal contexts in which consumer responsibility is addressed. From one perspective, consumer responsibility is seen as something that needs activation or some sort of external support in order to flourish. From another perspective, consumer responsibility is a force which demands responses and shapes business activities. Both of these perspectives build inherently on the idea of consumer responsibility as a decision-making process in relation to products (Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). Consumer responsibility can thus be understood as the counterpart of corporate responsibility in the pursuit of 'sustainable consumption and production'. In the following, both these perspectives on consumer responsibility are described (Sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2), before the role of retailers, which occupy a critical position in relation to both, is briefly outlined (Section 2.3.3).

2.3.1 Activating consumer responsibility

With calls for the engagement of the public in debates about global social and environmental challenges of production and consumption having become commonplace (Owens 2000), consumer information constitutes a key way to ‘activate consumer responsibility’. The assumption “that most people *want* to make the necessary changes and only require information as to *how* to achieve these pro-environmental goals” (Campbell-Arvai et al. 2014, 454, emphasis in original) is inherent in many public and corporate information campaigns over the past decades – in the UK and elsewhere (Barnett et al. 2011, Hobson 2002, Owens 2000). As outlined in the introduction, key policies that aim to promote consumer responsibility, as well as scholarly work concerned with the opportunities and limitations of consumer responsibility, largely presuppose that ‘consumer awareness’ and ‘empowerment’ would ‘build trust’ and provide individuals with the ‘right tools’ to make ‘desirable consumer choices’. Scholars have identified related activities of consumer education (McGregor 2005), consumer communication (Smith et al. 2010) and consumer campaigning (Barnett et al. 2011) as ‘top-down’ models of communication. Commonly such models presume “a deficit in public knowledge and understanding of environmental issues which needs to be ‘filled’ by expert knowledge [...] before individuals will accept their own responsibilities and acknowledge the need to change aspects of their lifestyle” (Burgess et al. 1998, 1446).

Marketing practitioners and scholars who understand the transformation of consumer habits as an integrated element of corporations’ CSR strategies (self-) attribute the role to ‘activate’ consumer responsibility first and foremost to businesses (Smith et al. 2010). Presuming that ‘responsible consumerism’ has to be co-created by corporations, these scholars and practitioners see the consumer as “a rational actor who eventually will react positively to responsible supply chain practices and the related marketing communication” (Smith et al. 2010, 631). This “leads to the widespread assumption that there is a discrete market segment of responsible consumers ‘out there’, waiting to be identified and acted upon by corporations” (Caruana and Crane 2008, 1497).

Although access to clear and reliable information is largely seen as an important prerequisite to responsible purchase decisions, the idea to activate consumer responsibility by providing information has been subject to much criticism. Counter perspectives for example draw on

studies which suggest that the provision of consumer information has only limited effects or that information on social and environmental concerns is often complex or contradictory and therefore constitutes a barrier to the activation of consumer responsibility (e.g. Terlau and Hirsch 2015, Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). Other perspectives which oppose enthusiasm about consumer information as a way to activate consumer responsibility draw attention to issues that can possibly not be addressed with increased and improved levels of information alone. Thus, financial constraints (Schröder and McEachern 2004) and social class (Adams and Raisborough 2008, Cairns et al. 2013) have been identified as key factors to limit consumer commitment to responsible consumption which cannot be fully compensated with efforts to inform consumers.

Based on the finding that information-based strategies are inefficient, studies deriving from behavioural economics have inspired the implementation of altered 'choice architectures'. The idea behind such approaches is that deliberately altered sets of 'responsible choices' are supplied by consumer-facing businesses such as retailers are prompting responsible consumption, rather than leaving the decision to consume responsibly entirely to consumers' rational decisions (e.g. Campbell-Arvai et al. 2014, see also Section 3.2.3). In this context, a reliance on deliberate responsible decision making is circumvented by the provision of more responsible sets of choices. However, the expressing of consumer responsibility is still associated with product choices and thus located in the marketplace.

2.3.2 Responding to consumer responsibility

CSR strategies and activities directed at improving social and environmental concerns hold a reputational element. CSR creates resources and visibility and "extends organisational reputation to a wider range of constituencies" (Manning 2013, 12). Many corporations, in particular large ones which operate on a multinational level have thus committed to publishing regularly updated reports in which they describe their impact on social and environmental issues. These CSR reports address a wide range of stakeholders, such as other professionals, shareholders and rating agencies.

While a range of stakeholder expectations is involved in businesses' CSR activities (Manning 2013), in particular the relationship between business action and the specific stakeholder group of consumers has been pointed out as decisive (Crane et al. 2004). Management practitioners and scholars have thus attributed consumer involvement a significant power to

influence corporate brand value and emphasised the importance to acquire approval and support from consumers. Related to this is the understanding that CSR is of limited value to the organisation if consumers do not engage with it (Manning 2013, Smith et al. 2010, Vitell 2015). From this perspective, consumer responsibility functions as a force which demands responses and shapes business activities.

Debates on CSR are paralleled and intertwined with consumer engagement with social and environmental concerns (Smith et al. 2010). Marketing literature emphasises the significance of taking into consideration the power of consumer responsibility, or 'consumer social responsibility' – CnSR, as it is abbreviated, within conceptualisations and realisations of CSR (Kampf 2018, Manning 2013, Vitell 2015). The key idea thereby is that "if *corporate* interests (i.e. profits) and *consumer* interests (i.e. self and public interests) are aligned, then increasing social benefits and public service will also increase profits" (Vitell 2015, 767, emphasis in original). In this line of thought, consumers are attributed the ability to become company/brand ambassadors and 'champions' who engage in advocacy behaviours, for example through positive word-of-mouth, their willingness to pay a price premium, or their resilience to negative company news. In this way, consumers are ascribed the ability to fundamentally support businesses to reap benefits from CSR engagement (Du et al. 2010).

With the alignment of corporate and consumer interests being considered crucial, corporations have framed their initiatives in consumer-directed ways. Related efforts have led to the establishment of:

"[...] products with ethical features of one kind or another, such as fair trade or recycled products; [...] cause-related marketing programmes, employee welfare programmes, or the development of an ethical code; in fact, it can mean a whole host of corporate endeavours that consumers and other stakeholders might demand from corporations for supposedly ethical reasons." (Crane 2005, 221)

In this way, corporate initiatives to foster the relationship with their consumers, such as cause promotion, cause-related marketing and social marketing are in themselves regarded as business practices in the sense of CSR (Kotler and Lee 2005). Corporate responsibility is thus understood as a way to respond to consumers as well as to engage with them.

2.3.3 The role of retailers

Due to their critical location at the 'consumption junction' between the production and consumption of goods (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004), retailer operations are given particular

attention in debates among academic and stakeholder audiences, and are regarded as 'lead actors' for consumer practices (Oosterveer 2012). In their role as 'gatekeepers' between producers and consumers, retailers are further considered to be well positioned for 'activating' knowledge-enhancing and knowledge-controlling mechanisms (e.g. through data gathered through loyalty card systems or browsing histories connected to online shopping). Analysing consumer buying patterns, they are regarded to assume a regulatory role and set up standards (Lawrence and Burch 2007) and to further "influence both supply chain and consumer behaviour" (Manning 2013, 24).

Identifying a situation in which corporations hold an increased role and power in society, retailers in particular are seen as determining, but also representing the field for the expression of responsible consumer action. The case of retailers' position with respect to food transitions represents thus the prime example for the repertoire of activities taken up by responsible corporations or so-called corporate citizens in relation to the stakeholder group of consumers. Retailers predetermine the scope of actions of consumers by enabling or withholding access to certain products and services and by influencing consumer preferences through advertising. In this way, they are further traditionally seen as a conduit for the exercise of consumers' political rights as a citizen (Crane et al. 2004).

2.4 Corporations as politicised agents

CSR, in particular in its business-led framing as 'corporate citizenship' (Section 2.2) poses fundamental questions about the social role of corporations and about wherein the 'citizenship' element in their conduct essentially lies. Crane et al. (2004) outline three descriptive viewpoints of 'corporate citizenship'. Firstly, the corporation could be thought of as a citizen in itself. Secondly, their role is to ensure the 'real' individual citizen's rights in society. Thirdly, the corporation could simply be understood as the agglomerate of its shareholders as citizens. Dependent on the viewpoint taken, different socio-political implications for the realisation of business responsibility are involved (Crane et al. 2004) and different levels of shareholder expectations and stakeholder demands are attached to corporate conduct (Manning 2013).

Thompson (2006, 2008) shows that businesses lay themselves open to the charge that they should act like ordinary citizens once they claim some kind of civic status, pointing out the difference between voluntary and mandatory societal engagements of businesses and

drawing attention to the different interpretations of 'citizenship' inherent in these concepts. 'Acts' of citizenship would differ from 'status' citizenship. These are not to be confused since the former is ultimately voluntary in nature and encompasses primarily what agents do to claim citizenship, whereas the latter "is most closely associated with formal democratic activity and the exercise of political rights and obligations" (Thompson 2008, 484).¹ The author argues that when companies claim to be 'good citizens', they do so on the basis of their 'acts'. Their 'status' as citizens however is highly questionable, in particular if they are operating on a global level. Since citizenship is a legal status only afforded to 'natural persons' and no polity exists from which corporations' citizenly status can be derived, corporations can, strictly speaking, not claim the status of citizenship (Thompson 2006).

Thus, with global regulation and policies arguably being shifted from (inter-)governmental-based models towards private and non-governmental activities, questions on the area and scope of business agency, the potential political role of corporations and their interrelation with or distinction from governmental responsibilities have arisen. Further, the voluntariness of CSR has created major tensions and encouraged debates from empirical, normative and instrumental perspectives (Bradley and Ziniel 2017, Dentchev et al. 2015). Conceptualising responsibility to work to remedy social injustices as political responsibility, Young's (2008) model on social connections and 'shared responsibility' between all agents as contributors to structural processes has spurred scholarly debates on corporate responsibility as political action. Related to this, the potential, extent and scope of the "democratisation of the business firm" (Thompson 2008), as well as its possible socio-political implications has been subject to exploration. Research on CSR has arguably taken a "political turn" (Scherer et al. 2016), in which political CSR (PCSR) supposedly poses "a critical alternative to [...] [an] instrumental view of CSR" (Scherer et al. 2016). Proponents of PCSR propose a deliberative model of democracy, according to which politics starts at the level of deliberating civil society associations. As opposed to a liberal concept of democracy in which politics is regarded to take place within formalised arenas of governmental decision making, in a deliberative model of democracy, corporations are politicised and regarded to:

¹ 'Status citizenship' further "pertains to a definite legal entitlement, where rights and obligations are thrust upon agents as a consequence of them being members of a polity or community, and from which they cannot voluntarily withdraw" (Thompson 2008, 484).

“[...] operate with an enlarged understanding of responsibility; and help to solve political problems in cooperation with state actors and civil society actors. Furthermore, with their growing power and through their engagement in processes of self-regulation, they become subjects of new forms of democratic processes of control and legitimacy.” (Scherer and Palazzo 2011, 918)

2.5 Consumers as politicised agents

Consumers have also been identified as responsible political agents in debates on sustainable consumption and production. Responsible consumption is thereby rarely understood in a sense of a renunciation of consumption, but more as responsible action that is conducted by individuals when making choices in the marketplace (Sassatelli 2007).

Consumers are “bestowed the responsibility for a morally virtuous handling of technological change and the liberalisation of world trade” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007) in their daily choices. The particular act of shopping is thus subjected to an “orthodoxy of the ‘active consumer’ in the social sciences”, in which “the agency, resistance and transgression that consumers bring to processes of consumption” is emphasised (Trentmann 2005, 3). Following this line of thought, consumers are expected to exercise responsible behaviour through the choices that they make in their consumption of commodities (Barnett et al. 2011).

Various labels such as political (Micheletti et al. 2012), sustainable (Schaefer and Crane 2005), ethical (Barnett et al. 2005a, Harrison et al. 2005) critical (Yates 2011) and green consumption (Peattie 2010) have been established in order to describe the performance of consumer responsibility in practitioner- and academic debates. The idea that consumers do not only pursue pure self-interested goals but also take wider societal and environmental considerations into regard and use their purchases to ‘vote’ for desirable socio-political outcomes, constitutes the shared fundament of these concepts and has been drawn upon extensively (Dickinson and Carsky 2005, Moraes et al. 2011, Shaw et al 2006).

Political consumerism, defined as “actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (Micheletti 2003, 2), challenges the notion that individual consumption is purely based on the satisfaction of individual pleasure or driven by a private economic and hedonistic motivation. As opposed to the idea of the consumer as an economic individual, seeking the good life in markets, free from social responsibilities, obligations or duties (Gabriel and Lang

2006), in political consumerism, individual choice “is charged with political power and appears to be defined less in terms of rights than of duties” (Sassatelli 2004, 190). The consumer is seen as a political and moral actor that is “considered both increasingly ‘active’ and ‘public’” (Sassatelli 2004, 188).

With consumption being conceptualised as political participation (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007), the supposedly opposite categories of the self-interested and private ‘consumer’ and the outer-regarded public ‘citizen’ are “recognized as porous, indeed overlapping domains” (Trentmann 2007, 147). Bringing the long history of the consumer and its embeddedness in concerns of rights and equity to light, whilst appreciating the liberal, ‘individual choice’-based model of the consumer (Cohen 2003, Gabriel and Lang 2006, Schwarzkopf 2011), the fusion of both concepts into concepts of ‘consumer-citizens’ or ‘citizen-consumers’ “has been sponsored by liberals, feminists, social democrats and progressives” alike (Trentmann 2007, 151).

Proponents of political consumerism and related approaches claim that citizens would “increasingly turn to the market as their arena of politics” (Micheletti et al. 2012, 141) and that, vice versa, “governments, civic groups [...] and transnational advocacy groups call on their citizens” to encourage them to “recycle, reduce and refine their consumption” (Micheletti et al. 2012, 143). Drawing on concepts of ‘citizen consumers’ or ‘consumer citizens’, theories based on consumer responsibility locate politics in the supermarket and interpret the purchase or boycott of a product as an act of voting (Stolle et al. 2005). Consumption is consequently regarded to be a “channel for political participation” (Shaw et al 2006, 1057) and a “vehicle within which to exercise citizenship” (Shaw et al 2006, 1054).

2.6 Contestations on the market as a democracy

“For citizens, choice means democracy: the freedom to have ones voice heard in a fair and equal society. For consumers in the liberal, free-market capitalist system, choice means sovereignty [...], a way to express their identities and position themselves amongst others.” (Gunn and Mont 2014)

While the ideas of citizen and consumer choice clearly differ in their situatedness and function, both are compared and mixed in long-standing public and scholarly debates. Practitioners and scholars alike have drawn parallels between the power of free individuals under the ‘democratic institutions’ of ‘the market’ and ‘elections’ (Hutt 1940, 71) and established an understanding of the market as a ‘consumer democracy’ (Dixon 1992,

Schwarzkopf 2011). As Shaw (2011) notes, “[t]he modern origins of the analogy between citizens voting with ballots in a democratic polity and consumers voting with dollars in a market economy has at least a century long history” (Shaw 2011, 101). Fetter, who was an early US-based leader of the Austrian school of economics, has described the market as “a democracy where every penny gives a right of vote” (Fetter 1905, 212). This indicates that the idea of consumer voting goes further back than the term ‘consumer sovereignty’ itself (Persky 1993).

‘Consumer sovereignty’ refers to consumers’ authority in markets (Smith 1987, 9). It describes a market condition in which individuals have the controlling power to decide which products and services will be produced and consumed (Moraes et al. 2011). While the origin of this concept is commonly attributed to Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, it was the economists from the Austrian School who from the late 1940s began to translate Smith’s *ideal* of consumer sovereignty into an actual *condition* and interpreted markets as “perfect democracies” in which “consumers were the sovereigns as long as the state kept its hands out of the game” (Schwarzkopf 2011, 14).

The ideology of consumer sovereignty and the associated idea of a ‘consumer society’ as a democratic institution have, in the view of some, been based upon and reinforced by market research and marketing practices (Ward 2009, Schwarzkopf 2011, Tadajewski 2016). Retracing the emergence and reinforcement of the idea of a “consumer’s choice as an equivalent to a citizen’s vote or a jurors verdict”, Schwarzkopf (2011, 8) found that advertisers and marketers have historically contributed to the establishment of the idea of the marketplace as a ‘consumer democracy’. Research methods, such as the consultation of consumer juries or the study of expenditures and behaviours of household and consumer panels have been symbolically exploited by advertising agencies, who “turned these innovations into a public propaganda advantage” (Schwarzkopf 2011, 13). The existence of these methods allowed advertising agencies to reference findings of “scientifically trained market research personnel” to oppose accusations of consumer manipulation and consequently “present themselves as social forces that allowed the democratic voice of [...] the hard-working housewife, the honest shopper [...] to be heard” (Schwarzkopf 2011, 13). Schwarzkopf argues that in this way the use of the “purely symbolic and merely theoretical similarity between consumer and voter or jury member to directly legitimise marketing and

market research practices” (Schwarzkopf 2011, 14) became established as a common practice of advertisers and fed into a general societal understanding of a consumer democracy.

Studies on consumer responsibility for social and environmental issues arguably also reinforce the idea of consumer surveying and marketing as a defence of democracy. It can be argued that normative ideas on ‘consumer citizenship’ are presupposed when the degree and ‘type’ of responsibility in consumer behaviours is inspected in surveys. Further, in marketing, supposedly citizenly responsibilities and obligations are appealed to, carrying a presupposition of sets of “choices that responsible consumers can legitimately make” (Caruana and Crane 2008, 1500). The ways in which consumer surveying and marketing, but also efforts by pressure groups and corporations are constituted, thus indicates what and how to consume, whereby morally framed discourses are drawn upon:

“People are increasingly expected to treat their consumption practices as subject to all sorts of moral injunctions. They are expected to do so through their capacity to exercise discretion through choice; in the everyday activities of social reproduction mediated through commodity consumption; and in relation to a very wide range of substantive concepts of the good life (Barnett et al. 2011, 89).”

In this sense, it is commercial institutions together with governmental groups and other influential institutional agents, who predefine what responsible choices are. In this way, they take the moral evaluation out of consumers’ hands: “[t]he moral evaluation has already taken place, discreetly, behind the scenes” (Caruana and Crane 2008, 1513). Consumers do not decide for themselves how to be responsible, but respond to sets of ‘responsible’ suggestions established by institutional agents. They find a set of pre-defined responsible alternatives provided (e.g. labelled products, paper bags as opposed to plastic bags, recycled packaging) and, in order to be a ‘responsible citizen’, their task is “simply to choose between ‘responsible’ alternatives” (Caruana and Crane 2008, 1513). A critical assessment of products and a reflection on consumption practices beyond choosing product alternatives that have been identified and labelled as such is thereby not envisaged as part of the concept of ‘consumer responsibility’.

In the application of the concept of consumer citizenship as a mechanism for social change contradictory forces are at play. On the one hand, consumers are, as citizens, considered to be heard by producers, and to create a sense of personal responsibility and duty that they

express through their 'votes' in the marketplace and elsewhere. On the other hand, their 'route' into executing their civic obligation to do 'the right thing' is commonly found in 'pre-prepared' choice-options, not allowing many opportunities of being interactive and self-reflective.

2.7 Conclusion

In commercial, political, civil society as well as scholarly debates, corporations and consumers are ascribed responsibility to foster 'sustainable consumption and production'. Both, corporations' performance-maximising and consumers' self-interested 'traditional' roles are expanded with elements of citizenship (Trentmann 2007, Whitehouse 2003). Concerted efforts deriving from the commercial field, as well as from politics, civil society and academia have led to various strategies being tested and applied in order to activate or steer consumer responsibility. Market research, consumer information initiatives, as well as other initiatives to steer consumers into behaving 'responsibly' have reinforced the idea of "politics in the supermarket" (Stolle et al. 2005). The consumer is seen as the central agent of change towards more socially and environmentally just systems of production and consumption (Micheletti and Stolle 2012). Given that consumer responsibility is commonly associated with the choice of certain 'responsible' products over others and imagined to be realised at the point of purchase, accounts of consumer responsibility are to a great degree intertwined with corporate conduct and commitments (Kennedy 2004, Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007). Critical theoretical perspectives on the concept of 'citizenship' in the context of 'economic rationality' bring to light the tensions inherent in models which understand markets as analogous to a democratic system and associated ideas of corporate- and consumer-citizenship (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007, Schwarzkopf 2011, Thompson 2006, 2008).

Chapter 3 – Researching consumer agency for sustainability

3.1 Introduction

The previous Chapter Two identified and discussed the practical field of enquiry of this thesis: corporate and consumer responsibility in the context of ‘sustainable consumption and production’. This chapter introduces social scientific contributions to the research field in which the study is positioned: ‘sustainable consumption’.

Social science research on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) is concerned with providing “insights into the complex, systemic linkages between social, natural, and technical phenomena; how these systems change; and what possibilities for guiding that change we might be afforded” (Welch 2015, 843). While SCP acts as an umbrella concept, it is considered to be dominated by two opposing intellectual positions that set the spectrum for debates on social change: ‘weak’, or ‘reformist’ approaches, which operate within an economic logic and emphasise technological solutions towards improved production processes with less environmental burdens on the one hand, and ‘strong’, or ‘revolutionary’ approaches which operate within an ecological logic advocating radical changes to the patterns and levels of consumption on the other (Hobson 2013, Welch 2015).

‘Weak’ approaches to social change are typically regarded to be fostered through the production and distribution of different types of products by firms and their purchase by consumers. Questions on eco-efficiency and responsible production and consumption thus constitute common research topics to these approaches. As opposed to this, ‘strong’ approaches are understood to associate social and environmental problems with a pre-occupation with economic growth and overconsumption. Related studies are concerned with finding more meaningful, but less-resource intensive ways of living (e.g. Lebel and Lorek 2008). Questions on how to find equity and well-being outside the status quo are thus centrally addressed by ‘strong’ approaches (Lorek and Fuchs 2013).

‘Weak’ approaches are typically associated with the study of the effects of aggregated individual consumer preferences, while the ‘strong’ approaches are related to broader normative criticisms of consumer society (Welch 2015). In their ‘extreme’ form, ‘strong’ approaches, as mostly found in social movements and amongst critical groups of academics, are regarded as problematic in the sense that they are regarded as idealistic and infeasible in

the current socio-political context. 'Weak' approaches have been predominant in public and corporate policy and have been criticised for operating within a productivist agenda and for focussing on potentials to drive demand and business opportunities (Geels et al. 2015, Welch 2015).

The conceptualisation of alterations in production and consumption as an opportunity for business innovation is inherent in the concept of ecological modernisation, which has established as a prevalent approach to sustainable development amongst scholars of environmental social science (Baker 2016). From the side of the producer, the concept describes "[e]co-efficient innovation" and "the introduction of environment friendly technology which also increases resource productivity" (Jänicke 2008, 558). In terms of consumption, ecological modernisation is concerned with the development of information feedback loops between consumer and producer, based on the idea that capable, knowledgeable and rational action from consumers will lead to more sustainable production (Carolan 2002, Spaargaren and Van Vliet 2000).

Economic and social psychology studies of human behaviour, which commonly reflect the 'weaker' approach, have delivered key models on consumer behaviour drawn upon in policy circles. However, the methodological individualism inherent in these models has been subject to fundamental critique, which has introduced transformative developments within the fields of study. Thus, a significant body of behavioural economics literature has questioned the notion of individual rational preferences of individuals as determinants of choice and raised attention for unconscious and contextual factors of individual behaviour. Further, an emerging area of new economics has begun to address the economics of well-being, grassroots innovations and ideas associated with the concept of 'degrowth' (Cohen et al. 2013, Kallis et al. 2018), introducing ideas and models outside of the predominant, narrow, individual consumerist view.

Scholars interested in sustainable consumption have responded to the conceptualisation of consumer responsibility as rational deliberate decision-making for the common good in different ways and have developed a variety of approaches to study 'consumer agency'. One body of literature presupposes consumers as agents of social change and reinforces the idea of consumer- and corporate agency for social change towards 'sustainable consumption and production' by producing empirical accounts of consumer behaviour and corporate tactics.

Much literature has been committed to study the extent, customs and circumstances under which consumers do or do not act responsibly (e.g. Bhattacharya and Sen 2004, Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Some have euphorically welcomed the concept of 'consumer citizenship' and investigated strategies to support consumers in their political and ethical undertakings (e.g. Micheletti 2003, Micheletti and Stolle 2012, Shaw et al. 2006) or to persuade consumers into making more desirable decisions in order to 'force' corporations into more responsible conduct (as discussed also in Section 2.3.2). Others have been less confident in responsibility taken by individual consumers and have discussed how institutions – first and foremost corporations – can take the lead by altering the provision of goods to steer consumers into some sustainable choices through 'nudges' (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein 2008) or the limitation of irresponsible choices known as 'choice editing' (e.g. SDC 2006).

By contrast, a growing number of social science scholars have sought to 'deconstruct' the paradigm of consumer agency. Contributions deriving from the tradition of practice theory have encouraged a shift from the focus on consumer agency towards thinking about how infrastructures, resources and conventions relate to practices of consumption (e.g. Shove 2010, Southerton and Evans 2017, Spurling 2013). Some scholars have critically reviewed the idea of 'consumer responsibility' (e.g. Barnett et al. 2011, Welch et al. 2018). Both these approaches recognise the presupposition of consumers as agents of change and challenge it by drawing attention to the societal circumstances under which consumers act and by making the impact of institutional agents visible.

Different from both these lines of thought, but associated with approaches that 'deconstruct' the paradigm of consumer agency are studies that draw from the tradition of discourse analysis (e.g. Johnston 2008, Kennedy et al. 2018, Swaffield and Bell 2012). Discourse studies support a 'departure' from consumer agency and attempts to allocate or shift 'agency' as such, studying the use of language and hegemonic structures of provisioning instead. 'Agency', 'responsibility' and the rhetorical activity of 'responsibilisation' are held as rhetorical devices that reinforce specific notions of 'sustainable consumption and production'. Thus, as opposed to established ways of studying 'sustainable consumption', discourse analysis rejects sustainable consumption as a self-evident category. In this way,

discourse analysis deals with contested notions of ‘sustainable consumption’ whilst researching attributions of consumer- or corporate agency.

This chapter is divided into three substantive parts. In the first section (3.2) I review scholarly work which presupposes consumers as agents of change. I thereby discuss studies that have attempted to measure (3.2.1), mobilise (3.2.2) and orchestrate (3.2.3) sustainable consumption. The section thereafter (3.3) engages with literature that holds a critical stance towards the consumer as an agent of social change – which is where my own contribution is located. This includes contributions from the tradition of practice theory (3.3.1), work that has identified (rhetorical) activities of ‘consumer responsabilisation’ (3.3.2), as well as a selection of empirical accounts that derive from discourse analysis, which provide the fundament to the theoretical framework of the research conducted for this thesis (3.3.3). This framework is outlined in the final section (3.4).

3.2. Conceptualising consumers as agents of change

With individual behaviour change having been established as the “‘holy grail’ of sustainable development policy” (Jackson 2005, xi), much research has been concerned with questions on how to change individual consumer behaviour at the point of purchase. Hence, consumer responsibility, to a large extent, has been dealt with in terms of conscious and unconscious consumer motivations, often with the aim to segment consumers or to identify of attributes that responsible consumers have in common (Barr et al. 2011, De Graaf et al. 2016, Gracia and de-Magistris 2016, Grankvist et al. 2004). A large body of research has been committed to researching strategies of how to encourage, help, convince or ‘nudge’ consumers (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) into making ‘better choices’ (Barr et al. 2011). In this body of literature, consumers are conceptualised as agents of change: they are quantified as agents, when their attitudes and behaviours are tested and assessed; they are mobilised as agents in attempts to encourage them to consume in responsible ways; and they are, allegedly, provided for and responded to through the establishment of ‘responsible’ ‘choice architectures’. Although being subjected to criticism, in particular in recent scholarly work on sustainability interventions, these approaches have constituted the “mainstream paradigm” (Keller et al. 2016) and informed large sets of policies, business models and marketing strategies (Prothero 2011, Sebastiani et al. 2013).

In the following, a brief overview of these academic studies is given. This overview is divided into three sections, with the first discussing research that aims at measuring sustainable consumption and thereby presupposes the possibility to quantify ‘the sustainable consumer’ (Section 3.2.1), research that deals with ways to ‘sell’ (i.e. raise awareness of and commercially exploit) sustainability and thereby presupposes that the ‘sustainable consumer’ can be mobilised, activated and persuaded (Section 3.2.2), and research that proposes the implementation of sustainable choice architectures, presupposing that ‘the sustainable consumer’ can and should be provided for (Section 3.2.3). While there are overlaps between the three lines of research, their contribution to the conceptualisation of consumers as agents of change plays out on different levels. Contributions associated with the first group establish and reinforce the idea of consumer agency and responsibility as a meaningful and measurable category within the pursuit of ‘sustainable consumption’. Contributions associated with both the second and the third group are implicitly or explicitly rooted in the first. However, while research associated with the second group recognises the existence of responsible consumers and draws upon them as self-evident categories, research associated with the third group, although built upon consumer behaviour as the basis of change, is critical of an over-reliance on deliberate, responsible consumer behaviour.

3.2.1 Quantifying the sustainable consumer: measuring sustainable consumption

Research aimed at exploring ‘the sustainable consumer’ and related opportunities and challenges in itself is constitutive of conceptual frameworks that are built on the consumer as the key agent of change. Such research reinforces “the idea that ‘consumer responsibility’ is a meaningful, objectively identifiable, and to some extent measurable quality” (Caruana and Crane 2008, 1497). Further, regardless of whether information campaigns are favoured or disapproved, interventions are approached from the level of individual behaviour change.

Studies most notably encompass the exploration of consumer attitudes and behaviour. Numerous studies have been conducted exploring the role of various forms of consumer consciousness, concerns, values and identities on attitudes and intentions to various product segments that are regarded as socially and/or environmentally favourable (see e.g. Michaelidou and Hassan 2008 for the case of organic foods, Shaw and Shiu 2003 for the case of fair trade products in general, Pelsmacker et al. 2005 for the case of fair trade coffee, as

well as Schröder and McEachern 2004 for the issue of animal welfare). Others have investigated the effects of various demographics on consumer boycotts in response to business behaviour and the reward of businesses for favourable behaviour (Neilson 2010). Much research has been concerned with the so-called 'attitude-behaviour' or 'value-action' gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002), which describes the phenomenon that consumer expression of pro-environmental attitudes is inconsistent with their behavioural patterns (Foster and Padel 1995, Shaw et al. 2016, Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). Various quantitative and qualitative surveys have further addressed consumer trade-offs between philanthropic/ environmentally-friendly and 'traditional' product attributes such as quality and design (e.g. Auger and Devinney 2007). In recent studies, in particular conflicts and compatibilities with health concerns have been explored (e.g. Van Loo et al. 2017, Verain et al. 2016). Further, consumers' willingness to pay a premium price for product features that are considered as favourable in relation to social and/or environmental aspects is a much researched and on-going concern investigated in consumer surveys (Auger et al. 2003, Mohl and Webb 2005). The impact of CSR-based claims (Bhattacharya and Sen 2004), consumer information campaigns on social and environmental issues (Grunert et al. 2014) as well as product certification and labelling for ethical and environmentally friendly ways of production have also been widely researched (e.g. Gracia and de-Magistris 2016, Grankvist et al 2004).

Regardless of whether these studies recommend a revision and improvement of campaigning and labelling, or suggest withdrawing from the inherent focus on individual responsibility, they all reinforce the idea that degrees of sustainable consumption can be measured through individual behaviour in the marketplace. Thus a conceptualisation of social change through the 'act' of consumption at the point of purchase is also embodied in studies which show that consumers experience information initiatives as being paternalistic, superfluous or not trustworthy (Sirieix et al. 2013), or that consumers feel that they should not be held responsible for sustainable consumption (Hornibrook et al. 2015) and expect businesses to take responsibility for their supply chain and to stock sustainable choices (Chkanikova and Mont 2015, Cummins 2004). They do so, by reproduction in the academic field (as it will be discussed in the following sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3) and by their recommendations being picked up by corporations, who might identify a 'business case' for CSR or social and cause-related marketing (Peloza and Shang 2011) to improve their reputation-management (Klein and Dawar 2004) or to shift towards non-information-based

strategies (such as adaptations for a more sustainable choice architecture as discussed in more detail in Section 3.2.3). Findings of such studies also inform soft (information-based instruments, e.g. public information campaigns, education and labelling) and hard (e.g. product reformulations, mandatory standards, market-based initiatives, direct regulations) policy initiatives for behaviour change on national and international levels (Van Loo et al. 2017).

Research on consumer behaviour in relation to social and environmental concerns conceptualises consumers as self-evident agents of change predominantly by starting from the marketplace as a realm of action. It does so either through a focus on ‘consumer agency’ and choice at the point of purchase or through a focus on institutional agency for market-based implementations to influence these choices. Responsible consumer behaviour is largely equated with purchase behaviour, whether it happens through deliberate individual choice or through ‘help’ by institutional agents. Research of this kind has been drawn upon to support conceptual underpinnings for both aims to mobilise the responsible consumer and attempts to provide institutional environments which foster responsible consumption. Related models are discussed in the following two sections (3.2.2 and 3.2.3).

3.2.2 Mobilising the sustainable consumer: selling sustainability

In extensive bodies of social science and behavioural economics literature on change towards more sustainable food systems, the focus has been on a collective of individual consumers who have the ability to exercise responsible choice whilst shopping (e.g. Kennedy 2004, Micheletti 2003). These approaches apply a neoclassical model of a free market in which the needs and wants of autonomous, ‘sovereign’ consumers are satisfied, and add sustainability-related considerations such as carbon emissions, social justice and animal welfare. In this way, the conceptualisation of consumers as powerful utility-maximisers who ‘traditionally’ undertake rational cost-benefit considerations on aspects such as price, functional efficacy and convenience is extended with ‘responsible’ considerations. In this line of thought it is argued that if consumers care about societal and environmental concerns, they would translate them into preferences and express them through acts of consumption (Gabriel and Lang 2006, Hobson 2002, Sassatelli 2007), which are commonly summarised by terms such as ‘political’ (Micheletti 2003, Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007, Stolle et al. 2005) or ‘ethical’ consumption (Harrison et al. 2005, Sebastiani et al, 2013). With businesses, and in

particular retailers, being conceptualised as ‘choice providers’, who respond to market demand (Gunn and Mont 2014), societal change is here understood as driven by supply and demand (see Chapter Two, in particular Section 2.3 for more detail on the interrelation between consumer- and corporate citizenship in the dominant interpretation).

Associated studies most notably encompass research on the effects of consumer information and marketing campaigns on sustainability-related issues, environmental and ethical labelling and other efforts to influence consumer choice. Suggestions drawn from these are for example based on the idea that knowledge transfer and signposting at the point of sale or directly on products would ‘guide’ individuals into making the ‘right’ choices (Jackson 2005), assuming a “linear relation [...] between information/awareness, attitudes and respective behaviours” (Keller et al. 2016, 77). Alternative suggestions are based on ‘social marketing’-thinking, in which commercial marketing methods are designed, implemented and controlled by profit-making, non-profit and public organisations alike, in order to encourage individuals to engage in socially responsible behaviour (Barr et al. 2011). The idea is thereby that consumer behaviours and behavioural change processes are socially embedded, so that the identification with desirable conduct and a misidentification with undesirable conduct can help achieve respective goals (Bhattacharya and Elsbach 2002, Jackson 2005). Community-based social marketing is further regarded as carrying the potential to change behaviours through the activation of community engagement as opposed to information-intensive campaigns (Jackson 2005, McKenzie-Mohr 2000). Another proposition in this regard is cause-related marketing, which has been defined as an “activity by which businesses and charities or causes form a partnership with each other to market an image, product or service for mutual benefit” (Adkins 1999, 11). The focus is here particularly on the potential of companies and brands to persuade consumers through their CSR strategies to make responsible choices (Sen et al. 2016).

Some scholars draw clear distinctions between these strategies and bring to attention the advantages and disadvantages associated with different approaches (e.g. Jackson 2005). However, in practice, the boundaries between information campaigns and various forms of marketing are blurred. As mentioned earlier, the application of marketing strategies is inherent in social marketing, even if applied by governmental or non-profit institutions. Collaboration between companies, governmental and non-profit-organisation on local and

global (e.g. for charitable causes or on product labels) levels further make it difficult to identify a clear difference between 'information' and 'marketing'. Additionally, businesses increasingly identify the need to foster the awareness and commitment of new consumers to respective lifestyles and some deliberately organise "their enterprises as campaigning vehicles designed to support the concerns of political/ethical consumers" (Kennedy 2004, 22), blurring the line between information and marketing further. Information and marketing campaigns can thus be summarised as efforts to 'sell' sustainability. Regardless of whether the idea is to build knowledge of some sort or to appeal to individuals through marketing strategies, the overall aim attached to these strategies is to mobilise consumers into making more responsible choices. Related interventions, therefore, commonly focus on 'intervening from outside' to persuade reflective and rational individuals to adopt desired behaviours (Keller et al. 2016).

Although constituting a dominant consumption-based template for social change, efforts to mobilise responsible consumers have in many cases been found ineffective. Consistent findings suggest that the percentage of consumers who are consistently 'active' in this regard remain a minority of around five to 10 percent of the population (Carrigan and Attalla 2011, Tischner et al. 2010). Suggested explanations point towards the 'attitude-behaviour gap' (Kollmus and Agyeman 2002, Shaw et al. 2016), as well as to the finding that consumption practices, in particular habitual and situational factors, are difficult to change (Clarke et al. 2004, Vermeir and Verbeke 2006).

3.2.3 Providing for the sustainable consumer: sustainable choice architectures

Starting from the acknowledgement of consumers' inability to consistently commit to act upon their values, advocates for a manipulation of 'choice architecture' offer an alternative form of intervention. A core principle here is not to persuade consumers into acting responsibly, but to provide for responsible consumption. In this way, individual 'actions' are still attributed a central role for social change.

The provision of a 'sustainable choice architecture' is largely rooted in two approaches: 'nudging' and 'choice editing'. The first approach, rooted in behavioural and cognitive science, most prominently influenced by Thaler and Sunstein's much acclaimed publication *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein 2008), suggests that consumers should be 'steered' towards more desirable choices without being confronted with a limitation of choices. 'Nudging'

suggests that governmental and non-governmental institutions, in particular consumer-facing businesses such as retailers, can function as ‘choice architects’ who take “the responsibility for organizing the context in which people make decisions” (Thaler et al. 2013, 428). This suggestion evolves from the concept of ‘liberitarian paternalism’, which rejects “the assumption that people do a good job of making choices” (Thaler and Sunstein 2003, 179). In order to “avoid random, arbitrary, or harmful effects and to produce a situation that is likely to promote people’s welfare” (Thaler and Sunstein 2003, 179), the focus is on the alteration of the environment in which people make their choices (‘choice architecture’), in order to help individuals make ‘better’ choices (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, Thaler et al. 2013).

As a second approach, the concept of ‘choice editing’ describes action through which manufacturers, retailers and governmental agents ‘take out the bad option’ (Akenji 2014, 19) before it reaches the supermarket. In the words of the UK Sustainable Development Roundtable (2006), which was leading to adopt the concept to sustainable consumption, “[c]hoice editing for sustainability is about shifting the field of choice for mainstream consumers: cutting out unnecessarily damaging products and getting real sustainable choices on the shelves” (SDC 2006, 16). As opposed to nudging, in choice editing, the “active behaviour change of the consumer is not required” (Gunn and Mont 2014, 466) and consumers are not given “the option of doing the ‘wrong thing’” (Lang and Barling 2012, 320). Hence, where choice editing is applied “[e]very consumer is a green consumer because sustainable products are the mainstream option” (Gunn and Mont 2014, 466).

Crucial to both nudging and choice editing is that these concepts are based on descriptions and definitions which conceptualise the provision of an allegedly sustainable choice architecture as *a response to consumers* and that the conceptualisation of *the consumer as ‘choosing agent’* is preserved. Strategies related to both are portrayed and interpreted as actions “for the common and individual good” (Keller et al. 2016, 80). Thus, it is argued that the employment of these strategies would ‘help’ consumers to act in the responsible ways they allegedly desire to act (Dixon and Banwell 2012).

The concept of ‘nudging’ as a tool to help individuals to change their behaviour has been applied and interpreted in varying ways (Moseley and Stoker 2013). One such ‘tool’ is constituted by ‘default options’ – options that a chooser obtains unless an explicit choice is made otherwise. Related studies have for example experimented on the influence of default

services (Theotokis and Manganari 2015), electricity provision (Pichert and Katsikopoulos 2008), restaurant meals (Henry and Borzekowski 2015) and restaurant menus (Campbell-Arvai et al. 2014, Filimonau et al. 2017). The presentation of social norms (Demarque et al. 2015, Nielsen et al. 2016) and social proof heuristics² (Prinsen et al. 2013, Cheung et al. 2017) constitute other ways through which 'nudge' is interpreted and tested as a way to steer consumers into making more desirable food choices at the point of purchase. The field of 'nudge' also encompasses studies on the influence and degree of accessibility and availability of 'responsible' options on individual choices. Experiments studied for example the effects of food placement and repositioning in terms of proximity and order in the shop, in the shelves and at the check-out counter (Bucher et al. 2016, Chandon et al. 2009, Van Gestel et al. 2018). Similarly, changes to the physical environment have been tested for their potential to contribute to more desirable patterns of behaviour. Researchers have for example found that the reduction of plate sizes has significantly reduced food waste from buffet offerings in hotels (Nielsen et al. 2016).

These examples show that the ways in which 'nudging' consumers into a sustainable 'choice architecture' are tested, are based on varied interpretations of the concept. While paternalistic manipulation through 'nudges' is per definition seen as a supplement or even replacement of information provision (Campbell-Arvai et al. 2014, Downs et al. 2009) and of attempts to convince people of what is 'right' (Kroese et al. 2016), many make no clear distinction between strategies to 'nudge' and to 'inform' consumers. Thus, for example the distribution of descriptive norms, real-time information and labelling has been suggested as strategies to 'nudge' consumers into desirable behaviours (Demarque et al. 2015, Nielsen 2016). Ambiguities also concern the relationship between the strategies of social marketing and 'nudging'. Social marketing, which is largely suggested as a persuasion strategy to 'activate' responsible consumers (Section 3.2.2) is by some regarded as a core category to 'nudging' (French 2011, Spotswood 2012). It is further left unclear whether the social norm-based approach is a type of social marketing or of 'nudging' (Burchell et al. 2013). The concept of choice editing differs from these in that undesirable choice options are removed from the 'choice architecture', such as the provision of only free range eggs or fair trade

² I.e. the provision of settings in which consumers are given the chance to observe others to determine the appropriate mode of behaviour in order to reflect 'correct' behaviour themselves. This approach presupposes that people look at what others do for behavioural guidance when they are unsure, in unfamiliar or ambiguous situations.

coffee (Grayson 2011). In all those approaches aimed at ‘providing’ for the consumer, the focus of agency and responsibility is clearly shifted from the consumer onto institutional actors, in particular retailers. However, although strategies and implementations might be transformed at a much earlier point in the supply chain, ‘sustainable consumption’ is, similar to studies that focus on potential ways to measure or mobilise the consumer (3.2.1, 3.2.2) still placed in the supermarket as the significant realm of action for social change. In this way, also calls for a transformation of production and provisioning such as ‘choice editing’ are embedded in an “overarching frame of choice as an ‘instrument for change’” (Brooks et al. 2013, 155).

3.2.4 Conclusion to conceptualisations of consumers as agents of change

Large bodies of social science literature have contributed to the constitution of the irresponsible consumer as an agent of change towards sustainability through a variety of empirical studies. Exploring consumer attitudes and behaviour or corporate strategies to influence consumer attitudes and behaviour, these studies start from a point where the idea of the consumer as an agent of change is taken for granted. In this way, these studies fundamentally conceptualise ‘consumer agency’ as a meaningful quality for social change towards sustainability.

Consumer choice at the point of purchase constitutes a constant concern of intervention in this body of scholarly work. This is the case regardless of whether the aim that is worked towards is the *mobilisation of* the consumer or the *provision for* the consumer. The approaches differ in the way that the former operates on the assumption that a change of individuals’ minds is required, while the latter aims at changing the environment – the ‘architecture’ within which individuals operate. They both, however, share the aim to enact more responsible choices being made by a collective of individual consumers as decision makers at the point of purchase. Suggestions to manipulate the choice architecture that consumers are exposed to move debates on sustainable consumption beyond an understanding of consumption as rational consumer choice. They are centred on the point of purchase as the sphere where retailer’s and consumer’s activities intersect. The mobilisation of the consumer is thereby largely constrained to this context.

As shown above, it is difficult to clearly differentiate between information-, persuasion-, nudge-, and intervention-based strategies, because applied strategies are mixed and the

ways in which they are described and legitimised are mixed. What is notable is that they have nevertheless collectively contributed to the establishment of normative and instrumental ideas that conceptualise social change for sustainability, and therefore more sustainable food systems, to be dependent on individual behaviour change at the point of purchase. Findings gathered through related studies have thus encouraged policy makers to integrate insights from behavioural science into policy design and implementation. This has been subject to extensive critique by scholars who question the effects of a change of consumer behaviour and the idea of consumer agency as such. This literature, which partly constitutes the theoretical foundation for the research conducted for this thesis is discussed in the following section (3.3).

3.3. Departing from a focus on consumers as agents of social change

As noted, a growing number of social science scholars have been committed to ‘deconstruct’ the paradigm of consumer agency. Notable contributions of this kind derive from the tradition of practice theory (e.g. Shove 2010, Southerton and Evans 2017, Spurling 2013). Considerable efforts in this direction have also been delivered by scholars who specifically apply a critical stance towards a (rhetoric) ‘responsibilisation’ of the consumer (e.g. Barnett et al. 2011, Welch et al. 2018). Most significant in relation to the project at hand is the contribution of discourse analysis (e.g. Johnston 2008, Kennedy et al. 2018) which, so far, has been given strikingly little recognition in established critical debates on agency for sustainable consumption. In the following, contributions from those three lines of thought are portrayed and discussed.

3.3.1 Beyond consumer agency: drawing attention to the social organisation of practices as an element of change

As opposed to approaches that assume rational choice as attempt to persuade or steer consumers into behaviour change, approaches of practice theory suggest that consumption occurs “often entirely without mind” (Warde 2005, 145) but “within and for the sake of practices” (Warde 2005, 150), highlighting the more habitual, mundane and ‘inconspicuous’ forms of consumption (Shove and Warde 2002). Scholars of this line of thought do not attribute routinised ways of understanding, knowing how and desiring to the single individual actor, but identify these as elements and qualities of a practice. In this way, the individual is described as a ‘carrier’ of practices. As agents, individuals are regarded to carry

out routinised ways of interpreting, knowing and wanting through their bodily and mental performances (Reckwitz 2002).

“This way of conceptualising consumption turns the ideas of motives, wants and choices as preludes to consumption activities that is assumed in so many studies of consumer culture completely around: instead, it is practices that generate wants and occasions for choice.” (Halkier 2010, 29)

The ways in which individuals access and experience consumption through practices are regarded as having significant implications beyond the ‘act’ of consumption in the supermarket as such. Great attention has thus been paid to conventions within wider systems of infrastructural provisioning and regulation. Proponents of practice theory argue that neither efforts to change individual consumer behaviour, nor technological innovations alone will lead to social change. “The key lies in transforming and reconfiguring social practices, which are composed of material objects and environments, and socio-cultural meanings as well as the skills and competences to do something” (Keller et al. 2016).

The strongest criticism expressed by proponents of practice theory is directed to the centrality in various manifestations of behaviour change thinking of the individual as a unit of analysis and the conceptualisation of individual agents as either rational utility-maximisers or as rule-following, consuming subjects (Keller et al 2016, Reckwitz 2002). Inherent in approaches of practice theory is thus a revision of “the hyperrational and intellectualized picture of human agency and the social offered by classical and high-modern social theories” (Reckwitz 2002, 259). In this way, practice theory “decentres’ mind, texts and conversation” and shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary (Reckwitz 2002, 259).

In some strong interpretations of practice theory, ideas such as political consumption or consumer citizenship are fully opposed, identifying in these conceptualisations of agency a dominant individualist paradigm that overshadows the significance of social contexts and structures (Spaargaren and Oosterveer 2010). Shove (2010) for example, makes a strong case for going beyond this paradigm that she summarises with the acronym “ABC – attitude, behaviour, and choice”. She argues that this paradigm frames the problem of climate change as a problem of individual behaviour and thereby marginalises, and in many ways excludes, serious engagement with other possible analyses (Shove 2010). In the context of policy formulation, it would deliver a “template for intervention which locates citizens as

consumers and decision makers and which positions governments and other institutions as enablers whose role is to induce people to make pro-environmental decisions for themselves and deter them from opting for other, less desired, courses of action” (Shove 2010, 1280).

With its focus on the ways in which practices are constituted by everyday activities, reproduced and ‘interlocked’ through social-temporal timings and coordination, practice theory crucially makes apparent the ‘orchestrating role of institutions and organisations’ (Southerton and Evans 2017). It allows a focus on the ‘material over the symbolic’, ‘the doing over the thinking’ and, consequently, ‘practical consciousness over deliberation’ (Warde 2014). Practice theory moves the understanding of consumption beyond ‘acquisition’ and defines it as “a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (Warde 2005, 137). Practice theory delivers empirical accounts of the complexities of human behaviour and shows how these behaviours are embedded dynamics of everyday life beyond acts of consumption (Spurling et al. 2013). In this way, practice theory stimulates consumption policy to consider the configurations and connections between practices and to recognise the potential of practice reconfigurations on consumption outcomes (Southerton and Evans 2017).

Practice theory represents a critical account of consumer-focussed strategies and implementations for social and environmental concerns and provides an alternative framing to models of individual choice (Warde 2014). However, while practice theory opposes the idea of the individual as the central unit of intervention and choice as the core presupposition, proponents give little recognition of the difference between the individual as a (rhetorical) *reference point* of intervention as opposed to the individual as an actual *target* of intervention. Scholars have identified a “well-established language of individual behaviour and personal responsibility” (Shove 2010, 1274) and observed that institutional agents are “appealing to the moral responsibility of citizen-consumers” (Spaargaren 2011, 814). However, caution has to be taken to draw from these observations that they represent “an indication of the extent to which responsibility for responding to climate change is thought to lie with individuals whose behavioural choices will make the difference” (Shove 2010, 1274) or to conclude that “too much responsibility for change is put on the plate of

the individual citizen-consumer” (Spaargaren 2011, 814). Scholarly work that substantiates the identification of ‘the responsible consumer’ as constituting a “rhetorical figure” rather than a “locus of sovereignty and agency” (Barnett et al. 2011, 19), suggests that “critical discussions of sustainable consumption should not take for granted the responsabilisation of the consumer” (Welch et al. 2018, 17). Some examples and their essential contribution to the research field of ‘sustainable consumption’ are presented in the following section.

3.3.2 Beyond the consumer: the consumer as a rhetorical figure

In established theories on consumption, there is little controversy on the understanding that the concept of the consumer is historically framed through institutional processes. A continuous re-framing and contention of consumers’ role in society by commercial, governmental and civil society agents is widely acknowledged (Gabriel and Lang 2006, Sassatelli 2007). Few however, have paid attention to the appropriation of the concept of consumer agency by institutional actors, such as commercial, governmental and non-profit organisations. Exceptions can be found amongst critical responses to literature on ethical and political consumption, which advocate to shift the focus away from the consumer as a locus of agency and instead shed light on the contributions of institutional agents in ‘creating’ the concept of consumer responsibility. In this line of thought, the responsible consumer is regarded to be institutionalised (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007) and mobilised (Barnett et al. 2011) through governance structures, market processes and everyday life.

Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) critique what they call a ‘generic active consumer model’ that is based on the belief that the active consumer is a universal entity available across nations and time. Related to this, they suggest that debates – also in the academic realm – would be “part of a contestation over what consumers and consumption should be” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007, 479) and thus contribute to the reproduction of an ideology of responsible consumption. The authors claim that “[f]ocusing on consumers’ attitudes and values, one misses out other actors’ strategies aimed at for example developing markets and regulating political responsibilities, and how other actors thereby, deliberately or not, serve to frame consumers, their options, attention, expectations, and self-definitions” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007, 473).

Barnett, Clarke and colleagues depart from a similar standpoint, emphasising that campaigns and other initiatives addressed at consumers have a function that goes beyond the

mobilisation and persuasion of consumers as responsible agents. 'Ethical consumption' is understood as a political field of strategic action with normative negotiations of collective actors taking place (Barnett et al. 2011). Barnett et al. (2011) argue that institutional agents publicly address consumers through campaigning and 'use' them in this way to make their own institutional concerns heard. Ethical consumption campaigning is thus interpreted as a way "to get people talking, both in everyday life and in more formal public arenas" (Clarke et al. 2007, 238) and to "establish the legitimacy of organisations as representatives of popular concern on these issues" (Barnett et al. 2011, 21).

Consequently, Barnett et al. (2011) urge to focus on the provisioning side of consumption instead in order to shift "attention away from individual efforts to adjust consumption behavior, drawing into view a broader, more complex pattern of activities that generate issues which often become visible and politicised as consumption problems" (Barnett et al. 2011, 70). Responsible consumption is in this line of thought to be understood as a moment in the networks of production, distribution and marketing of items and services and consequentlz as an activity of multiple individual and collective agents, not only consumers (Barnett et al. 2011). Within this activity, the responsible consumer is understood to function as a "rhetorical figure" (Barnett et al. 2011, 19), i.e. a rhetorical point of reference that is employed by various agents. Developing this approach, Evans et al. (2017) suggest how studying how this 'rhetorical figure' "features in the project of sustainable consumption" (Evans et al. 2017, 1400) can give insight into the "underlying political rationalities" of responsible consumption. Investigating the ways in which institutional agents such as grocery retailers, policymakers, third sector organisations and sustainability consultancies mobilise the rhetorical figure of the consumer thus reveals their strategies to obtain acceptance and attention from other institutions (Welch et al. 2018).

Having brought critical attention to the significance of the consumer as a rhetorical figure, research conducted by Barnett et al. (2011) and related studies (e.g. Welch et al. 2018) have delivered a fundamental contribution to social science scholarship on sustainable consumption. However, the motivation for this strand of research evolves from a problematisation of the 'individual'-centred framing of corporate and public policy on sustainable consumption. The 'rhetorical lens' is thus applied in order to identify the form and extent to which the consumer is or is not responsabilised. No consideration is given to

the rhetorical mobilisation of the figure of the consumer beyond various shades of 'responsibilisation'. Further, institutional agents' practices contribute to the reinforcement of the concept of 'consumer agency' not only by speaking *for* the consumer by speaking *to* the consumer (e.g. through campaigns, marketing, or other forms of communication) but also by speaking *about* the consumer *without addressing them* (e.g. in forms of communication between experts and policy makers). Consumer campaigns are the obvious context in which the rhetorical deployment of a responsibilised model of the consumer can help to drive issues up the agenda (Welch et al. 2018). However, also if not responsibilised, the figure of the consumer can rhetorically function as an agent, which is given little consideration in these studies. Insights on this can be delivered by contributions from discourse analysis. The following section (3.3.3) introduces this field.

3.3.3 Beyond sustainable consumption: discourse analytical approaches

Contributions deriving from the tradition of practice theory as well as from critical work on 'consumer responsibilisation', as presented in the previous two sections (3.3.1 and 3.3.2), have brought to attention that a great deal of consumption is determined by the organisation of collective infrastructures of provisioning (Barnett et al. 2011). 'Infrastructure', as for example understood by scholarly contributions outlined in the sections above (3.3.1 and 3.3.2) can refer to the provision of and access to tangible facilities, such as agricultural land, transport systems and buildings or health and educational institutions. It can, however, also be understood as the rhetorical space that limits or liberates how issues around sustainable consumption for social change are framed. These 'rhetorical spaces' are dealt with in empirical contributions that draw from the tradition of discourse studies. Approaches of this field start from the proposition that "discourse structures the space in which agency and subjects are constituted" (Johnston 2008, 233). Applied to the field of 'sustainable consumption', the concern with 'rhetorical structures' is not limited to the study of the constitution of agency but 'sustainable consumption' in itself is approached as a concept that is built "on expert language and concepts" (Feindt and Oels 2005, 162). Thus, although attributions of agency are generally central to discourse analytical studies, since "[s]tory lines require actors, or agents" (Dryzek 2013, 18), discourse analytical studies explicitly acknowledge that this agency is embedded in multiple contested interpretations of concerns that it is related to (Feindt and Oels 2005).

Various studies have thus challenged the understanding of social and environmental issues as self-evident categories by drawing attention to attributions of 'agency'. An early and notable reference in this regard is Dryzek's detailed account of nine environmental discourses in the 1990s (Dryzek 2013), which has been replicated and drawn upon by many subsequent studies on climate change (e.g. Doulton and Brown 2009, Hulme 2008, Swaffield and Bell 2012). Dryzek has notably put an emphasis on the attribution of agency within discourses, regarding the roles played by actors (such as 'enlightened elites', 'rational consumers', 'ignorant and shortsighted populations' and 'virtuous ordinary citizens') as a significant feature of environmental discourses (Dryzek 2013).

A number of studies have researched framings of action and agency for social and environmental issues in consumer campaigns or other efforts to activate consumer citizenship. Some have analysed discourses of marketing campaigns and consumer communication in terms of their contribution to framings of political, social and economic problems and solutions. Such contributions have been delivered by Brei and Böhm (2014) and Johnston (2008). Brei and Böhm (2014) studied cause-related marketing by the example of Volvic's '1L = 10L for Africa' campaign, which linked the sale of bottled water in 'developed' countries to the promise to provide drinking water in Africa, and found that through this campaign, political struggles around consumption were diffused. The campaign was recontextualised as a 'program' and 'project'. Narratives of 'supporting', 'drinking', 'giving' and 'getting involved' dominated over narratives of 'buying' and 'consuming' and consumers were approached as ambassadors and overall framed as activists. In this way "the campaign sought to change the status of consumers; [...] to transform them from passive shoppers into active, engaged consumers who participate in positive social action by buying bottled water" (Brei and Böhm 2014, 25-26).

Similarly, in another case study of Whole Foods Market (WFM), it is demonstrated how 'the consumer' is framed by a corporate actor and how this corporation's efforts to address social and environmental issues contribute to reinforce the established structures that have inherently led to the very same issues. Johnston (2008) unpacks the 'citizen-consumer hybrid', concluding that citizenship goals are only superficially addressed. As opposed to this, consumer interests are served in the sense of consumer choice, status distinction and ecological cornucopianism. Both studies demonstrate how, on the one hand, big societal

challenges are addressed in corporate communication and the role of the consumer is 'reframed' within this context, whereas on the other, the inherent "ideological work" suggests consumption as an "easy fix or patch" (Brei and Böhm 2014, 26). Thus, Johnston critically notes that that "[t]he emergence of the citizen-consumer cannot simply be understood as individual acts of benevolence [...] but as a reaction to the social inequality and ecological deterioration of neoliberal capitalism, and its associated veneration of market-based solutions" (Johnston 2008, 262).

Others have approached discourses on action and agency for social and environmental issues in consumer campaigns from a more general context. Studying agents' accounts of issues related to sustainability, scholars have identified a gap between the articulation of diagnostic abilities and suggestions on how to deliver change (Kennedy et al. 2018, Swaffield and Bell 2012). Swaffield and Bell (2012) have critically examined the ways in which climate-protecting behaviour is promoted by large organisations. They differentiate between two concepts of environmental citizenship which they term as 'deliberative' and 'neoliberal'. While the former encompasses 'ordinary moral reasoning' in relation to global equity, future generations and the natural world, the latter is rooted within economic self-interest and functions narrowly within the acceptance of sovereign individual choice. Interviewing 'climate champions', who function as 'multipliers'³ to educate colleagues, the researchers found that a 'deliberative' concept of environmental citizenship is employed when multipliers describe their own values and motives, but that they appeal to 'neoliberal' values and motives when encouraging others to take climate action.

A similar dualistic differentiation has been identified by Kennedy et al. (2018) who conducted semi-structured interviews with activists on the front line of the North American local food movement. The scholars found that activists drew attention to broad-scale injustice, inequality and demonstrated awareness of power and structural problems when diagnosing the limitations of conventional food systems, demonstrating a strong sense of 'thick' democratic imagination (see Perrin 2006). However, asked about prescriptions for change, activists applied a 'thin' understanding of democratic imagination (see Perrin 2006):

³ 'Multipliers' (in German: 'MultiplikatorInnen') are individual or collective agents who reproduce knowledge, carry further/spread a sphere of knowledge.

they reproduced individualistic and market-oriented conceptualizations of civic engagement and drew heavily on the consumer side of the citizen-consumer hybrid, making assumptions on individual consumer taste and advocating for a market based and normative education to help consumers make sense of the premium prices: “The rich diagnoses of problems and challenges to justice and sustainability narrow when manifested into specific types of citizen engagement” (Kennedy et al. 2018, 160).

The method of discourse analysis inherently allows reaching beyond the analysis and critique of identified issues and proposed solutions to social and environmental issues and related attributions of agency but aids to reveal hegemonic complexities behind notions of sustainability and attributions of agency carried out by sustainability professionals, multipliers and policies. The empirical accounts provided by the studies outlined above deliver a theoretical expansion to studies on ‘consumer mobilisation’ and thus provide invaluable contributions to social science studies concerned with ‘sustainable consumption and production’. However, these studies neglect the wider contexts in which the rhetorical figure of the consumer operates. Although theoretically and methodologically suggesting a wide field of enquiry, these studies are solely concerned with the area of consumer education and campaigning and are thus limited to the research of strategies and implementations which determine the consumer as a recipient in need of being ‘activated’. Representations of the rhetorical figure of the consumer and associated notions of agency are omnipresent in speech and writings that do not ‘target’ consumers. With consumption constituting a major objective in efforts to face social and environmental challenges, industry- and non-profit affiliates, consultants, politicians, academics and other experts concerned with matters of ‘sustainable consumption and production’ inevitably reproduce spoken and written accounts of consumer and other actors’ agency. These accounts constitute the field of inquiry of the research at hand.

3.4 The theoretical framework of this project

This chapter divided social science debates on consumer agency into two categories. The first encompasses contributions which are committed to interrogating and strengthening the potential to foster social change through responsible ways of consumption. Studies which are determined to investigate consumers’ attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable consumption were assigned to this category. Some of those depart from the presumption of

a political potential within acts of consumption. Others presuppose unpredictability of consumer behaviour that has to be counteracted by innovative forms of provision. The second category considered research critical of the former. It either explicitly critiques a focus on individual behaviour change or studies consumer agency as a rhetorical device rather than an actual field of investigation.

A critical stance on individual behaviour change is also at the basis of the study at hand, which starts from the premise that discursive framings of 'sustainable consumption' and 'consumer agency' precondition and simultaneously reflect strategies and interventions to foster social change. Aiming for a better understanding of circumstances under which policies on food sustainability are formed, expert discourses on sustainable consumption are investigated. Notions of consumer agency/responsibility and sustainable consumption are thus understood as interdependent concepts. As such, they provide the basis for discursive formations which both are determined by, and have an effect upon, social structures (Fairclough 2001). In this way, they represent the conceptual sphere of action which enables and impedes policies.

The second category of approaches has helped develop the underlying theoretical framework of this thesis. Practice theory aids to situate discourses in the wider context of infrastructure and provisioning beyond the retail environment. Concepts of sustainable consumption and production as well as associated concepts of agency are intertwined with practices, institutional capacities and technologies (Feindt and Oels 2005). Discourses are reflected in infrastructure and institutions and vice versa (Dryzek 2013). Studies concerned with consumer responsabilisation have crucially brought awareness to the relevance of the consumer as a discursive figure as opposed to a 'real' agent. Thus, both practice theory and studies concerned with consumer responsabilisation are invaluable in providing in-depth frameworks to locate consumer agency in the wider contexts of provisioning and infrastructure for sustainable consumption and production. Their explanatory power is, however, limited with respect to the 'rhetorical mobilisation' of 'the consumer' as an agent and 'consumer agency' as a concept. Practice theory literature shows little recognition of the difference between the individual as a (rhetorical) *reference point* of intervention as opposed to the individual as a *target* of intervention, while the responsabilisation literature is concerned with the rhetoric of responsabilisation through campaigns, but pays little

attention to how the concept of consumer agency is rhetorically mobilised in written and spoken texts beyond those that are addressed at consumers.

Even when consumption-related issues are conceptualised as ‘systemic issues’ (Evans et al. 2017) or institutional agents assume responsibility, they can still draw upon the consumer as a central point of reference. Supermarkets, for example, were found to “position themselves as custodians who help their customers solve problems [...] and/or leverage their powerful position in the food system to take action on behalf of their customers” (Evans et al. 2018, 644). Argumentations of this kind are fundamentally built on the rhetorical figure of the consumer. Thus, even though policy language might “shift away from the language of *blaming* individuals or specific groups” (Evans et al. 2018, 647) and put an emphasis on collective responsibility, the rhetorical figure of the consumer plays a crucial role in debates. The consumer is not ‘responsibilised’ in this instance but rather drawn upon in the role of a citizen whose voice is being heard and responded to (Schwarzkopf 2011).

‘Consumer action’ also functions as a central point of reference in the context of various suggestions to ‘provide’ improved or limited sets of choices to consumers (as described in more detail in Section 3.2.3). ‘Choice editing’ and similar concepts show that related policies are framed around the individual agent as the key unit of intervention, while the target of interventions is commonly on the structural level of provisioning. They demonstrate how “‘choice’ has proved an elastic concept that has been stretched to its limits in the justification of policies” (Brooks et al. 2013, 163). Even studies of practice theory, which explicitly oppose a focus on individual behaviour change, at times employ a language that puts individual consumers and their choices as a reference point, and for example utilise terms such as ‘sustainability accreditation’, ‘labelling schemes’ and ‘choice editing’ in positive and encouraging ways (e.g. Spurling 2013).

Further, attention needs to be paid to the fact that “market research, surveys and other technologies [make] a collective of ‘consumers’ knowable [...] in order to speak in their name in policy arenas and the public realm” (Barnett et al. 2011, 40). References to market research or other anecdotal evidence on consumer desires can be seen as conventional and institutionalised ways to establish consumer agency. As discussed in Section 3.2.1, policy makers often draw from this evidence. However, survey and experimental methods which study consumers’ willingness to engage in ethical or socially responsible purchasing

behaviour have been found inherently weak in design and sensitivity towards the issues under investigation (Auger and Devinney 2007). Crucially, various efforts to measure and quantify responsible consumption or the supposed desires of responsible consumers do not only reinforce the consumer as an agent, but also carry underlying meanings of 'responsible consumption and production', which are incorporated and reinforced by policies. Discussions that are critical of the centrality of individual consumer agency (as discussed in Section 3.2.3) should thus not limit the concept of 'agency' to responsible behaviour at the point of purchase. Further, there needs to be an acknowledgement of 'consumer agency' being embedded in normative notions of 'responsible' systems of production and consumption (as done by scholarly work that is presented in Section 3.3). Both, the rhetorical mobilisation of 'the consumer' as well as the attached normative meanings need to be investigated in order to identify the dynamics of agency in relation to sustainable consumption.

For the most part, this study thus draws from discourse studies (e.g. Fairclough 1992 and 2013, Jäger 2001 and 2009). As demonstrated by the empirical accounts above (3.3.3), the study of discourses of sustainable consumption aims to establish and critique the extent to which consumers and other actors are attributed agency and responsibility. In this way, discourse analysis significantly differs from methods that critique the individual behaviour change paradigm (3.3.1) and/or the responsabilised figure of the consumer (3.3.2). Discourse analysis focuses on *how* this subjectivity and agency is attributed to the consumer and studies these attributions in the context of contested framings of sustainability. It is concerned with how consumer agency is intertwined with other actors' agency and with broader underlying assumptions about social conditions and social change. Simultaneously investigating on discursive representations of social and environmental issues and agency, discourse studies have shown that the language applied by institutional agents is also constitutive, rather than only representative of social and environmental issues and associated agency (see e.g. Dryzek 2013). Applying a discursive perspective thus allows us to understand social and environmental issues, proposed solutions to these issues and the associated types of agency as being subject to continuous (re-)production (Feindt and Oels 2005).

Offering a reflexive understanding of business strategies and interventions for more sustainable food systems, discourse analysis allows us to study the effects produced by and incorporated in concepts of sustainable consumption and production. In this way, I understand the discursive frames of agency for sustainable consumption as the 'rhetorical infrastructure' provided to combat social and environmental issues. In line with discourse studies, I consider the knowledge base of sustainability policy as fragile and contestable and understand that "[t]he articulation of an environmental problem shapes if and how the problem is dealt with" (Feindt and Oels 2005, 162).

Chapter 4 – A discursive approach to agency for sustainable consumption and production

4.1 Research questions

This chapter discusses the methodological approach employed in this research. It begins with a brief outline of the four questions which guided this research project. Section 4.2 outlines a methodological understanding of discourse analysis. Section 4.3 explains and justifies the methodological decisions taken with respect to data collection and the parameters that informed data analysis. The final section 4.5 reflects on the limitations of this research.

This research recognises ‘sustainable consumption and production’ as a contested field in which notions of the consumer (whether framed as ‘sustainable’ or ‘unsustainable’, ‘knowledgeable’ or ‘ignorant’) are rhetorically mobilised and contested. Based on this understanding, this project was motivated by two overall aims. Firstly, there was an intention to explore how sustainability is framed in food industry-related ‘expert’ discourses, and more specifically: how multiple framings of sustainability are related; how such framings become associated with different forms of food consumption; and how they contribute to understandings of desirable action towards a more sustainable food system. The second intention concerned representations of the figure of ‘the consumer’ in these expert discourses, associated ideas of how to mobilise ‘the consumer’ and how these are embedded in understandings of processes of social change. These intentions are expressed through four core research questions:

- What ideals of sustainability can be found in food industry-related discourses (and what are their consistencies, compatibilities and contradictions)?
- What role do accounts of the discursive figure of ‘the consumer’ play in discourses on sustainable food consumption and what attitudes and behaviours are ascribed to the consumer?
- Which ideas exist on strategies to push sustainable consumption forward and which notions of ‘choice’ can be found in the context of those strategies?

- How are forms of knowledge used to legitimise argumentations on consumers and sustainable consumption?

These questions guided the interrogation of the ways in which non-profit organisations (NGOs), corporations, policy makers, campaigners, lobbyists and third sector organisations represent ideas of social change for sustainability in food. Following a discourse analytical approach, in this thesis I examine how both discursive representations of ‘sustainability’ as well as of ‘the consumer’ are mobilised in food-industry-based sustainability discourses.

4.2 Preliminary remarks and positioning in the field

Barnett et al (2011) have emphasised the importance of understanding ‘consumption’ as a moment in the networks of production, distribution and marketing of products and services. Following this, consumption is understood as an activity not only of consumers, but of multiple individual and collective agents. The attention is shifted

“away from individual efforts to adjust consumption behaviour, drawing into view a broader, more complex pattern of activities that generate issues which often become visible and politicized as consumption problems” (Barnett et al. 2011, 70).

Drawing from critical discourse analysis (CDA), this research problematises the figure of the consumer from a similar approach. It suggests that consumer attitudes and behaviours always operate within the context of more complex patterns of collective, institutional agency. Thus, the ideas and ideals of consumer agency as such and their representation in ‘expert discourses’ are examined. It is further of interest how various ideas and ideals on sustainability are developed and maintained over time and how ideas between competing approaches are mixed and negotiated within discourses.

With critical discourse analysis (CDA) ‘the consumer’ is conceptualised as a non-fixed idea. Fairclough (2003) has critically remarked that “if we are thinking specifically of economic practices in contemporary societies, people’s activities are constantly being interpreted and represented by others, including various categories of experts (e.g. management consultants) and academic social scientists” (Fairclough 2003, 208). CDA thus “recognises that consumer identities are constructed as being subject to disciplinary norms” (Fitchett and Caruana 2015, 8). It allows exploring written and spoken texts in terms of “how subjectivity and associated relationships become organised” (Fitchett and Caruana 2015, 5) as well as investigating “the dynamics of emerging market subjectivity such as ‘ethical

consumers' or 'consumer citizens' [...], while observing how these configure new relationships between consumer, product, society and the environment more broadly" (Fitchett and Caruana 2015, 7). Accordingly, critical discourse analysis "is less concerned with questions about whether consumers really are active or passive and more with the reasons why and how these particular representations of the consumer have become popular and resonant, rather than others" (Fitchett and Caruana 2015, 10).

Utilising the method of discourse analysis for this project thus allows looking beyond the thinking "of the consumer as the natural agent of consumption" (Barnett et al. 2011, 68) and "helps avoid a simplistic dichotomy between consumer dupes versus consumer heroes" (Johnston 2008, 234). It allows us to understand the consumer as a product of the creation and utilisation of various actors who are operating in the discursive field of sustainable production (Fitchett and Caruana 2015, Wodak 2001b). In this way, CDA works "to theorize the ideological tension that inevitably underlies [the food sustainability] discourse" (Johnston 2008, 234).

The methodological framework of this project shares Barnett et al.'s (2011, 83-84) claim that a "great deal of consumption has little to do with consumer choice but is, rather, determined by the organization of collective infrastructures of provisioning." However, while infrastructure in this context is primarily associated with the provision of tangible facilities (such as agricultural land, transport systems, buildings, health and educational institutions), the proposed research indicates the discursive framing that limits or liberates the rhetorical space to discuss issues as an important part of the infrastructure to enable sustainable development. Exploring discourses contributes to new insights on social structures just as well as allowing the exploration of practices or network interactions. Therefore, within this research, the given infrastructure is conceptualised as the discursive space of sustainable values and behaviour. Applying discourse analysis, this discursive space as well as the assumptions and norms that shape the discourse can be made explicit, unpacked and consequently contested (Fitchett and Caruana 2015, 9).

Discourses and practices are inevitably related. Scholars of practice theory have emphasised the interdependency between materials, competences and meanings in practices (Shove et al. 2012). Not only physical objects and infrastructure shape practices, but also knowledge, cultural conventions and socially shared meanings (Spurling et al. 2013), as represented and

reinforced in discourses. From the perspective of CDA, all these elements are not fully separable and are instead dialectically related (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002). Being aware of the interrelation of discourses and social practices, CDA acknowledges that:

“[d]iscourses include imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be. [...] These imaginaries may be enacted as actual (networks of) practices – imagined activities, subjects, social relations, etc. can become real activities, subjects, social relations, etc. Such enactments include materialisations of discourses, in the ‘hardware’ (plant, machinery, etc.) and the ‘software’ (management, systems, etc.).” (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002, 195)

Discourses as textual or spoken material are closely entangled with materialised and institutionalised formations and practices. Jäger (2001) makes the societal and more materialised aspects of discourses explicit, arguing that discourses form the elements of discursive practices (knowledge-transfer: speaking, thinking), non-discursive practices (actions), as well as manifestations/materialisations of practices. In this context, he adopts Foucault’s term “dispositive”, defining it as “[...] the constantly evolving context of items of knowledge which are contained in speaking/thinking – acting – materialization” (Jäger 2001, 56). Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) similarly argue that discourses figure in three ways in relation to social practices. Discourses are, most obviously, (a) conversation or other forms of semiosis, and are, therefore, part of social activities as such. Discourses further figure in (b) representations, when social actors re-produce or re-contextualise elements of their own or others’ practices. Social actors incorporate representations of practices and shape and construct them differently, depending on how they are situated within a practice. Discourses also crucially contribute to the (c) construction of identities of individuals or styles of groups, as identities are, to some extent, always determined by semiotically constituted performances. Scholars of discourse analysis thus recognise semiosis as a vital element of social practices and further that discourses can only be understood in the context of culture, society and ideology: “From its basic understanding of the notion of discourse it may be concluded that CDA is open to the broadest range of factors that exert an influence on texts” (Meyer 2001, 15).

CDA crucially recognises societal materialisations, as well as the knowledge that informs these materialisations, as the outcome of certain relations of dominance and power:

“In texts discursive differences are negotiated; they are governed by differences in power which are themselves in part encoded and determined by discourse and by

genre. Texts are sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance.” (Wodak 2001a, 11)

Therefore, research on social change “cannot take the role of discourse in social practices for granted” (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002, 186). In this respect, CDA seeks to investigate the underlying structures that stabilise and naturalise conventions and which are so dominant that they are taken as a given (Wodak 2001b). The method of discourse analysis is thus not only concerned with the study of seemingly ‘naturally occurring’ social conditions (Wodak and Meyer 2009), but also with questions of how language reinforces and legitimises certain social conditions and institutional structures (Fairclough 1995, Fairclough and Wodak 1997). As Jäger puts it, CDA scholars are “not dealing with the establishment of ‘truths’ but with allocations that have a certain validity” (Jäger 2001, 60), pursuing the identification, exploration and critical study of the knowledge valid at a certain place and at a certain time (Jäger 2001).

Thus, “[t]aking a discursive perspective allows one to understand how ‘nature’ and ‘the environment’ are continuously ‘produced’ through environmental policy making, planning, research and development as well as through everyday practices” (Feindt and Oels 2005, 163). Researching ‘sustainable consumption and production’ through the lens of discourse analysis allows insights into how ‘taken as a given’ knowledge (e.g. self-evident assumptions such as that sustainability can be found in products, that labels and certifications are distinguishing features to identify sustainable products, that waste is a bad thing), conventions (e.g. that sustainable behaviour is located in the supermarket) and materialisations (e.g. retailers who ‘edit-out’ uncertified products, recycled packaging) are intertwined within contested ideas and ideologies. ‘The consumer’ is thereby studied as a ‘rhetorical figure’ prevalent in the knowledge formations that organise institutional practices and societal conditions on a large scale.

The research method applied in this project is first and foremost based on methodological conceptualisations suggested by Jäger (2001, 2009). Jäger’s method provides a framework that is particularly useful to the research aims and questions relevant to this project, although developed on the basis of empirical studies on a different field.⁴ Given that Jäger is mainly concerned with the analysis of media texts, for the analysis of the first set of

⁴ Jäger’s research is mainly concerned with the discourses on phenomena such as xenophobia and racism.

empirical data, which are media articles, this method is used. Due to the variety of analysed material (media articles, expert interviews and policy documents), this study was also supplemented with methodological suggestions provided by other CDA scholars, as noted in the following sections. This study does not seek depth when it comes to linguistics found in core empirical contributions to CDA, but rather focuses on the societal and political context of the data.

This work contributes to the field of sociology of consumption. More specifically, this project adds to the existing critical research strand on consumer agency (see Chapter Three). Methods of discourse analysis have been underappreciated in previous research projects on sustainable consumption. Utilising these methods allows not only to refrain from any presupposed notions of agency, but to essentially investigate the ways in which notions of consumer agency (and other actors' agency) reinforced in written and spoken texts.

4.3 Data collection

This study investigates discourses on sustainable food consumption and the roles that are therein ascribed to consumers and other agents. Statements of individual and collective professionals associated with the food industry or other experts such as NGO representatives, policy makers, academics, campaigners, and lobbyists provide an essential source for this endeavour. Thus, in order to acquire appropriate data to address the outlined empirical research questions, access to linguistic material in which several organisations and institutions 'have their say' was required.

Pursuing the research questions in the most comprehensive way possible, a combination of data collection methods was implemented to address the research questions. While the collection of some basic quantitative details (e.g. the number of articles published per year or the representation of certain key words) played a considerable role at the very early stage of this research, it is primarily and foremost qualitative data that is the basis of this research. I thus draw from a variety of data to gain insights to the field of study: journalistic media articles from a food industry-based magazine, interviews with key representatives of retailers, NGOs and consultancies, as well as policy documents. In addition, key stakeholder events were visited throughout all phases of the project and informed the research implicitly (Section 4.3.4).

While the process of data collection was to a certain extent influenced by various ways of unsystematic explorations on the field (participant observation at stakeholder events, the study of newsletters and websites etc.), the research is substantively based on three systematically collected and analysed empirical data sets. The research was conducted chronologically in the sense that I started with the collection and analysis of journalistic material, followed by expert interviews (inter alia conducted on the base of an interview guide that was informed by results of the analysis of the journalist material) and finished with a set of data obtained from policy documents (of which the sampling was greatly based on information gathered through the interviews with key professionals).

CDA “does not constitute a well-defined empirical method but rather a cluster of approaches with a similar theoretical base and similar research questions” (Meyer 2001, 23). I therefore did not consider the process of data collection as a strictly isolated activity. Rather than understanding data collection as a process that has to be finished before the beginning of the analysis, it is considered to be an on-going process. Inductive elements further played a role, allowing coding to both follow upon and lead to generative questions (Strauss 1987, 55). Thus, the data collection and analysis conducted for this research is divided into different phases, which partly overlap and/or inform one another.

The overall empirical target of this project was to examine the language that various stakeholders to the food sector employ in relation to ‘sustainability’ and ‘the consumer’. It should give insights into the concepts of sustainability as well as the roles and potential responsabilisation of the consumer⁵ in the discourse on sustainable food in the UK. Therefore, the analysis of the first set of data was conducted with the intention to get the broadest possible overview on the language used by representatives of a variety of institutions and organisations such as NGOs, corporations, policy makers, campaigners, lobbyists and third sector organisations. CDA scholars, in particular those affiliated with the discourse-historical approach, consider discourses to be diachronic and support the analysis of discourses over a period of time. The explorations of discursive developments over previous periods of time can reveal changes and disruptions that inform insights into current socio-political conditions (see Jäger 2009, Wodak 2001b). In order to keep the lens wide and

⁵ Literature on responsabilisation of the consumer is discussed in section 3.3.2

to get a general first idea on the variety of public discourses that have been going on, the investigation of journalistic material was chosen.

Media articles, which constitute the first data set analysed in the course of this project, constitute a specific genre proven to provide valuable data for the purpose of discourse analysis. However, given the nature of media articles, comments on issues related to food sustainability and consumption were rather short and set in a certain context. Further, the wide coverage of public and industry-related discussions of this platform, the contents as well as the language is tailored towards a certain readership.

A more in-depth examination of stakeholders' framings of issues on food sustainability and consumption promised to deliver a vital contribution. Most organisations provide information on their websites, and public speeches and newspaper interviews with spokespeople of most NGOs and retailers operating in the food sector are accessible. A systematic analysis of freely available and accessible material however seemed not feasible given irregular availability of material in terms of quantity and quality. Moreover, questions which arose from the analysis of the articles were of a specific nature (e.g. in relation to changing extents of presence of certain themes over time). Looking for answers to these questions through the analysis of the masses of information seemed neither a reasonable, nor feasible endeavour in the context of this research project. All these reasons led to the decision that semi-structured interviews with stakeholders would make a substantial and effective contribution to this research.

Aside from gathering data which would be analysed with methods of discourse analysis, these interviews served another purpose: the sampling of the policy documents, which would be analysed as a third set of data. Consequently, the explicit question was asked concerning what the interviewees thought to be the most important, good, useful or influential policy reports was an essential part of the interviews. In this way, the interviewees functioned as 'key informants', who directed me towards key policy documents related to sustainable consumption and production of food.

4.3.1 Media articles

Context and research field

As emphasised earlier, the objective of this research was not to explore the ways in which the consumer is addressed (how media speaks *to* the consumer), but rather to gain insight into the discourse *on* the consumer as agent of sustainability. Consequently, all possible magazines that are partly or fully directed to the consumer (such as the Ethical Consumer) were ineligible material for this research matter. As a consequence of the method of elimination, but also because the research focus is on the food sector, the choice was made for *The Grocer*, the British market leading magazine devoted to the food industry. On their website, the Grocer is described as “the UK’s only paid-for online service and weekly magazine with coverage of the whole FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods) sector. Customers range from directors of the large multiples to independent retailers, wholesalers and suppliers, as well as growers, food processors, manufacturers, key opinion formers and the national media” (The Grocer 2016). *The Grocer* was considered a valid source for the purpose of this research, since the magazine not only covers the issues that the food sector in the UK is concerned with, but also various food industry based issues that are addressed under the label ‘sustainability’. *The Grocer* is the market leading magazine in the sector and published weekly. It targets a wide audience across various organisations and institutions related to the the food sector, as well as giving a voice to these target groups. It therefore provides the most suitable field of investigation for the purpose of this research.

The sampling, preparation and familiarisation with this set of data took more time and was more complex than the work on the two other data sets. The reasons for this fundamentally lies in the nature of it being the first set of data analysed within that research. It was the first route to immerse into the reality of debates on food sustainability and consumption-related issues in the UK. Further, given that it is journalistic material, it is very diverse: the variety of contents, the themes drawn upon, the variety of language used, as well as the various stakeholders that are given a voice, had to be taken into consideration in the course of the analysis. In that sense, this set of data was much more diverse than interviews with key informations or policy documents, which are usually clearly affiliated with one or a few organisations or institutions.

Data gathering

In order to gather the data required for this research, a keyword search was conducted with the online database Factiva. Using the Factiva search builder, The Grocer was set as source and 01.01.2005 – 31.12.2015 was put down as date range. After a few runs of research with different combinations of key words and a first examination of the found articles, the following text was finally put down in the search field: (*unsustainab* or sustainab* or ethic* or unethic**) AND *consumer** AND (*report* or survey* or research* or poll* or figure* or data*).

Given the fact that a major part of the research is targeting the construction and mobilisation of the figure of the consumer, the keyword *consumer** was an obvious choice, and so were the words *unsustainab** and *sustainab**. However, after a first review of the articles found, it turned out that many articles on consumption, production and distribution of goods are using the terms ‘sustainable’ and ‘ethical’ interchangeably - a condition that is also reflected in other documents, such as academic publications and marketing material (see Section 3.2.2). Based on this insight, it was found that only searching for articles containing the keywords *unsustainab** and *sustainab**, would miss out on a not negligible number of articles (~500 out of 1883 as in the present case). Thus, the search was supplemented with the words *ethic** and *unethic**.⁶

The line *report* or survey* or research* or poll* or figure* or data** was added to make sure that only articles referring to some kind of evidence be included in the sample. Adding this selection criteria, it could be ensured that the sample would include material that could contribute findings on my fourth research question: *How are forms of knowledge used to legitimise argumentations in relation to arguments on consumers and sustainable*

⁶ One could make an objection on that selection, in that other terms such as ‘green consumption’ or ‘political consumption’ are also used as synonyms to ‘sustainable consumption’. In response to that, it has to be said that it was not the aim of this research to find every single article which mentions issues around sustainability; in any case, this would be an impossible endeavour. Even if various possible synonyms of ‘sustainability’ were added in the search field, the search would still miss out on a great number of articles that concern issues of sustainable development, without mentioning the term ‘sustainability’ or any of its synonyms. In fact, it is the aim of this research to analyse the framing(s) of responsibility in the context of the discourse on sustainability. Responsibilisation is strongly related to morals and ethics, which are objects to this study. Therefore it is not only the exchangeability of the terms, but also the direct connection between ethics and the questions and aims of this research that influenced the decision to look for *ethic** as well as *unsustainab** and *sustainab**.

consumption? Prior to this decision, I found that research including this line would decrease the size of the sample significantly (from N=1903 to N=1101), however, it would still provide a sample of an adequate size and would, more importantly, accommodate the research objectives in a more exact way.

To verify the decision made for the selection of the time period (and thus not go further back than to the year 2005), a search with the exact same keywords was conducted, with the start date changed to 01.01.1995. This quick check allowed confirming that the number of articles containing the given keywords was insignificantly low in the 1990s and early 2000s. A closer look at articles found showed that they often referred to issues that had nothing to do with the definition of sustainability or sustainable/ethical consumption underlying this research. In fact, this was, to a lesser degree, still the case for articles published in 2005.

Sampling

The keyword search on the Factiva database outlined above led to an output of N=896 articles found in the period between 1.1.2005 and 31.12.2015. The document distribution by year peaked of the number of published articles in the year 2007, which is shown in Table 1.⁷ Before the final sample was taken, I familiarised myself with the whole data in order to avoid overlooking salient time periods or themes and conducted a brief preliminary exploration the overall themes in relation to their potential to contribute to my research objective. I therefore conducted a pre-analysis in two steps. First, I drew small samples from all years in order to gain a broad overview of the data and emerging themes. Then I researched the data for particular themes identified (data analysis is discussed in Section 4.4).

Based on the findings of this two-part preparatory analysis, as well as the given quantitative information on the distribution of articles over the whole-time span, the sample for the analysis was drawn. While quantitative aspects play a less important role to discourse analysis, information on the frequency in which particular arguments come up, as well as on

⁷ A careful run-through through the articles revealed that the database search came up with duplicates for some articles in the years 2005-2009. The problem was reported to the database operator Dow Jones customer service but could not be solved. Therefore, manual counting had to be conducted for the affected time period. The new quantitative results showed that for the 2005 sample the number decreased from N=43 to N=42; in the 2006 sample from N=108 to N=87, in the 2007 sample from N=187 to N=122, in the 2008 sample from N=220 to N=106 and in the 2009 sample from N=92 to N=88. The overall number from the samples of all years decreased from N=1101 to N=896.

issues that were discussed at a certain time in a certain way, can contribute important information on the data (see Jäger 2001).

Out of the given time span of 11 years, samples from the following four years were drawn: 2005, 2007, 2010 and 2015. The earliest (2005) and the most recent years (2015) of the overall time span were selected. 2007 was selected on the basis this was a particularly striking year, not only was it the one where most articles on the chosen keywords were published (see Table 1), it was also the year before the recession of 2008 (and results of the preliminary analysis indicated that this was a crucial phase in the development of the discourse). Thus, the narrative had clearly moved on since 2005 and the effects of the recession from 2008 had not yet set in.

Year	Total number of articles found	Number of articles sampled
2005	42	17
2006	87	
2007	122	49
2008	106	
2009	88	
2010	91	37
2011	83	
2012	72	
2013	65	
2014	63	
2015	77	31
Total	896	134

Table 1: Total and sampled numbers of articles per year

The recession itself can certainly be considered as a crucial discursive event according to Jäger's definition (Jäger 2001, 2009),⁸ constituting a moment in time that caused a severe shift in the narratives on sustainable food consumption. The fourth sample was therefore drawn from the articles published in the year 2010. This appeared to be a sensible choice, since the effects of the recession still showed to be relevant, but still at an adequate distance from the sample from 2015, which greatly represents a different discursive line of argumentation that had been particularly on the rise from the year 2011 onwards.

The sample that was ultimately drawn comprises 15 percent (N=134) of the aggregate articles found through the keyword search. As shown in Table 1, the proportionate number of articles per year is distributed as follows: Sample of the year 2005: 17 articles, sample of the year 2007: 49 articles, sample of the year 2010: 37 articles, sample of the year 2015: 31 articles.⁹ All articles were chosen randomly and inserted to NVivo. The thorough analysis of these data, combined with the preparatory analysis conducted ahead of the actual analysis allowed the assessment that deeper investigations on a bigger sample of the same data set would not have resulted in many additional findings. This was also proven as towards the end of the analysis of the sample newly found isolated cases of alternative discourses did not lead to new results (Jäger 2009).

4.3.2 Expert interviews

Preparation and sampling

The interview guide for the semi-structured interviews with key representatives of UK based retailers, non-profit organisations and consultancies was developed on the basis of a number of sources and influences. First of all, the questions of the research guide stand in close relation to the research questions and are largely informed by literature research and the analysis of *The Grocer* articles that had been conducted prior to the interview-phase. Further, a field-tested and proven as fruitful interview guide for expert interviews, used by colleagues for a past project with a different research focus served as a source for the development of the interview guide. As I initially intended to conduct the policy document analysis straight after the analysis of the journalistic material, I spent some time on internet searches for policy documents and CSR reports, skimmed them and took notes. This exercise

⁸ Jäger defines discursive events as events that are given prominence in media which as such influence the discursive lines in varying degrees (Jäger 2009, 162).

⁹ Bibliographic information of all sampled articles is listed in Appendix I.

helped me to familiarize myself with potential strategies and approaches my interview partners would likely mention as well as informing questions related to policies.

In the context of this research, 'experts' are people in executive or leadership positions in relevant areas (food, sustainability) in various organisations in the UK. Potential interview partners were contacted per email, directly or through their personal assistants. Once I started with the collection of data, snowball sampling proved to be an expedient method for the recruitment of interviewees as well. A first set of interviews was conducted in July 2016, another set in November and December 2016, partly face-to-face, partly over the phone.¹⁰

In order to find interview partners, I contacted food- and/or sustainability professionals of UK-based institutions, belonging to each of the following four groups: (1) Regulatory/government-related bodies (e.g. Food Standards Agency, Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs) – two people showed initial interest, but were not responsive in the further course and the interviews did not take place. (2) Major food retailers – three interviews with representatives who occupy key positions in two corporations were conducted. (3) Non-governmental organisations – four interviews with senior professionals of four different organisations were conducted. (4) Consultancies – two interviews with key professionals were conducted.¹¹ In total, nine interviews with experts were conducted. In Table 2 below, the interviewees are listed with pseudonyms and briefly introduced.

Before the emails were sent out, research on every person's professional background was conducted. In relation to individuals working in the corporate sector, LinkedIn, the social networking site for business professionals, was found to be a good source. Research participants associated to NGOs or other organisations were researched on their institution's websites, which usually provide short biographies. In additions, interviews or presentations (in written form or as videos) and well as blog posts, media texts etc. of or on the

¹⁰ I did not conduct a designated pilot interview, however, I initially interviewed two academics associated with different universities with are significant expertise in policy making processes. The core aim of these conversations was to receive guidance in sampling of relevant policy documents, which constitutes the third set of data that was analysed in this project (see Section 4.3.3 for more detail), however, the questions of the interview guide were addressed in these conversations in order to get a 'feel' for potential issues to arise.

¹¹ It has to be noted that when the settings of face-to-face and phone-interviews clearly vary, there was no noticeable difference to the quality or depth to which issues were addressed. Transcribing the data, I noticed that those who were interviewed over the phone tended to respond to questions with a longer answer, without interposed questions, however, in terms of the style, no difference was identified.

participants provided useful resources for the selection of potential candidates, but also for the preparation of the interviews, as it sometimes helped to ask more specific questions. All interviews were transcribed and coded with the qualitative research software NVivo.

Name	Association	Position	Type	Length
David	Non-profit organisation	Senior business director in an industry organisation with a focus on sustainable food	Phone	57 min.
James	Non-profit organisation	Senior professional, specialised on food	Face-to-face	72 min.
John	Non-profit organisation	Executive director in an NGO with a focus on food	Face-to-face	55 min.
Joseph	Food Retailer	Senior PR executive	Face-to-face	49 min.
Mary	Food Retailer	Sustainability manager	Face-to-face	60 min.
Michael	Consultancy	Senior sustainability professional with a focus on food	Phone	52min.
Robert	Non-profit organisation	Senior manager in an organisation with a focus on waste	Phone	78 min.
Richard	Food Retailer	Sustainability professional with a focus on waste	Phone	26 min.
William	Consultancy	Managing director in an organisation with a focus on food	Phone	69 min.

Table 2: Interviewees

Interview process and relevance

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured¹² manner, using an interview guide¹² that encompasses five sets of questions and sub questions, which are divided into the topics of *sustainability and contentions, sustainability and strategies, sustainability and the consumer, sustainability and interrelation with other issues/trends and future of sustainable food consumption*. Taken as a whole, all interviews inquired on the particular organisation’s background in relation to food sustainability, policies on food sustainability in an UK context

¹² For interview guide, see Appendix II.

(with an explicit question on relevant policy papers which was asked in each interview, sometimes in the course of the interview, but mostly at the very end) as well as questions on food sustainability as a field of policy and business intervention as well as on the specific role of consumption.

Each interview began with questions to determine the interviewees' and/or their organisations' origin and background in order to specify their relation to food sustainability. The conversation was typically led over to a discussion on the debates on sustainable food in general, with the intention to get an insight into the participants' impressions of strategies on sustainable food as well on how they assess those strategies and the development of those strategies. However, the interview guide was used in a very flexible way, so that some conversations went straight into the discussion of the roles and responsibilities of consumers or more specific issues that were raised by the interviewees at early points of the interview.

The topics of food sustainability in relation to other issues/trends, as well as the future of food consumption, were less frequently impelled and less prevalent. Usually, the guiding questions to these topics were picked up upon if a tendency of the interview partner to address those topics or issues was noticed. Questions on the future of sustainable food also served as a method to gain more insights into the experts' analysis of recent policies or consumer strategies, if those weren't pointed out in a satisfactory way at earlier stages of the interview.

The expert interviews were conducted with the two central intentions to provide (a) insights into the investigation on the research questions (in this way, they functioned as a secondary method to gain further information and clarification) and to (b) point me into the 'right' direction for the selection of policy documents (see Section 4.3.3). Thus, the data gained through interviewing enabled me to put the analysis of the data set taken from *The Grocer* into a wider perspective. The set of usually rather brief comments, opinions and interpretations of opinions was thus complemented with detailed experts' comments on specific topics. It is important to note that the objective was to capture the interviewee's use of language in relation to issues around food sustainability and consumption as well as their references to other discourses. In the research process, the interviewees were thus not regarded as 'informants' but rather as 'carriers' of discourses.

Discourse analysis considers texts as “sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance” (Wodak and Meyer 2001, 10) and does not approach the individual as a primary or consistent unit of analysis (Talja 1999). This also applies to interview data. Meanings, values and ethical principles as represented in interviews are not regarded as a creation of individuals. Rather, they are understood to represent the whole history of institutional practices and social reality that take different shape at different times and lead to effects that were not intended or anticipated by anyone (Abell and Myers 2008, Talja 1999):

“Interviews carried out for the purposes of discourse analysis are unusual in that they are not, generally speaking, aimed at gaining information about informants’ experiences or opinions, nor are they usually designed to document their attitudes, but rather to obtain a sample of the discursive practices that they employ, with a view to studying the nature of these and how they function” (Hammersley 2014, 4).

This study approached the interviewees’ argumentation as expressions of the collective field of expertise on sustainable food consumption, rather than as individual expressions or collective expressions of their constituencies. The variation in the interviewees’ association (retail, non-profit, consulting) constituted a crucial requirement for the sampling. Interviewees expressed their opinions, arguments and evaluations on the base of their own background and as representatives of the institution that they are associated with and thus operate in various discourses. However, in the analysis, the association of speakers with different constituencies was no relevant criterion. What I was interested in was the ‘discursive common ground’ shared between all of them as experts in the field of sustainable food consumption.

Ethics

The collection, as well as the use of interview data required approval by the University Research Ethics Committee. The approval was unproblematic since the participating interviewees acted in their roles as spokespeople for their organisation. Thus, neither their positions, nor the research topic as such, embodied particularly problematic issues.

All participants were informed about the contents of the research by a short introductory e-mail. They were further presented with a summary of the project as part of the participation information sheet. Some informants wanted more in-depth information ahead of arranging a meeting or demanded a short conversation on the project prior to the interview. Some

potential interview partners never responded to the first inquiry, however, none declined the interview once being presented with the participation information sheet and consent form.

After the first contact, all participants were provided with a participant information sheet, which had a consent form attached. Those who were face-to-face interviewed were presented with a printed version of the document and signed the consent form before ahead of the interview. Those who were interviewed over the phone printed, signed and scanned the forms and returned the documents per e-mail or confirmed their consent per email. Ahead of both, face-to-face as well as telephone interviews, participants were explicitly informed that their voice will be recorded.

Anonymity was guaranteed to all informants. Their names, as well as the names of the organisations that they are affiliated with, are anonymised for the research report. Anonymisation is not only provided for an atmosphere to speak more freely, it also goes in line with the concept of discourse analysis that is underlying this research, in the sense that this method is primarily concerned with what is said in which way as well as what kind of information is drawn upon and considered as relevant and important. Who exactly the producer of the analysed text is, is secondary and only relevant in terms of power and situatedness. Thus, the brief information provided in Table 2, is crucial but in its shortness highly satisfactory. Relating the research project to this position, it is acknowledged that the individuals interviewed for this research hold positions in organisations that can be considered as key to the discourse, to discursive practices, as well as to social practices of sustainable food consumption. The relevance of their statements, however, is gained through their evaluation as a collective and even more so as they are put in relation to the media articles, policy documents and other data that informed this research. The fact that they cannot be identified as individuals or speakers for certain organisations or institutions was therefore negligible in the framework of this research project.

4.3.3 Policy documents

CDA holds the position that “it is very rare for a text to be the work of any one person” (Wodak 2001a, 11). In fact, it is a cause of discourse analysis to bridge the gap between micro and macro level, suggesting that both levels are forming one unified whole in daily interaction. Discourse analysis understands language users as members of groups,

organisations and institutions. Groups, vice versa, contribute to how their members or proponents talk (Van Dijk 2001, 354). Authors of articles in the industry-based magazine *The Grocer*, individuals and groups cited by these authors, as well as the professionals that I interviewed directly for this study are immersed in a discourse much of which is shared with reports and policy documents. The examination of key policy papers was thus regarded valuable in order to round up and further inform the analysis.

As mentioned earlier, the contact with representatives of various institutions was also helpful in the sense that the interviewed experts would point me into the 'right' direction for the selection of policy documents to be subjected to analysis. The suggestions provided by nine interviewees and two further academic experts on food policy vitally contributed to the sampling for the third phase of data analysis. At the end of each interview, I asked my interviewees to name policy documents that they find important, central or influential to the development of the food sustainability agenda. While I had the chance to inform some of them about my intention ahead of the interview, others were confronted ad hoc, of which some responded to my request by getting back to me per email on the same or next day of the interview. Many of the experts interviewed for this study held a senior position related to food sustainability and most of them looked back on a long career in the context of environmental and/or food related issues. Therefore, the group of experts who participated in this research can be considered reliable sources to give information on potential key policies of past years. The tendency of experts to refer to documents that they are involved with or that are close to their professional field, was counteracted by making sure that a source or document had to be suggested by a minimum of two informants in order to be selected for analysis.

The policy documents sampled on the base of their responses (as outlined in Table 3)¹³ provided the final set of data systematically analysed in the course of this research. As such, this met the aspiration to "integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded" (Wodak 2001b, 65). It has to be emphasised that, although not

¹³ A reference list is provided in Appendix III and the reports cited in this thesis can also be found in the bibliography (by abbreviation).

represented in a separate chapter of this thesis, this served as a complete set of data and constitutes as such as a fully integrated part of the empirical research within this project.

Association	Publisher	Abbreviation	Year	Document Title
Non-profit Organisation	The Carbon Trust	The Carbon Trust	2016	The Eatwell Guide: A More Sustainable Diet
Government	Cabinet Office	CO	2008	Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century
Government	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	DEFRA	2010	Food 2030
Government	Public Health England	Public Health England	2016	From Plate to Guide: What, why and how for the eatwell model
Government	Public Health England	Public Health England	2018	The Eatwell Guide. Helping you eat a healthy, balanced diet
Government	Sustainable Development Commission	SDC	2006	I will if you will
Non-profit Organisation	Food Ethics Council	FEC	2013	Beyond Business as Usual: Towards a Sustainable Food System
Non-profit Organisation	Forum for the Future	FftF	2007	Retail Futures 2022: Scenarios for the Future of UK Retail and Sustainable Development
Non-profit Organisation	Food Ethics Council & WWF-UK	MacMillan, T. and Durrant, R.	2009	Livestock consumption and climate change: a framework for dialogue
Non-profit Organisation	WRAP ¹⁴	WRAP	2006	Grocery Futures. The Future of UK Grocery Retail
Non-profit Organisation	WRAP	WRAP	2009	Household Food and Drink Waste in the UK
Non-profit Organisation	WRAP	WRAP	2015	Food Futures: from business as usual to business unusual
Non-profit Organisation	WWF	WWF	2009	One Planet Food Strategy 2009-2012
Retailer	Marks and Spencer	M&S	2007	How We Do Business: 2007 Report
Retailer	Marks and Spencer	M&S	2017	Plan A 2025. Plan A 2025 Commitments

Table 3: Policy documents

As explained, the selection of the policy documents was heavily based on the information gathered through the interviews with experts. However, by the time I conducted the interviews I was familiar enough with the field that I already knew of most the policy documents that were suggested. This was due to readings of academic papers, the continuous examination of relevant websites but also due to the analysis of *The Grocer* articles which was accompanied by a research on references made in the articles. In addition, talking to

¹⁴ Waste & Resources Action Programme

people who have been working in the field as well as participant observations at stakeholder events was further helpful for a familiarisation with the field. It helps to put various aspects into relation, to see things in their broader context, but also to narrow down some of the core influences, which most importantly informed the pre-mapping of policy documents ahead of the expert interviews. Having a good overview of the various institutions involved, of documents published and cited as well as associated debates associated, certainly informed my ability to deal with the information received in a qualified way in relation to the final sampling of the data but also regarding the overall analysis as such.

4.3.4 Participant observation

Fieldwork and ethnography are fundamental to CDA, these methods allow exploring the object under investigation from the 'inside' and provides empirical support for further analysis and theory construction (Wodak 2001b). Conferences and other stakeholder events as well as newsletters are significant sources of data in order to establish topics that are discussed and for how these are dealt with, even if no systematic analysis of this material is conducted. For this reason, I visited the following stakeholder events: Sustainable Food and Beverage Conference - 2 Dec 2015, Birmingham; Marks and Spencer - Plan A Stakeholder event 6 July 2016, London; Food Matters Live 22-24 Nov 2016 and 21-23 Nov 2017, London.

At these events, I took many notes of speeches I heard and conversations I had. Further, I collected materials such as promotional leaflets and booklets. Although I did not systematically analyse this data, it helped to contextualise the sets of data that I drew upon in my analysis in many ways (marking out the field, sampling, categorisation, etc.).

4.4 Data analysis

Because of the high variation of the data analysed in discourse analysis, CDA researchers emphasise that attempts to develop a universal 'recipe' to analyse the data would be an impossible and ineffective endeavour. Jäger (2009), for example, explicitly advises not to execute the steps suggested in his methodology in a mechanical way. Scholars nevertheless share guidelines to deal with semiotic data but emphasise that the method has to be developed and customised in accordance to research questions and available.

It has to be noted that no single section of a text has got a dramatic impact on societal practices and norms. Text sections rather represent extracts and facets of the bigger picture. Given that discourse analytical approaches are concerned with the bigger contexts and their

historical, continuous meaning in society, it is important to keep the relation to the ‘bigger context’ in mind when dealing with discursive fragments (Jäger 2009).

4.4.1 Guiding questions for the analysis

A set of questions guided the analysis of the empirical data in the course of the analysis procedure. These questions evolved from the method suggested by Jäger (2001, 2009), as well as from empirical studies on the field of ‘food sustainability’ (primarily Johnston 2008, Adams and Shriver 2010 and Kennedy et al. 2018). As a first step of the analysis, the topics found were structured. These questions helpfully provided a first set of categories to structure the data during the first round of analysis. They further served as a base to successively create further categories and codes. Codes were changed, split and merged in the course of the research. The categories were not treated as a given set from the beginning, but were adapted in alignment to the information provided by the data. Repetitively occurring attributes of texts and contents could therefore be marked and collected. This way to approach the data goes in accordance with the approach followed by Jäger (2009), who understands the exercise of structuring and categorising the data as the first analytical step. Crucially, it also allows taking up isolated individual cases that do not fit into this structure (dominant vs. alternative discourse). Some questions were equally substantial to all three data sets. Those are presented below.

Addressing the first, and parts of the third research question, which are concerned with the identification of *ideas and ideals on sustainability in food industry-related discourses* as well as with notions of *strategies to push sustainable consumption forward*, all three data sets were analysed under the guidance of the following questions:

- i. What understanding of society, economics and politics are the given arguments based upon?
- ii. How are sustainability and sustainable consumption framed as topics (problem, opportunity, etc.)?
- iii. What kind of beliefs, goals, expectations and motivations in relation to society, economics and politics are drawn upon?
- iv. What is the discursive context of the text or the text section? Which social circumstances are adopted in the text? Are discursive events referred to?

- v. How are the relationships between various actors (suppliers/producers, retailers, hospitality sector, government, civil society, individuals) portrayed in relation to food sustainability goals (collaborating/congruent vs. rivalry/conflicts)?
- vi. How is the consumer-business relationship portrayed?

Research question two and in parts research question three which are concerned with *the framing of the consumer and consumer choice* are reflected in the following guiding questions for the whole research data:

- vii. What socio-political, economic and psychological dimensions of the consumer are drawn upon?
- viii. Are trends or tendencies in consumer behaviour addressed? Which ones and in what way?
- ix. What (normative and action related) competencies (obligations, responsibilities) are attributed to the consumer?
- x. How is consumer choice framed? What contexts is it embedded in?
- xi. Are ideas on how to influence consumer choice expressed? Which are those? How do they relate to the notions of human behaviour, society, economics and politics?
- xii. What are the ideas on consumer information? What kind of information is supported and reinforced?

In order to explore research question four, which is dealing with *expertise, knowledge and legitimacy*, the following questions guided the analysis throughout all three data sets:

- xiii. What kind of supporting evidence is used to underpin the argumentative lines in relation to sustainability and the consumer (and in particular the strategies on how to influence consumer choice)?
- xiv. Are there references being made to research (in-house, government, university, etc.), authorities, numbers, laws, narratives recounting of organisational success and failures, etc.?
- xv. In which way are the references presented?
- xvi. What purpose do these references serve?

4.4.2 Questions applied to the analysis of specific sets of data

Some questions were directed to specific empirical datasets. Given that this projects involves three types of data sets, the guiding questions varied in terms of format as well as in their dimension. Further, the sequence of analysis had an impact on the development of this set of questions in the sense that the prior set of data informed the analytical approach taken for the following. The specific questions applied to each dataset are listed below.

On top of the questions specifically related to food sustainability and consumption, the following questions guided the analysis of the *articles*:

- i. Is there a function of the text to be identified (information, clarification, guidance, reasoning, instruction, etc.)?
- ii. Which are the fundamental assumptions that underpin the argument (e.g. scarcity of natural resources, global inequality, economic growth, climate change)?
- iii. What are the themes and subthemes addressed (labels, health, meat, etc.)?
- iv. What strategies and rhetorical patterns can be identified (critique, emotions, scares, threats, comparisons, presentation of evidence, scenarios and thought experiments, references to authorities, metaphors and other rhetorical means such as idioms, sayings, clichés, etc.)?
- v. Can a discursive context of the article be identified (implicit or explicit references to events, occurrences such as scandals or campaigns)?
- vi. What diagnose of the current situation is inherent in the article (evaluation, issue(s) of focus)? Is there a future perspective set out?
- vii. How are institutional regulations envisioned (bottom-up, top-down, external, internal rules and regulations)? Who are referred to as the key agents to put these in place?

The following additional questions guided the analysis of the *interviews*:

- viii. How do the experts diagnose, critique and problematise the current system? How do they envision the future?
- ix. How do they explain their role and contribution for a sustainable development as well as their relation and influence on consumption/the consumer?

- x. How do they envision roles and agency for a change to sustainable food consumption?
- xi. How do they imagine the role of the consumer and consumer focused strategies and implementations for sustainable food consumption?

For the analysis of the *policy documents*, the following list of questions was applied:

- i. How is the current system diagnosed, critiqued and diagnosed? What are the key issues addressed (e.g. scarcity of natural resources, global inequality, economic growth, climate change)? What vision of the future is represented?
- ii. How are roles and agency for social change envisioned?
- iii. Are references to consumer behaviour and attitudes and related studies in place? How are these related to visions of strategies and implementations for social change?
- iv. How are institutional regulations envisioned (bottom-up, top-down, external and internal rules and regulations)? Who are referred to as the key agents to put these in place?

4.4.3. Process of the analysis

The three data sets were analysed in sequence: at first, media articles were examined. Based on this analysis, the interview guide for expert interviews was developed. While the collection of and familiarisation with policy documents was an activity that I have followed from the very early 'exploration' phase of this research, the final sampling and analysis was only conducted after the interviews had been fully analysed.

The process of data coding and analysis was the same for each data set. Firstly, all data was uploaded to NVivo, where the material was 'scanned' with the aid of specifically selected/adapted questions (as outlined above). The analysis of all elements started with simple and repeated reading, followed by coding. The data were organised, categories were identified and codes developed. In this iterative process, single text passages were agglomerated in an analytic-structuring manner. I also used the 'memo' function to take notes of sudden ideas or hypothesis that I had in relation to certain text passages or categories. These memos were treated as a component of the notebook that accompanied the research process. In this pendular process in which my focus moved between the text and the analytic structure, the main categories were established. These finally served to

structure the analysis and determined which contents were picked up and how they would be presented. The analysis of both the media articles as well as the interviews is each represented in a separate empirical chapter in this thesis (see following Chapters Five and Six). The analyses are structured along various notions identified in this process. These are described with quotes of narratives that feed into respective notions.¹⁵ The policy document analysis is not displayed separately but incorporated in the discussion (Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine).

CDA scholars emphasise that language use is a 'mode of action'. "Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or 'constitute' them" (Fairclough 1992, 3) – they are socially shaping as well as they are socially shaped. The analysis of the data is not only concerned with the interpretation of texts, but with their historical and social context (e.g. Fairclough 1992, Jäger 2001, 2009, Van Dijk 2001, Wodak 2001a, 2001b). Thus, in order to complete the analysis by adding an interpretative dimension on discursive practices and regularities (Wetherell and Potter 1988), societal knowledge formations drawn upon in the text materials needed to be identified. In preparation of this endeavour, all three sets were joined up in a diachronic investigation, in which differences between former and recent discourses on 'sustainable consumption and production' were recognized (see Section 7.2). Further, the whole data was structured along overarching themes of 'the consumer' as raised in the literature that is concerned with the research of consumer agency for sustainability (see Section 7.3). In this way, the material reality of discourses on their own could be captured.

In a final interpretative phase, in which overall employed interpretative practices were to be identified, an extensive form of interpretation was put in place in order to avoid the projection of my own biases towards the text (Keller 2007). As a first step, notebook notes and memos which were collected over the course of the whole process of analysis were consulted for prevalent themes. Subsequently, argumentative patterns associated with these themes were studied and analysed over the whole time period from 2005 to 2017 (media articles and policy documents served for a diachronic analysis and interviews

¹⁵ It is important to note how I differentiate between 'narratives' and 'notions' throughout this analysis. While I regard accounts of connected events and stories and representations of a particular situation or process as a narrative, I regard a wider concept or belief about something as a notion. From an analytical perspective, 'narratives' thus constitute single accounts of a phenomenon, which accumulatively feed into and reinforce sets of values and understandings that constitute a notion.

additionally informed the analysis of recent patterns). The attribution of values to these themes, but also the ways in which causes of problems, potential consequences and options for solutions were described in the texts, were central to this interpretation. Based on the narratives associated with various different themes, eventually, abstract interpretative 'frames' or 'schemes' (Keller 2006, 2007) which form the 'interpretative repertoires' (Wetherell and Potter 1988), which confine what is 'sayable' (Jäger 2001, 2009) were identified and termed. In this way, the 'naturalised' common sense practices of discourses and their 'disguised ideology' (Fairclough 2001) are identified (see Chapter Eight).

4.5 Limitations

This research contributes to a better understanding of ideologies on sustainable consumption, the struggles and negotiations between contesting narratives, as well as the references to expertise and data made by stakeholders in order to maintain, justify and legitimize their concerns in relation to food sustainability. In this way, the study contributes to an understanding the naturalized ways in which conduct for 'sustainable consumption and production' in the context of food is discursively negotiated and evaluated. It further allows a critical review of underlying notions of food sustainability.

Although rich data material was available and data saturation posed the main factor parameter for this analysis, the data drawn upon is limited in a few ways. Thus, it was outside of the scope of this research project to explore how this discourse is incorporated into non-discursive practices. While this can be recognised as a limitation of discourse analysis per se, it should also be noted that 'testing' the discourse for actual reflections in practices could lead to more comprehensive results.

The data drawn upon in this project is limited in the sense that policy documents constituted the only source for governmental narratives. Unfortunately, I did not manage to get any interviews with governmental representatives. It has to be noted that this study is concerned with discourses on 'sustainable consumption and production', with a particular focus on the discursive mobilisation of the consumer. In its theoretical perspective, as well as in the analysis as such, consumer and corporate agency are recognised for being contrasted and interconnected, while governmental agency is not much acknowledged. The marginal presence of narratives on governmental agency could be the effect of it actually being underrepresented in the discursive landscape. This is indicated by scholarly work,

which has identified that CSR is exceptionally established and institutionalised on a national level whilst there is a relative absence of governmental activity in the UK compared to other European countries such as Germany (Moon 2004, Steurer 2010). In the analysed data, governmental statements do not have a strong presence and corporate agency is pointed towards in many ways. However, it has to be acknowledged that governmental contributions have also been underrepresented in the sampling, which was as such not intended.

Further, there is an emphasis on retailers in the collected data. This is partly predetermined by *The Grocer* employing a focus on retail, partly conditioned by the choice of interviewees (all corporate representatives occupy a position in retail). It has to be emphasised that the latter was a deliberate choice, given the importance of supermarkets as 'gatekeepers' and places for the execution of 'consumer agency' that was identified in the literature. The interviews with NGOs and consultancy-representatives confirmed this (discursive) importance, with all of them frequently locating challenges and opportunities for sustainable consumption and production in the supermarket. Nevertheless, this focus in data collection should be made explicit and it needs to be taken into consideration that the consultation of other corporations and consumer brands could have led to more nuanced results.

Chapter 5 – Changing discourses on food sustainability between 2005 and 2015: articles in an industry-based magazine

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with how discourses on food sustainability are represented at different points in time. It deals with narratives found in articles published in the industry-based magazine *The Grocer* and identifies notions of sustainability as well as related notions of the consumer and how these are discursively contextualised within wider concerns of the food industry. While narratives are single accounts as represented in the analysed texts, I consider notions as wider ‘concepts’ or ‘beliefs’, within which narratives accumulate.

The chapter analyses articles published in *The Grocer* in the years 2005, 2007, 2010 and 2015, paying attention to developments and changes over time. It starts with general preliminary remarks on observations of the development of narratives over time that led to the selection of the four sampled years (Section 5.2). Subsequently, in the main body of the analysis, for each of the four examined years (Sections 5.3, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6), the analysis is divided into: (a) the discursive conceptualisation and utilisation of ‘sustainability’; (b) the competencies and actions ascribed to the consumer, and (c) the discursive representation and interrelation of both within the food industry). A brief concluding section (5.7) summarises the major discursive changes over time.

The analysis presented in this chapter is restricted to the empirical material of media articles (as described in section 4.3.1). The expert interviews (as described in section 4.3.2) are discussed in the following Chapter Six. While the analysis of the policy documents is not presented in a separate chapter, results taken from the analysis of all three data sets are jointly discussed in the Discussion Chapters (Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine).

5.2 Quantitative representation and preliminary remarks on discursive dynamics

Societal knowledge formations and practices have a genesis. In order to gain a better understanding of the status quo, the history of a topic has to be taken into consideration and discursive developments over time have to be investigated (Wodak 2001b). While some historical components of ideas of market-based agency for social and environmental

concerns were introduced in Chapter Three, this chapter examines discursive developments over time (2005-2015) in detail by investigating a specific selection of four samples published in *The Grocer* during particular years (2005, 2007, 2010, 2015).

It is important to note that although the analysis below indicates great differences between all four samples, it is not in the nature of discourses to radically change at certain points in time. Neither do 'new' discourses replace 'old' ones from one year to another. A discourse that is present within a given space at a given time is further always compounded by countless discursive strands, of which some are more dominant than others. All discursive strands fluidly draw upon and incorporate various discursive topics and ideologies. Over time, they co-exist, overlap and accumulate in some ways, rather than being replaced by one another. Although major changes to discourses might be introduced by what Jäger calls 'discursive events' (Jäger 2001, 2009),¹⁶ it has to be noted that these are unlikely to abruptly replace entire 'old' discourses with wholly new ones. Discursive events rather disrupt or impact particular elements of the discourse on the long term.

Changes to new dominating discursive strands never occur without transition. When a discourse is investigated within a certain context in time, however, it is possible to track its development as well as to identify periods of discursive change and moments when certain narratives peak and establish notions of matters that are significantly different from the previous 'peak' period. A 'peak' period is a period in which new narratives become so prevalent that notions of sustainability etc. appear significantly different to the previous 'peak' period. Based on a pre-investigation of various articles published throughout all the years from 2005 to 2015, four such 'peak' periods were identified. These are *roughly* represented by the four samples selected for in-depth analysis.¹⁷ It has to be noted that the

¹⁶'Events' are characterised by some sort of materially substantive components. 'Discursive events' differ from 'events' in the sense that they are given prominence in the media. While "events" can always be somehow traced back to discursive configurations (turning points, shifts or disruptions), however, only if they fundamentally impact aspects of direction and structure of the discourse can they be identified as 'discursive events' (Jäger, 2001, 2009).

¹⁷ For reasons of simplicity and comparability, all four samples comprise articles published within the period of 1st of January and 31st of December of a certain year. In this context it has to be emphasised that, given the fluid nature of discourses, the exact temporal delimitation of each sample does not significantly impact the findings of the study. The pre-analysis that encompasses articles published throughout all years within the period of 2005-2015 helped to counteract potential misrepresentations. In other words; if the samples were taken within four time periods e.g. starting from the 1st of July of one year until the 30th of June in the following year, the quotations presented in this chapter would certainly be different and potentially add different nuances, while the overall results would likely be the same.

significant differences between single samples are not a 'coincidence', but based on a thorough pre-analysis in which key periods of change were identified.

Looking at the quantitative distribution over time, a key word search on articles of *The Grocer* published in the years 1995-2015 instantly showed that contributions containing 'sustainability' and 'ethics' were much less represented in the years before 2005 than they were from the year 2005 onwards. With the number gradually rising roughly from the beginning of the year of 2004 and intensifying closer towards and during the year 2005, the first sample was taken from articles published between January and December 2005. Broadly conceptualising sustainability as a novel force that impacts the industry from outside, this discourse is characterised by the overarching notion of 'sustainability as risk and innovation'.

The qualitative pre-analysis indicated a shift in narratives between articles published in 2006 and the subsequent years. The quantitative count further showed that between all years, 2007 comprises the highest number of articles containing the chosen combination key words (see Table 1 in Chapter Four). Those two aspects determined articles published between January and December 2007 to provide the second set of samples to this study. With a clear focus on 'business opportunities', the dominant narratives of this period contributed to the establishment of a very optimistic notion of sustainability.

The pre-analysis further identified the economic recession of 2008 as a discursive event of significant presence and impact. Its effects persisted for years, arguably up to current times. The period from January to December 2010 represents an appropriate time period to draw a sample, since in 2010 the effects of the recession began to fully take hold and were more certain than in the previous couple of years. In other words; while the certainty of the recession as an event of major impact had settled, the destabilisation and insecurity coming along with it was still ongoing in 2010. As such, it constitutes a perfect point in time to 'catch' discursive formations that are predominantly based on a notion of 'sustainability in crisis'.

Finally, article samples drawn from the time period from January until December 2015 were selected to deliver the fourth set of data to this analysis. The year 2015 does not only represent the 'natural' end point of data collection. The background of the recession, as well

as narratives of sustainability as an integral business activity that have been present in various shades for about a decade, are both still holding on. On this background, a new and transformed concept of 'sustainability' becomes manifest in the year 2015 with the notion of sustainability blurring into wider aspects of 'brand identity'.

Given these pre-analytical findings, the data presented in this chapter comprises articles published during the years 2005, 2007, 2010 and 2015. Starting with the earliest sample and closing with the most recent, the subsequent presentation of the results is chronologically organised, with each of the four main sections comprising data drawn from articles of one year. Each of those sections is divided into three sub-sections. The first one gives insights on respective framings of the term 'sustainability'. The second discusses the representation and interrelation of 'sustainability' with targets and conduct of the food industry. In the third, thereby made references to 'the consumer' are presented.

5.3 2005: Kick-off

5.3.1 Sustainability as risk and innovation

The sample of 2005 is the smallest in quantitative terms and further, amongst the articles found by the applied key word search, about half did not address topics related to environmental or social sustainability. All articles on 'sustainability' referred to potentials or threats regarding the future viability of the food industry. However, in many articles, the word 'sustainability' was thereby used without any apparent relation to environmental or social concerns, but to generally address issues of durability and stability in economic contexts.¹⁸ In some articles, speakers affiliated with sustainability-related institutions (e.g. *Sustainable Development Commission* [4_2005]) or who were holding a 'sustainability' position (e.g. a company's *global sustainable project co-ordinator* [10_2005]), had their say on topics such as labelling or pesticides, without any further discussion of socio-environmental sustainability.

In the few exceptions in which environmental aspects were addressed, issues were either mixed with economic concerns and made the focus of discussion (e.g. in the case of two risk-focussed articles, one on food miles and one on overfishing), or the environment was

¹⁸ For example, it is discussed whether a new regulation "will lead to sustainable lower prices" (11_2005), utilising the term 'sustainability' to refer to price *stability*. In another article that deals with financial struggles of British farmers, it is claimed that "Tesco's low-price agenda has made food production unsustainable for many farmers and growers"(16_2005), limiting the meaning of 'sustainability' to *economic matters*.

treated as a side note (as it is the case for the two reputation-focused articles that deal with CSR). As such, the term 'sustainability' was associated with long term durability and stability of the food industry: either through direct statements, such as that corporate responsibility helps businesses to manage "potential risks and *future sustainability* by continual improvement of their impact on society" (1_2005); or indirectly through the figure of the consumer, for example by judging consumers' commitment to buy British as a "significant factor in *sustaining* the farming and food industry and *ensuring a viable future*" (16_2005). Social concerns were mentioned, but only superficially and vaguely – for example through reference to "treatment of staff" (6_2005). Overall, 'sustainability' constituted a loosely contextualised keyword to indicate long-term and forward-looking thinking on the one hand and a buzzword in relation to CSR on the other.

'Ethics', on the contrary, were blended in to a discourse on quality and premium produce that conflates "variety, quality, provenance and ethical products" (15_2005). 'Ethics' were further drawn upon as a characteristic of products rather than production, with references to "ethical' brands" (12_2005), to the promotion of an ethical "position" (2_2005) or to the ethical "philosophy" of a company (5_2005). Commonly presented as a sales pitch on the rise, 'ethics' was associated with 'organic' and 'provenance', but simultaneously with 'premium' and 'quality'. Overall, related social and environmental attributes were reduced to their marketability as the premium priced, more expensive choice.

5.3.2 The consumer – unaware of sustainable choices

The discursive separation between 'sustainability' and 'ethics' is particularly apparent in the way in which consumers' values and actions were contextualised. While 'ethics' was related to "UK consumers' growing appetite for premiumisation" (17_2005) and presented as an inherent consumer trend on the rise, acknowledgements of consumers' interest in sustainability were kept vaguely in the sample of 2005.¹⁹ If mentioned in the context of

¹⁹ A few articles dealt with questions of efficiency in the supply chain by embedding those explicitly or implicitly into sustainability agenda concerns, such as food miles. While retailers were put under most scrutiny in that context ("the most powerful players in the supply chain, retailers bore the greatest responsibility," [6_2005]), consumers' interest in this issue is particularly emphasised to support the argument: Thus, a private sector policy advisor is cited for having said "We need to design a supply chain that has what it takes to win the consumer" (1_2005). In another contribution, a speaker of a consumer organisation is cited referring to inefficiencies found in the meat sector: "Consumers wanted to see a more collaborative approach which took their concerns about economics and sustainability into account" (3_2005).

'sustainability', consumers were commonly referred to as a reference to explain the lack of success of supposedly sustainable activities or innovations of businesses. They were portrayed as being unconcerned and unaware of sustainability-related issues. This was supported with references to figures in surveys showing consumers' disregard of sustainable products. For example, in an article on overfishing it was stated that

“[c]onsumer research by Unilever [...] shows some surprising figures: 36% of UK consumers have never even thought about this issue”, adding that “[l]ow consumer awareness is of course a barrier to change” (13_2005).

The distinction between 'sustainability' and 'ethics' also shows in the way in which 'price' was discursively dealt with. While ethical products were associated with premium prices that consumers happily pay for, consumers were regarded to trade off 'price' against 'valuable' (and arguably 'sustainable') product attributes. In one example, local food consumption was considered to clash with consumers' preferences in low prices. Facilitated by a reference to a survey which allows consumers to rank “11 key considerations that determine what [they] buy” (16_2005), the idea of a consumer that is trading off 'price' against 'origin' was narrated.

In short, in the discourse of the sample of 2005 'sustainability' is framed as a pressuring force, leaving the industry with the challenge to get the 'uninformed' consumer 'on board', while in relation to 'ethics', consumers that are portrayed as a pressure factor on the industry.

5.3.3 Representation and contextualisation within the food industry

All sampled articles that dealt with environmental or social sustainability took a general tone of changing conditions and highlighted that industry adaptations have to happen in order to secure positive (economic) outcomes for the industry in the future. However, only five out of 17 articles referred to sustainability in the context of environmental concerns, conceptualising them as 'external forces' that pose economic risks for the industry. Two of those dealt with CSR and related reputational implications (see Chapter 2, and in particular Section 2.2 for a review of literature related to CSR). In an article that discussed Unilever's engagement for alternatives to chemical pesticides as a 'sustainable agriculture initiative' leading to a “new-look Unilever logo” (10_2005), the focus was explicitly set on reputational aspects related to 'sustainability'. Two further articles place sustainability into the context of

business practices and risk management, one of them being devoted to overfishing and related questions of certification and the other one dealing with the topic of food miles.

With the focus on certification schemes, the general tone of all five articles put the emphasis on current ways of production having to be reviewed. Supply chain adaptations were stressed as being necessary in order for the industry to remain stable in the long run. For example, an article on CSR warned that “[i]f you don’t have an integrated supply chain, you don’t have a sustainable supply chain long-term” (7_2005). Another article closes with the following message:

“If it [the food and drink industry] doesn’t get to grips with the impact of its supply chain [...] the prospect of a sustainable supply chain will recede ever further” (12_2005).

In both articles on CSR, ‘sustainability’ is arguably framed as a topic by itself, as the core subject of discussion, putting a strong emphasis on its far-reaching reputational implications, for example by referring to a “new era of accountability” [6_2005] in which “food and drink companies [are] being so much in the media spotlight” [1_2005]). Its potential relation to and relevance for environmental concerns, however, remains in the background, being added to the end of the list of CSR implications (and after ‘customers’/ ‘consumers’), without any further context or discussion being provided:

“It [CSR] can use the most up-to-date scientific know how to the benefit of consumers and the environment” (1_2005).

“Many retailers and food manufacturers are rightly proud of their strategies and have received plaudits for their treatment of staff, customers and the environment” (6_2005).

‘Taken as a matter of agriculture, manufacturing, wholesale and regulation, ‘sustainability’-related argumentations followed a logic of production, including aspects such as business innovation, performance, competitiveness and reputation. While voices in support of investments in sustainable production presented environmental sustainability rather as a force than a voluntary opportunity, they also claimed that ‘sustainability’ would create substantial and large benefits beyond financial profits, for example by adding “vitality to life – for [...] consumers, [...] employees and for communities and the environment” (10_2005). In relation to consumption, businesses were portrayed as innovators and were prompted to

take action to 'reconnect' consumers with their food and to encourage them to make more sustainable choices:

"The food and drink industry reaches into every home. It can create an environment where people are encouraged to make the right choices." (1_2005)

"Our research shows that a third of people would be more likely to make sustainable choices if they had more information. This alone should encourage action." (13_2005)

"[I]t is now time to get the public to make the connection between the countryside they love and the food they buy in the supermarket. If they don't, [...] the future of the British countryside remains in doubt. 'The commitment of consumers to purchase home-produced food will be a significant factor in sustaining the farming and food industry and ensuring a viable future.'" (16_2005)

Just as the number of articles addressing 'sustainability' in relation to environmental or social concerns, the number of articles discussing 'ethics' was small. The relevance of 'ethics' to the food industry was dominated by claims of its importance as a product attribute and references to the 'upmarket' retailer Waitrose as a role model. In articles that contain references to 'ethics', in comparison, the retailer Waitrose and their "amazing figures" and "double-digit sales and profit growth" (15_2005) repeatedly served as a good example, given "its strong ethical stance and its well-known promotion of organic food and drink" (17_2005). Businesses, in particular retailers, who fail to deliver an ethical stance or to provide ethical product segments, were portrayed as missing out on opportunities. Thus, in relation to Waitrose having been voted the best UK retailer in the Grocer's survey of the world's finest food retailers, it was argued that "it can pay off to focus on quality and provenance rather than just price" (17_2005), emphasising the saleability of ethically labelled products. In these narratives, 'ethics' was economically valued through its attributed relevance in the consumer-facing contexts of marketing/advertising and retailing. Given its "appeal to the foodies" (15_2005), a growing group of consumers who are more likely to consume high-priced premium products, an 'ethical' focus of businesses was portrayed as profitable.

Overall, different notions of 'sustainability' and 'ethics' were represented in the discourse of 2005, separated by a discursive divide between production and consumption. Both share the common discursive denominator of associated commercial losses in case of negligence as an overall sentiment throughout all articles. The business pursuit to achieve both, sustainability

(e.g. to manage risks through innovations or reputations through CSR) as well as ethics (e.g. by integrating ethical/premium product segments) were encouraged throughout.

5.4 2007: Green hype

5.4.1 Sustainability as a 'green' business opportunity

As shown in Section 4.3.1, in the year 2007, the number of publications found by the key word search peaked (n=122 as opposed to n=106 in 2008 and numbers below 100 in all other years). This comparatively excessive quantitative representation went hand in hand with high enthusiasm for 'sustainability', which was portrayed as a transformative 'green' concept in its own right. In many articles, an explicit business case for sustainable or ethical strategies, innovations and adaptations was made, which was represented in various headlines containing terms such as 'sustainable', 'ethical' or 'green'. With its former future-implications fading, in 2007, 'sustainability' was advocated for in relation to economic and ecological effects at the present time. In addition, the introduction of 'health' into the sustainability discourse marks out a major change.

In articles of this year, the term 'green' functioned as an umbrella term, connecting various matters. While practically non-existent in the discourse of the 2005 sample, the term was used excessively just a couple of years later. This was through claims that retailers, suppliers and consumers are "going green" (41_2007) or that corporations are "jumping onto the green bandwagon" (46_2007). The terms 'ethics' and 'sustainability' were used interchangeably in these contexts, allowing no distinction between them and their associations with certain domains or actions in the context of the food industry. While organic produce was clearly treated as a matter of ethics in the 2005 sample, it was associated with the wider 'green' sustainability agenda in 2007, for example when the president of "the world's largest organic yoghurt company" was called "America's green man" (27_2007) or in the claim that "Australia's largest organic and wholefoods supermarket" is "flashing its green credentials [...] with its product range of more than 12,000 organic, natural and fair trade products" (16_2007). In a similar way, carbon footprints and packaging, both topics that formerly would have been associated with sustainability and production, were depicted as being ethical concerns of consumers in 2007. In the following quotation, a corporation's sustainability strategy as well as a suppliers' reduction of packaging are identified as *green* activities that are implemented for economic

and *ethical* reasons. The terms 'green', 'sustainable' and 'ethical' are here used interchangeably, blurring the interpretations of different terms:

“Suppliers are doing a lot of things to be *greener*,’ says Barthel. ‘Cadbury Schweppes’ Purple Goes Green initiative and Nestlé’s new *sustainability* strategy are prime examples, as are the moves to reduce packaging by many companies such as Heinz, Coors and Coca-Cola.’ According to Barthel, suppliers such as Coors, which switched its Grolsch bottles from 220g to 190g to cut packaging and energy use, do so for sound economic as well as *ethical* reasons” (40_2007).

Sustainability and profitability are merged under the umbrella of ‘development’, resulting in business actions being self-evidently assumed to serve a societal or environmental cause. Nestlé’s CEO for example assesses the opening of a factory in Brazil as making “good ethical and business sense”, with the foundation of his judgement rooted in the fact that this new factory is doing both, creating “2,000 jobs”, as well as manufacturing “Nestle products in more affordable pack sizes and adapt[ing] products to nutritional needs and tastes” (12_2007). A line of argument like this indicates that a business achievement is ethical by nature: by primarily pointing at benefits for individuals in the local community, the opening of a new factory is portrayed as a charitable activity.

In 2007, health, which is not related to sustainability in any way in the sample of 2005, emerges within the sustainability discourse. On the one hand, ‘sustainability’ and ‘health’ were self-evidently portrayed as two sides of the same coin, for example through links being made explicit or both simply being mentioned in one breath. However, on the other, ‘health’ was portrayed as standing in competition with sustainability and ethics. Argumentations on ‘health’ in relation to ‘sustainability’ thus reach from the presumption of them being two sides of the same coin to their portrayal as competing concepts.

The former is represented for example in references to Tesco’s efforts to “make a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle achievable for us all” (31_2007). Another example in which the unity or compatibility of ‘health’ and ‘sustainability’ is presupposed is represented in the following quote, in which confusing and unhelpful labelling is criticised for “hindering the kind of food choices that need to be made for health and sustainability”(37_2007). In both these examples, ‘sustainability’ and ‘health’ are referred to as a unit.

The latter is for example represented in articles in which the importance of ‘health’ is compared to the importance of ‘sustainability’ or ‘ethics’. Referring to a report, in one article

it was claimed that “consumers considering trying a new product are now more likely to take ethical factors into account than health or convenience” (8_2007). In another article, survey data “of 300 grocery executives in 48 countries” was consulted, resulting in the finding that “healthy eating” would be the current “number one issue for the world”, while “corporate responsibility, encompassing sustainable development, social standards and corporate governance, ranks just fifth globally” (4_2007).

A tension between ‘sustainability’ and ‘health’ in ‘fish’ as a product was sensed. This is for example reflected in one article that allows the director of a fish oil supplier to express his fears that the health-trend of “Omega-3 could be damaged by the debate about sustainable fishing”. He insists that the “oils are a by-product of tuna fishing, which is completely sustainable” (28_2007). Similarly, in another article it was claimed that

“[f]ish is outperforming the other canned SKUs [stock keeping units] because of the healthy eating trend. However, concerns over the sustainability of tuna catches hang over the sector.” (30_2007)

Notwithstanding the contentions in relation to ‘health’, a clear distinction between sustainable and unsustainable businesses and products was widely presupposed. This divide was reinforced with the factor of ‘price’, expressed by claims such as that “[t]he conscientious consumer will have to pay a bit more” (15_2007), and that the year of 2006 “will go down in history as a moment when the importance of price waned and healthy and ethically sound food became the battle ground” (5_2007). Thus, the 2005 narrative of ethical products being of premium quality as well as of premium price is in the widened sustainability discourse of 2007 appropriated to the idea of sustainable products as a whole – including claims on their popularity amongst consumers.

5.4.2 The consumer – unable to choose

The figure of the consumer plays a central role to shifted representations of ‘sustainability’ in the sense that they were largely portrayed as demanding sustainable products. Even in contexts where ‘sustainable’ adaptations are justified on the grounds of efficiency, they were commonly substantiated with references to consumer concerns, for example with comments such as that “the consumer will decide who's the winner” (1_2007).

In various articles, claims on consumers wanting and pushing for sustainability are emphasized, either in relation to particular products or product segments or as general

adaptations in production and distribution, such as the reduction of energy use and waste. Throughout, a 'conscious' model of the consumer was employed, being portrayed as the judge and decision-maker of businesses' success. References of growth in sales of 'sustainable products' or to consumer surveys commonly supported these claims. "Impressive figures" of "[s]ales of organic turkey" (50_2007) were explained with consumers' commitment to sustainability and statements such as that "[r]esearch indicates more consumers are interested in the sustainability of their goods" (9_2007) were frequently drawn upon.

Alongside these 'new found' sustainability demands of consumers, the notion that consumers have to be better informed remained in force in narratives of 2007. This was discussed in a distinctively less educational, but more market-oriented way, in relation to particular consumer choices as a desirable outcome. Labelling and certification schemes were suggested as methods to foster desirable consumer choice. As such, these were portrayed as being demanded by consumers. For example, it was criticised that none of "the industry's mainstream players [...] efforts [...] involves the independent certification consumers want" (43_2007). Further, in one article, a representative of the Rain Forest Alliance (RFA) legitimised the institution's certification scheme in reference to consumers and the importance of their choices:

"The importance to consumers is the independent verification that organisations such as the RFA provide' [...] 'It's about making it easier for consumers to make a choice that is better for farmers, workers and the planet'" (14_2007).

The number of calls for 'better choices' or 'right decisions' of consumers are striking, just as well as the self-evident equation of 'sustainable choices' being the 'right' and 'informed' choices that consumers wish to make. For example, one article specifically argued that "signposting of green products will help shoppers make the right decisions" (41_2007). Following the same line of argumentation, in the following quote poor carbon footprint figures of a company are related to a lack of consumer empowerment.

"Innocent admits its carbon footprint figures are not perfect and PepsiCo will modify its scores as new information comes to light. However, a calculated score is better than nothing, says Jess Sansom, sustainability manager at Innocent. 'We must remember the object of the exercise: to cut and continue cutting emissions and empower consumers to make their own choices'" (19_2007).

Overall, two narratives of the consumer co-exist in the discourse on sustainable and ethical consumption in 2007: the demanding consumer and the consumer who is in need of help and assistance. These argumentative lines are not contradictory. The first is based on evidence that consumers, when asked, express interest in sustainable products. The latter is based on claims that consumers lack in capability to express this interest when shopping. Both narratives present a common understanding of consumers being ready to consume sustainably and ethically and of businesses having the responsibility provide appropriate products and to market them in efficient ways.

5.4.3 Representation and contextualisation within the food industry

In relation to the food industry, the ideas of sustainable and economic development were merged in 2007. With benefits for sustainable development and businesses frequently mentioned jointly, the line between environmental and social causes and commercial profits is blurred. ‘Sustainability’ is portrayed as an integrated, internal business strategy and framed as an activity of economic nature. Evidence-based claims on rewards for sustainability adaptations being available to be reaped *here and now* can be found throughout the sample. With these rewards being framed as eco-efficient savings, sales growth or the outpacing of competitors, the pursuits of ‘green’ and ‘profits’ were presented as two sides of the same coin.

Manifold examples were presented on how ‘sustainability’ would bring commercial benefits to businesses or how the neglect of sustainability would disadvantage businesses. Various articles hold claims that ‘sustainable’, ‘ethical’ or ‘green’ adaptations would come along with cost reductions. Flagship-projects referred to in this context are predominantly eco-efficient ‘sustainable’ activities such as waste and packaging reduction, with for example a suppliers’ engagement “on projects to reduce packaging and the associated *environmental and monetary cost* of disposal” being highlighted (15_2007). Similarly, direct cost savings of business adaptations were exemplified by reduced packaging, as shown in the following excerpt:

“From reducing packaging to calculating carbon footprints, redrawing supply networks to simply cutting down plastic bag use, green pledges now form a major plank of supermarket strategies. [...] Everyone is at it. [...] ‘Many companies have made changes because it makes financial sense’ [...]. If you change a packaging film from 35 microns to 30 microns, you can use the same machinery but the costs saving is obvious” (40_2007).

Further, the potential for economic growth of sustainable business investments was emphasised, for example with the CEO of a major retailer being cited predicting that “greener companies will grow” (40_2007). In this respect, the notion of sustainability as a reputational issue gained high prominence. Numerous comparisons and rankings of businesses were presented in relation to their sustainability performances, feeding into this notion. Argumentative lines in this context emphasised competition, comprising statements on rivalries between all retailers and references to certain retailers being “number ones”, with M&S repeatedly taken as the role model.

An example in this context is an article on the retailer Morrisons finally ‘joining’ by publishing their first corporate responsibility report and reaching out for its share of the success. It is argued that Morrisons has finally made the step to compete with other retailers on equal ground:

“Morrisons finally got its ecological act together this week and outlined its environmental commitments in its first-ever corporate responsibility report. Until now, it had been letting rivals Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer grab all the green headlines” (23_2007).

With Morrisons being portrayed as still catching up, it was warned that “[t]here was a glut of green activity from its rivals” (23_2007), emphasizing that all players are constantly expanding their green activities.

The hype about activities in the name of sustainability created a condition in which various kinds of economic success were attributed to sustainability commitments. An example for this is represented by the following flood of sustainability-related words of praise expressed for Tesco’s success of having been voted Britain’s favorite supermarket. The fact that the retailer received this award for its achievements in “range, service and stock levels“, of which neither relate to aspects of social or environmental sustainability in any apparent way, remained unnoticed in this praise:²⁰

²⁰ The connection established here between Tesco’s commitment to turning “green consumption” into “a mainstream way of life” and the retailer having been voted Britain’s favorite supermarket, comes across in an even more tenuous way, in the light of another article which was published three months later, presenting the results of the latest Ethical Reputation Index. On this consumer survey-based index which assessed retailers’ “treatment of *environment*, employees, customers and suppliers“, Tesco was ranked behind most food retailers, which indicates rather low ‘green’ commitments: “Tesco was down five places on last year in 15th position. [...] Despite the launch of its £100m environmental program in January, Tesco was ranked 15th. Sainsbury's came 11th, Morrisons 20th, and Asda 14th.” (45_2007)

“Tesco continues to outstrip market growth and is fast becoming a successful global player,’ [...] It describes itself as a ‘campaigner for the consumer’ and has led the drive for ‘Green Consumption’ as a mainstream way of life, with initiatives and products that make a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle achievable for us all. ‘Placing the consumer at the heart of its thinking, coupled with the good value it continues to offer, have all counted towards it being voted number one’” (31_2007).

Consumer desires and demands constituted a frequent reference to explain sustainability-related initiatives of businesses. For example, in relation to adaptations in packaging it was claimed that “[c]onsumers are asking retailers for less packaging and the retailers are then talking to the supply chain” (40_2007), generating the picture of consumers approaching retailers on their own initiative. Claims such as that new products had to clear an “ethical hurdle” (8_2007) and that “the real driver is not the retailer but the consumer” (40_2007), as well as questions on “how to meet consumer demand for sustainable food” (48_2007) fed the notion of sustainable businesses conduct as a response to consumers. “[C]ollective consumer consciousness” (25_2007) and “consumer trends for improved knowledge, sustainable food, local sourcing and reduced environmental impact” (24_2007) were referred to as aspects that are “influencing the industry” (25_2007). Related to this are encouragements to provide consumers with assistance to make them familiar with sustainability issues and to get them used to innovations in order to enable them to buy ‘sustainable’ products. Thus, calls upon retailers, such as that they should provide “more information so shoppers can make an informed choice and we call on retailers to drive this” are commonly found (39_2007).

Overall, an established idea of manufacturers as well as the retailers being supposed to provide for sustainability was in place. This idea was assisted by sustainability being portrayed as resource- and cost-efficient and being pushed for by consumers. The necessary actions to be taken by consumers in this context mostly focused on them responding to sustainability labels and signposting whilst making their choices at the point of purchase.

5.5 2010: Disruption

5.5.1 Sustainability in crisis

The contextualisation and utilisation of the term ‘sustainability’ largely replicates the dominant framing of 2007. In 2010, ‘ethics’ and ‘sustainability’ continued to be largely treated as one and the same, or as subcategories of ‘green’, discussed within “green concerns” (1_2010), “green products” (19_2010) and “green credentials” (20_2010). In

contrast to the 2007 sample, however, no explicit doubt was expressed on the fusion of 'sustainability' and 'health', while both notions continue to be mentioned in the same breath. For example the aspiration that "everyone needs to eat healthily in environmentally and ethically sound ways" (7_2010) was expressed and details on a "health and sustainability programme" (27_2010) are presented.

However, different to the sample of 2007, in articles of 2010 the urgency and importance of tackling sustainability-related issues (as found in articles of 2005, Section 5.3.1) is emphasised. Wider issues of global food security became more prominent in 2010, whilst the excitement about 'win-win' situations, as prevalent in articles of 2007 (Section 5.4.3) declined. In relation to these 'problem-focussed' debates, the obscurity of the term 'sustainability' as such was made a subject of discussion and references to the complexity of the concept and calls for more clarity were made.

In the samples of 2005 and 2007, sustainability was addressed in a rather uncritical and unquestioned manner, with a common understanding of the meaning seemingly being 'naturally' assumed. In the sample of 2010, in contrast, a lack of knowledge on 'sustainability' and the complexity of related challenges were openly acknowledged, with the urge for a better understanding being repeatedly expressed. For example, a long article dedicated to the topic of water scarcity emphasised its complexity and addressed the lack of knowledge of practitioners:

"The growing scarcity of water is not just a problem for sub-Saharan Africa, it's jeopardising the future of food production all over the world. What can we do [...] What's the water footprint of a kilogram of rice? Fifty litres? A hundred? How about a kilogram of beef? Five hundred litres? A thousand? Would you be surprised to learn the answers were 3,000 and 16,000 litres respectively? Admit it, you would. [...] As with its carbon cousin, establishing the parameters for measurement is difficult. 'If you think carbon footprinting is complex, welcome to the world of water footprinting.'" (10_2010)

Concessions of uncertainty did not only concern specific sustainability challenges, but also the very concept of sustainability itself. One example holds the baldly demanding title "We must define a sustainable diet" (7_2010), In another explicit criticism on how the issue has been dealt with in the past is expressed, arguing that "oversimplified" messages "about 'going veggie'" would obscure the real message of how to combat global warming and lead to "polarised debates" (9_2010). Considering that prior sustainability debates had been

continuing without any need expressed for clarity on what the term actually means, these novel acknowledgements of complexity signify the differences between articles of 2010 and the other years.

5.5.2 The consumer – unable to commit to choices

With various articles dealing with stagnation in sales of 'sustainable' market segments and the recession being identified as an interfering factor to sustainable consumption, in articles of 2010, consumers were widely portrayed as having difficulties to afford sustainable choices. However, claims on an established consumer commitment to sustainability were still frequently drawn upon throughout the sample, with consumers' values being confirmed and occasional references to surveys being made. Price-related explanations were presented on why consumers currently do not shop as sustainably as they would be expected to, given the values that they express. With the event of the economic recession constituting a central point of reference, claims that the "current tough financial climate" (38_2010) makes consumers feel "the bite of recession" (11_2010) indirectly excuse consumers from committing to sustainable purchases. In some articles, the argument that 'sustainability' cannot compete with 'price' was made explicit. In relation to the "Grocer Gold Awards" for example, it was found that 'ethics' was left behind 'price' since "[s]hoppers judged value for money as the most important category, followed by quality of food and prices in joint second" (25_2010).

Nevertheless, in various contexts it was explicitly stressed that consumers do seek to choose sustainable products. For example, it was claimed that they "consider organic and green products as a real alternative" (20_2010) and that "organic products continue to offer a holistic solution to the ethical shopper who understands the need for sustainable food and farming" (14_2010). The following text segment supports this notion, separating consumers' values from their shopping actions. While the argumentation is clear, the wording in this context is remarkably imprecise; actions that are phrased as "concerns" and "thinking", are opposed to consumers' values, which are – in turn – evidenced by 'green behaviours' on a large scale.

"[T]he recession has dented consumers' green concerns. Mintel's Ethical and Green Retailing report in September shows that one in five consumers are not in a financial position to think about green or ethical issues. But don't be fooled the report also shows a strong commitment to ethical and environmental issues, as those rating

them as 'very important' were actually up marginally on 2008. Some 97% of adults have adopted at least one of the greener behaviours in the survey." (1_2010)

Based on the narrative that consumers say they want sustainable products, but do largely not choose them, another prevalent line of argumentation was found in this sample. It proposed that consumers 'expect' businesses to act in sustainable ways or to 'take it for granted'. A representative claim of this notion is that "[t]he UK consumer does care but, through the recession, they care about price and the product tasting right first and expect us [the industry] to do the worrying for them" (27_2010).

Related comments such as that "shoppers are expecting more from their supermarket" (25_2010) further suggest that consumers entrust companies with a matter that is very important to them, indicating that trust is a crucial element to the relationship between consumers and businesses. Consumers (often named in one breath with NGOs) would quickly call out companies (since "bad news travels at web speed" [12_2010]), if they recognised unsustainable conduct, which would further lead to negative effects on businesses reputations and – consequently – sales. In this way, a notion of a 'new' type of consumer engagement and 'consumer pressure' was employed, which is well represented by the following quote:

"Food security and consumer pressure over ethics now mean every single element in a supply chain must be traceable. [...] [t]hese days, of course, brands don't just have to worry about health and safety issues. In an age of increased environmental responsibility, companies are being judged on their environmental and ethical credentials." (18_2010)

5.5.3 Representation and contextualisation within the food industry

With the recession as an omnipresent event, the discourse of sustainability in the food industry was led by two central narratives. Firstly, business involvement in pursuing and upholding *sustainability as an agenda* was throughout emphasised as fundamental. Secondly, and equally advocated, was the rationality and reasonableness of the supply of *sustainable products*.

In regard to the former, a widely shared notion that the industry either has taken or will take the lead on sustainability was in place. The industry's principal role in this regard was taken as a given, to the degree that caution about this condition is signalled, with collaboration being advocated for:

“Few think industry can deliver alone” (33_2010 – academic expert statement).

“[C]ollaboration is really key to delivering our aim” (34_2010 – business leader statement).

Argumentations in other articles, however, were built on critique of other recalcitrant actors' engagement. With other 'sustainability agents' – especially politicians – being chided for inactivity, the industry's role is portrayed in a positive way. We see this in the following example, in which the author attributed macrostructural strategic failures to the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. Introducing the argument by referring to the recent Conference as “damp squib”, the claim that 'sustainability' is not taken care of by governments is substantiated. A major part of the argument is represented by quotations of Tesco's CEO speaking at a 'Consumer Goods Forum Global Summit' in London. Climate change is portrayed as an 'unpopular' issue that has difficulties to compete with other issues in the face of the recession.

“If, like me, you are concerned about the environment and climate change, the last year or so has not been great,' [...] 'Recession, the deficit, unemployment have been the issues capturing the headlines. They have pushed climate change down, and sometimes off, the agenda.’” (26_2010)

While he regrets the current situation, he continues to give hope by referring to businesses' commitments, which he claims commonly remain unnoticed:

“The good news which rarely gets reported is that responsible businesses, businesses that focus on creating long-term value, know these are short-term distractions” (26_2010).

This argumentation strongly indicates that businesses have already started to “take [the] green lead” (1_2010), while other agents' actions are either too slow in showing results or simply inadequate. Remarkably, the reasoning that the industry has to or will take charge of sustainability was further linked to the idea that instant action must be taken in order to enable long-term improvements to happen (indicated in the quote above where the “long-term value” [26_2010] is highlighted). Based on this understanding, the future viability idea which was prevalent in the discourse of 2005 was reintroduced.

This future-directedness was also prevalent in debates on sales of sustainable products, which constitute another core set of narratives on the interrelation of sustainability and the

food industry of the 2010 sample. Based on the understanding that sustainable products are comparatively more expensive, it was argued that consumers are forced to cut down on sustainable products. Various suggestions on the industry's response to this were in place and all of them emphasised the importance to adhere to 'sustainability'. Optimism was spread about the prospect of good times after the recession, implying that it is worth it for businesses to hold on to the production of sustainable products, for example arguing that 'organic' would be "here for the long term" (14_2010) or "a long-term strategy" (30_2010). In other contexts, it was anticipated that "consumers who care about green products will be even more mindful of post-recession" (19_2010) or that "consumers may well come back to organic when the recession ends" (17_2010). This future-directed language of 'withstanding' and 'hope' in relation to sustainable products was further embedded in debates on business rivalry, where "those retailers and brand owners who continue to invest in green initiatives and effectively communicate them to consumers" were designated to be the "winners in the long-term" (1_2010).

Alongside these claims which promise a 'better future', this sample further comprises various explanations to prove or convince that things are not as bad as they seem as well as that certain issues are temporary, that consumer interest persists and that 'sustainable' remains profitable. In this context, the present disturbing factor of the recession as such was refused. The question whether sustainable products have a future does not arise, since the present is narrated in a way that leaves no doubt on it. For example, evaluating the current economic situation of organic, a 'Comment & Opinion' piece by Soil Association trade director Finn Cottle was titled "(r)eports of organic's death are exaggerated" (14_2010). In another extensive article on the organic sector, she claimed that it is to the retailer's disadvantage if they neglect organic: "It's important for retailers to understand that they are letting organic consumers disappear. Asda, the Co-op and M&S have all lost market share recently" (30_2010).

With the topic of 'organic' recurring throughout the sample, the problem was portrayed to be less rooted in organic products actually being more expensive, but rather in them being perceived to be more expensive. An article for example reported that "there was a kneejerk reaction to pull back on organic, which has always been perceived as expensive" (17_2010) and claimed that (particular) business strategies have "always been to make organic

products affordable" (17_2010); drawing on a narrative very different from the narratives of organic produce that were prevalent in earlier samples.

Rationality and reasonableness to adhere to the supply of sustainable products was further most dominantly reinforced by references to consumer desires and demands which they – given the (perceived) premium price – cannot translate into sustainable purchases by themselves. In this context, cost-based choice-manipulations were supported. For example, evidence was referenced to show that

“higher-spending families’ (the bracket organic shoppers typically fall into) have changed their buying habits, with 90% now actively looking for promotions” (30_2010).

Encouraging promotional offers on products that are considered to fall into ‘sustainable’ market segments, it was argued that retailers could “help influence choice” (14_2010), for example by “steer[ing] consumers towards greener and healthier choices” through “promotions and special offers” (9_2010). Argumentations along this line advocate for soft attempts to manipulate consumer choice. Potentially related to this new line of argumentation, also a critical voice on the impact of labels on consumers was expressed, which opposes the discourses of earlier samples, in particular the sample of 2010, where labelling is regarded a key strategy:

“Labelling is apple pie and motherhood territory, but most consumers don't use labels. The real value of labels is encouraging factory or kitchen recipe change. [...] Labelling, alas, doesn't yet capture what's needed” (29_2010).

In response to consumer’s scrutiny, which was portrayed as being stronger than ever although or because consumers cannot commit to make sustainable choices by themselves, a wider understanding of “work[ing] emotionally with customers” (30_2010) was established. In related narratives, the importance of building a “touchy-feely” and “intimate contact with the consumer” (30_2010) as well as to “[w]in consumers' hearts” (21_2010) through sustainability and ethical credentials was emphasised. The focus of related argumentations was, however, not on sustainability as such, but rather on brand reputation *through the means of* sustainability credentials, with successful brand marketing constituting the purpose of ‘efforts’ and ‘responsibility’ in the name of sustainability. In one article that dealt with a study showing “that public belief in climate change has fallen dramatically”, brands were advised not to “overreact”, given that “ethical responsibility” was “a chief

concern” for consumers (8_2010). It was recommended that adhering to sustainable consumer communication would be expedient anyway, since it would provide for the “need to connect with consumers, giving them an emotional reason to buy” (8_2010). This article makes apparent how regardless of the ‘popularity’ of climate change, ‘sustainability’ was considered to be a crucial element of brand identities.

To summarise, the discourse that interrelated sustainability and the food industry in 2010 is greatly influenced by the recession of 2008 and dominated by two main narratives. The first one is political and production-focussed, supporting the idea that industry agents are and will remain the major sustainability agents of the future. The other is focussed on products, drawing on a perceived growth stagnation of designated ‘sustainable sectors’. This was evaluated as being ‘not as bad as it sounds’, giving an outlook for a thriving future of sustainable products and reinforcing the idea that sustainability-credentials are essential for brand-building.

5.6 2015: Consumer connection

5.6.1 Sustainability as brand identity

In the most recent sample of 2015, various references to businesses’ ‘commitments’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘purpose’ indicated a strong presence of ‘sustainability’. However, ‘sustainability’ notions were thereby both more nuanced and more ambiguous in comparison to earlier years. Various meanings of sustainability were utilised, often within one argumentation, and it merges into concepts that go far beyond environmental and social concerns. In short: In articles of 2015, ‘sustainability’ was established as a concept, but as a term loosely defined and interpreted.

This can be illustrated by the example of an article on the 60th anniversary of Birds Eye Fish Fingers (21_2015), where the focus fluctuates between different interpretations of sustainability. The article is presented with the title “How fish fingers can sustain for 60 more years”, seemingly raising the question of the product’s ability to maintain presence/popularity on the market. A few lines down, it is argued that “consumers kept engaged for six decades” because “Birds Eye has revolutionised the frozen industry to ensure product sustainability”, using the term in relation to the maintenance of consumer loyalty, referring to a another aspect of economic durability and stability. In the following two paragraphs, however, environmental references are made to Birds Eye’s promotion of

“sustainable fishing practices” and its commitment to “sustainable fisheries”, associating these actions to “ecological awareness”, “green practice” and the “Marine Stewardship Council” certification.

In the closing paragraph eventually, the term ‘sustainability’ is related to future viability, diffusing its meaning between ecology and the market. According to the argumentation held in this paragraph, Birds Eye has taken the role to ensure the persistence of “our” oceans in order to allow consumers to continue enjoying fish fingers. What they reassure to consumers, however, is not continued enjoyment, but eco-friendly sourcing. The quote therefore demonstrates how the meaning of the term ‘sustainability’ for ‘environmentally and/or socially sound future’ is presupposed through interposed commercial and consumer-related claims but simultaneously diffused through the absence of substantial references to environmental or social concerns:

“Birds Eye has an important role to play in ensuring the long-term security of our oceans. Future enjoyment through sustainable management has remained firmly at the heart of Birds Eye Fish Fingers since its launch. Through the use of the Forever Food Together Green Captain and the MSC Eco-Label across certified fish products, we can reassure consumers that the fish fingers they’ve enjoyed since Her Majesty was crowned, have been sustainably sourced - and will continue to be” (21_2015).

Sustainability, it seems, is flexible as a term to the extent that it dissolves into other concepts – one of them being health. This arises particularly remarkably in relation to the topic of ‘fish’, which shaped a specific sphere of tension between the concerns of ‘sustainability and health’ in earlier samples (see Section 5.1.1). In an article on growing sales volumes of salmon which are largely ascribed to promotions, ‘sustainability’ is applied as a filler word alongside of ‘health’, when the claim that “Brits were buying more salmon because of its reputation as a healthy, sustainable food” (13_2015) is interposed, with no further remarks on ‘sustainability’ being given. Further, in the context of an article on the canned tuna supplier John West’s “profits leap”, Greenpeace’s concerns about its fishing practices are pointed out. The article closes with the following statement, in which positive ‘health’ aspects serve as a justification for practices that are regarded ‘unsustainable’ by Greenpeace:

“[A] John West spokeswoman said the company was "committed to sustainable sourcing", noting it was the first company to sign up to WWF's Sustainable Seafood Charter last year. She claimed there was not enough pole-and-line tuna available to

meet demand, and said FADs [fish aggregating devices] were "effective at targeting single species and minimising bycatch" if properly managed. She pointed out 90% of John West tuna sold in the UK came from the skipjack species, whose stocks are considered healthy" (22_2015).

With the above statements indicating that 'sustainability' and 'health' are standing side by side, in other places 'health' was framed as a sub-category of 'sustainability'. In one article it was claimed that "animal welfare" is "above food health and safety [...] the most important sustainability issue" to consumers (14_2015), implying that 'animal welfare' and 'food health and safety' are subcategories of 'sustainability'.

In this sample, 'sustainability' was not only merged into wider contexts of aspirations such as continuous economic viability of products or individual health, it was also discursively equated with a wider concept of brand credentials. This can be illustrated by an article that lists the "[t]op five sustainable brands in fmcg [fast moving consumer goods]" according to the "Corporate Knights" magazine. In this context, charity- and environmental commitments are listed as "sustainable brand" credentials alongside of engagements for "communities" or awareness raising activities "among [...] consumers of how to make more sustainable lifestyle choices" and growth accounts recorded for "Sustainable Living Brands", as well as the promise of making the yet to be developed "HIV vaccines available at lower prices in third world countries" (18_2015).

Factual and verifiable engagements for social and environmental concerns were conflated with generic rhetorical phrases of 'doing good' and 'growth' under the collective term of 'sustainability'. This broadened use of the term 'sustainability' as a 'greater cause' of brands encompassed consumer-directed attributes that are for example summarised as "the principles of co-creation, value sharing, transparency and accountability" (19_2015), or elsewhere listed as "'LATTE': Local, Authentic, Traceable, Transparent and Ethical" (17_2015).

5.6.2 The consumer – unwilling to make choices themselves

In the sample of 2015, the idea of building a connection to consumers through sustainability credentials was discursively framed as the central objective in relation to sustainability. With 'consumer pressure' being regarded as the constant companion of business conduct, an emphasis was put on the importance of businesses to foster an emotional connection to the consumer that is built on trust and transparency. Consumer power, portrayed as being

exerted through scrutiny and pressure on the industry, was frequently referred to throughout the sample. Rather than discussing consumers' potential choices in the supermarket, the focus was on consumers' potential online activities. In other words; reputation was not portrayed as something left to the businesses' efforts and inputs, but as highly influenced by and dependent on consumers' active interference. Thus, many consumer-related argumentations drew upon the notion that "companies cannot afford to be anything less than open" (17_2015) since through social media "any accusation of unethical practice can spread fast" (15_2015).

In the claimed necessity to 'connect to the consumer', 'ethics' and 'environmental' concerns were contrasted: while the former was claimed to form the basis of consumer communications, the latter was regarded to be taken for granted by consumers, without actively looking for them. In reaction to the finding that "price and quality still ranked above sustainability for consumers overall", a representative of The Seafish Industry Authority argued in one article that "[i]n their [the consumers'] view, it is the role of the retailer to ensure the seafood they source is responsibly fished, both environmentally and socially" (25_2015). Findings on low consumer commitment to sustainability issues were commented on with arguments such as that "[c]onsumers for their part expect grocery retailers and brands to be accountable for their social and environmental impacts" (19_2015). These claims suggest that consumers *do* care but take sustainability in business as a given while in relation to their own action, they focus more on 'traditional' consumer concerns such as 'price' and 'quality'. Implied in this argumentation is that businesses should be wary about the ever-present observation and pressure exercised by consumers, since they could potentially catch out sustainability offenders at any time. In relation to the wider 'purpose'-interpretation of sustainability, 'consumer pressure', however, did not replace 'consumer choice' as a means to ultimately reflect consumers' commitment. The central aspect of 'consumer pressure' rather sets the focus on the intermediary element of business reputation, which was regarded to be found reflected in sales, and therefore consumer choice (e.g. deliberate avoidance of brands due to scandals or deliberate purchases because of convincing ethical claims).

Environmental concerns were portrayed as comparatively low on the list of consumer concerns when it comes to their daily choices. As opposed to this, ethics were portrayed to

score higher than ‘environmental’ products in consumer rankings and to be touching upon consumers’ emotions. ‘Ethics’ were explicitly put in contrast to ‘sustainability’, for example when it was found that “[c]onsumers cared less about guarantees that a company would improve the environment (42%), limit its carbon footprint (32%) and pay its taxes (30%) [...] while half (52%) said they would stop buying products from a company found to be acting unethically” (15_2015). Further, emphasising the factors of ‘price’ and ‘quality’ in ‘ethical’ produce, the following two quotes indicate a revival of the notion of ‘ethics’ that was prevalent in the sample of 2005:

“According to the Foods Attitude Study, 76% of customers say they're more drawn to buy ethical brands, with 74% believing it leads to a higher quality product, too” (18_2015).

"In 2013, Fairtrade product sales reached £1.5bn in the UK alone, reflecting the growing willingness of consumers to pay an ethical price for goods" (7_2015).

Overall, two core notions on ‘the consumer’ are placed. Both are based on ‘transparency’/ ‘trust’ as the common denominator between conceptualisations of ‘ethics’ and ‘sustainability’. Firstly, similarly to ‘ethics’-related argumentations of the sample of 2005, it is argued that consumers are ready to spend their money on products with ethical credentials since they associate them with a ‘purpose’, and therefore positive emotions. Secondly, in opposition to this, and similarly to the sample of 2010, various references state that consumers will not translate their values into actions of ‘choice’ at the point of purchase. In comparison to the sample of 2010, however, it was not argued that consumers *cannot* afford to make sustainable choices. Consumers were rather presented as taking sustainability in the food industry for granted, which makes them *unwilling* to make sustainable choices.

5.6.3 Representation and contextualisation within the food industry

Through references to consumer desires, ‘sustainability’ was in 2015 differentiated into two diverging concepts: firstly, a narrow understanding of ‘environmental sustainability’ and, secondly, a broad understanding of ethics and ‘purpose’. This differentiation is reflected in its portrayal in the context of conduct of the food industry. While the former was portrayed as largely established as an integral part of ‘doing business’, the latter was considered as a ‘differentiating’ brand attribute to testify brand credibility and authenticity.

The notion of progress in ‘environmental sustainability’ is reinforced with references that evidence the far-reaching establishment of ‘sustainable’ certifications, alleged consumer

expectations on sustainability standards, as well as in general statements on how businesses have taken the sustainability agenda to an advanced level. The following text section represents an example for the latter, arguing that the newly adopted UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will not greatly impact the activities of the retailer Marks and Spencer since many things have already been taken care of since years:

“Sustainability is already high on the agenda in grocery and has been for years. The SDGs won't mark a ‘radical revolution’ for the sector, says Mike Barry, director of sustainable business at M&S, but ‘another step on the journey’. The retailer has already achieved 47 of 100 commitments on sustainability in its own Plan A. These include a 60% reduction in packaging used for home deliveries, 100% of fish sourced sustainably, and a 36% improvement in energy efficiency” (20_2015).

In the context of sustainability as ‘purpose’, on the contrary, the necessity of active consumer engagement was emphasised. In a lengthy article dealing with the question whether “business need a purpose” (18_2015), several voices in support of brand credibility and differentiation were cited, with for example the Vice President for Sustainable Businesses at Unilever claiming that it is important for businesses to take “measurable action in a way that's relevant to the brand, good for society and meaningful to the people who choose their products”. It would be crucial to “establish a credible connection between product and cause, a vital component in selecting any social purpose” (18_2015). While environmental sustainability was portrayed as a customary, integrated part of doing business, commitments to a ‘purpose’ were associated or even justified with commercial benefits. For example, in reference to “[l]atest figures from Fairtrade” to show that brands “championing social purpose and sustainability are growing nearly eight times faster than the stagnant UK economy as a whole”, it is stated that “saving the world has become big business” (18_2015). Further, a speaker of Unilever claims that “[m]illennials” being “receptive to sustainability credentials” is “a pattern reflected in their sales” (18_2015).

A concrete example in this context are comments on Coca Cola's positioning in the sphere of social purpose which was given attention in two different articles of this sample. In an article written by the vice president of Coca-Cola Enterprises GB, he states that the company is “changing the way [it] market[s] Coca-Cola - unifying [its] four variants through a new 'one brand' strategy” by focussing on making the offered “choices [...] much clearer to consumers” in order to promote sales of their “lower and no-calorie products” as their

contribution to “inspire sustainable soft drinks choices”. While applying a very loose concept of ‘sustainability’, ‘health’ emerges to be the company’s contribution to the community:

“To inspire, we need to bring new consumer ideas through product, packaging and commercial innovation. On choices, it’s about offering the right range and communicating it in a way that helps shoppers make the most appropriate decisions for themselves and their families. And we know that health is a key element of sustainable choices” (5_2015).

In another article, a consultant argues that the company should “ditch its £3bn advertising budget for a year to help the world’s rainforests”, asking the rhetorical question: “What do Coca-Cola know about the rainforest?”. Allocating the company’s purpose elsewhere, he further argues that

“[o]f course, they’re environmentally conscious and ever more sustainably sourced but it isn’t their core skill’ [...] ‘Their skill is drinks and consumers. The work they do around happiness is a great platform. Take that £3bn and spend it on something that’s to do with community and people, rather than trees” (18_2015).

Given the examples presented in this section, it becomes apparent that the ideas of differentiation/saliency through ‘purpose’ which were generated through claims that emphasise the importance of sustainability as a brand attribute, lead to a reasoning that puts credibility/authenticity of brands ahead of environmental sustainability. An image of a pool of possibilities for brands to choose whatever matches them best is created, while calls to reach social and environmental sustainability goals lose salience. In short: if, under these terms, an environmental sustainability’ topic is found to be unpopular amongst consumers or not overtly compatible with a brand’s positioning in the first place, it can easily be disregarded.

What was found in the sample of 2015 was a distinction between product-related and consumer-facing ‘purpose’ attributes and production-related ‘environmental’ matters of sourcing, production and distribution. Environmental sustainability was regarded to concern ways of production that consumers do not directly face when making choices. As opposed to this, sustainability in the sense of ‘purpose’ was regarded to appeal to consumers’ concerns about quality and to foster the development of an emotional connection of consumers with brands that they are ready to reward with loyalty and with paying higher prices. This differentiation is similar to the distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘sustainability’ identified in

the sample of 2005, but with the difference that environmental sustainability does no more seem to pose a challenge – at least not in relation to consumers.

5.7 Conclusion

Comparing past (2005, 2007, 2010) with recent (2015) industry-related discourses on food sustainability, significant changes to the ways in which ‘sustainability’ has been framed were identified. As observed in articles published in *The Grocer*, ‘food sustainability’ was in its earliest discursive framing of 2005 defined by environmental issues and associated with questions of resilience and portrayed as constituting a challenge to the industry. Consumers, described as being unaware and unconcerned about these issues, were regarded as adding to the challenge. Fast forward ten years, ‘sustainability’ was frequently used as a self-explanatory term in relation to issues far beyond environmental challenges and matters of social justice. When raised as a topic as such, ‘environmental sustainability’ was portrayed as being largely established and implemented in the industry’s conduct and as such being taken for granted by consumers. An interrogation of the development of discourses in the time between helps to shed a light on the developments that resulted in this change.

The examination of discursive developments in *The Grocer* revealed that there was a time shortly after 2005, when the industry began to adapt more resource-, energy-, and, consequently, cost-efficient ways of production that were framed as ‘sustainable’. The analysis further revealed that what was in 2005 described as a consumer trend for ‘ethical premium produce’, was in 2007 referred to as evidence for consumers demanding sustainable products. Paired up, these two developments redefined sustainability in 2007 as something that is good for businesses, consumers and the planet alike. The focus on opportunities associated with this new concept of sustainability distracted attention from the problem- and challenge-centred focus that was in place in 2005.

One could conclude that over a period of two years, the industry managed to transform one of its biggest challenges into an opportunity or that consumers have been fully educated on sustainability and collectively and consciously decided to make sustainable choices whenever possible. Comparing prevalent narratives in *The Grocer* in 2005 and 2007, however, this analysis suggests that for the situation to appear so radically different, it was the *notion* of sustainability that was redefined and transformed. The 2005 definition that encompassed long-term resilience and future viability was replaced by an equation of

sustainability and efficiency in production by 2007, transforming sustainability from a challenge into an opportunity. Simultaneously, the idea of 'sustainable products' was established, in the sense that the formerly identified trend for 'ethical premium produce' was redefined as a trend for 'sustainable produce'.

The discursive 'bubble' established over this short period of time comes to the fore when discourses of 2007 are compared with discourses of 2010. 'Price', which in 2007 functioned as the determining factor for consumer commitment to sustainable products, posed a great problem to 'food sustainability' in 2010, two years after the economic recession took hold. As a consequence of having been established merely on the grounds of a consumer trend for 'ethical premium produce', consumer commitment to sustainable choices appeared to decline during and after the recession. With tensions within the concept of 'sustainability' in 2010 being explicitly raised and calls to define sustainability being expressed, the narratives of 2010 further show how unclear the concept of 'sustainability' was during the period of the 'green hype' in 2007, when the production and consumption of sustainable food appeared to thrive.

Examining discourses of 2010 in comparison to other years, it is further revealed how the difficulties that 'sustainability' appeared to encounter during and after the economic recession were mobilised to establish a stronger sense of business agency. With eco- and resource-efficiency in production being established as a core principle and integrated aspect of industry conduct, and consumers' lack of commitment to sustainable choices being regarded as a sole result of financial difficulties, the idea that the industry takes the lead on sustainability could be established. Building on the 2007 established idea of consumers being keen to consume sustainably as well as the in 2010 apprehended notion of sustainable products being (temporally) hard to afford for consumers, a notion of a 'attitude-behaviour gap' was established that legitimised narratives on businesses having to take care of consumers on their behalf.

This is reflected in articles of 2015, where 'environmental sustainability' is self-evidently taken as a principle followed by the industry. Being described as 'critical observers' or as 'trusting receivers' of sustainability, consumers remain to be framed as rather passive in relation to environmental sustainability, but are portrayed as showing increased demand in products and brands with a 'purpose'. The differentiation between 'environmental'- and

'purpose'-sustainability in these most recent discourses reveals firstly how previous understandings of 'sustainability' are surpassed by 'premium purpose' as a consumer trend which subsumes several product characteristics that are regarded as 'marketable'. Secondly, it demonstrates how 'sustainability' is redefined by a narrow focus on environmental issues, which are regarded as less marketable. In this way, the underlying definition of 'food sustainability' in discourses of 2015 replicates the definition which was 'originally' in place in discourses of 2005: environmental issues have to be taken care of by the industry without the support of consumer choice. In comparison to the sample of 2005, however, 'the consumer' is portrayed differently: with consumers having been incorporated into discourses as choosing agents (2007) and later been transformed to willing, but inactive agents (2010). In 2015 they are, as opposed to discourses of 2005, no more portrayed as being uninformed, unaware and consequently inactive, but as informed and aware but deliberately inactive. This notion of consumers consequently reinforces the notion that the industry transformation towards 'sustainability' is largely accomplished, with related narratives suggesting that the mass of critically minded consumers is finally able to lean back and relax about environmental issues and let the industry carry on with 'sustainable production', while consumers themselves move on to follow their 'new' individual concerns around 'purpose'.

Chapter 6 - Discourses on food sustainability: interviews with experts

6.1 Introduction

The analysis of articles in *The Grocer* presented in the previous chapter allows extensive insights into discursive changes over time. Given the centrality of the magazine within the food industry and the variety of voices from various stakeholders that are present on this platform, it delivers strong data in discourse analytical terms. Media articles, however, constitute a very specific genre and embody particular means of language and communication. Their analysis is static in the sense that their context is set, which ensures discourse-analytical validity in its own right, but at the same time represents a limitation. As opposed to this, the analysis of qualitative interviews allows for a more specific, in-depth examination of particular stakeholder framings of the issue of investigation. Through interviewing, a dialogue is encountered. Interviewing allows to specifically provoke the expression of opinions or knowledge on certain topics as well as to ask for clarification on certain comments or remarks that interviewees make. Further, the interaction with the interviewing researcher contributes to the self-representation of the interviewee as an expert in the field (Abell and Myers 2008).

Following the aim to investigate the ways in which matters of sustainability are discussed within expert circles, I conducted interviews with nine participants who are greatly involved with the concerns of the food industry and occupy key positions in grocery retail or NGOs and consultancies with specific engagement with the food industry (see Table 2 in Section 4.3.2 for details on their occupation). Following a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix II), I prompted the respondents to evaluate strategies and implementations for sustainability. The data gathered thus provides insights into current stakeholder debates on food and sustainability and gives an indication on the prevalence of different subject areas and on the ways in which these subject areas are debated. Examining how they diagnose and critique the current situation, and in particular their underlying understandings of 'sustainability', as well as the ways in which they refer to the consumer, promised in-depth insights to compliment the broader analysis of articles in *The Grocer*.

The participants were interviewed as representatives of a wider circle of stakeholders in the food industry. They all are experts on the food industry and related implementations for

sustainability. Although dealing with expert knowledge, the approach taken for this study significantly differs from typical studies expert interview-based studies. Given that the purpose of the interviews was not to extract 'expert' or 'insider' information on the issue of investigation, the focus of this research is not the interviewees' expertise, such as the historical or regulatory knowledge or the information on developments or innovation shared during the interview. It was rather the notions of 'sustainability' and 'the consumer' that the experts (re-)produce whilst sharing their knowledge that constituted the subjects of study. Discourse analytical studies approach meanings, values and principles carried by interviewees as a linguistic expression of institutional practices and the social reality that they operate within (Abell and Myers 2008, Hammersley 2014, Talja 1999). Rather than trying to give an account of the interviewees' expertise and assessment of certain sustainability-related issues by investigating the views and insights of single interviewees question by question, the whole data set was scanned for representations of attitudes and knowledge structures. The analysis presented in this chapter thus comprises the core descriptions, explanations and arguments and the basic assumptions on social change for food sustainability drawn upon by these experts during the interviews.²¹

As shown in Section 6.2 below, three notions of sustainability that underlie the interviewees' argumentations on strategies and implementations for a more sustainable food system were identified: sustainability as a synergy, sustainability as a product attribute and sustainability as an economic value. Notably, these notions were mobilised in different argumentative contexts. While the notion of sustainability as a synergy was inherently found in experts' *descriptions* on what sustainability is or should be, the latter two notions were indirectly applied in the context of arguments dealing with the realisation of sustainability in the food industry and implicitly drawn upon as self-evident 'common sense' (Fairclough 2001). Interviewees drew upon an underlying notion of sustainability as a product attribute when it came to *imagine* how sustainability is, will or should be implemented in the food industry and mobilised a notion of sustainability as an economic value in order to *legitimise* action for sustainability.

²¹ As explained in Chapter Three, the aim of this research was to identify the discursive framework, i.e. the discursive 'common ground' that experts on 'sustainable food consumption' operate in, for which their institutional association was deliberately left unconsidered (Section 4.3.2).

Discussing sustainability-related issues in the context of the food industry, interviewees draw on various assumptions and ideas on consumers' attitudes, behaviours, roles and responsibility. Consumers are most dominantly described for something that they do not do, which is to make sustainable choices. However, closely related to this is a more active account of consumers, in which they are described as requesting initiative from experts and decision makers, in particular retailers, to implement sustainability. In two less prominent, but nevertheless apparent accounts, some interviewees further narrate positive stories of consumer choice successfully delivering change to certain areas and reflect upon consumers' 'disconnection' from food and farming. These discursive conceptualisations of 'the consumer' in relation to food sustainability are elaborated in Section 6.3.

6.2 Conceptualisations and notions of sustainability

Having been interviewed in their role as experts on food sustainability, the respondents of this study were prompted to look back on past developments to evaluate the current situation and to look ahead. They were encouraged to voice their opinion and to make statements on what should or should not be done etc. (see Chapter Four, Section 4.3.2). The interview material thus encompasses a large number of descriptive and normative statements which contain diagnoses on the issue of food sustainability and elaborations on outlooks on potential strategies and implementations in relation to the pursuit of a sustainable food system.

In the accounts given by the interviewees, three dominant notions of sustainability were identified, which are drawn upon in different argumentative contexts. The experts explicitly identified and discussed sustainability as a synergy. This was the case when they elaborated on their personal viewpoints and also when they described progress or imagined how 'sustainability' should ideally be approached by practitioners, politics or other policy-making agents (Section 6.2.1). Secondly, when they expressed visions of social change and related challenges, opportunities or successful implications, they compared 'sustainability' to other product attributes, such as 'convenience' and 'price' and differentiated 'sustainable' from 'unsustainable' products by employing a notion of sustainability as a product attribute (Section 6.2.2). Lastly, when legitimising sustainability as an aim to follow, experts conceptualised sustainable products as being worth more and costing more and sustainable production being efficient, overall drawing upon a notion of sustainability as an economic

value (Section 6.2.3). In the following, it is outlined how each of those three notions are reinforced by the interviewees. A concluding section (6.2.4) summarises the core findings.

6.2.1 Describing it: sustainability as a synergy

When the interviewed experts made descriptive or normative statements, for example to outline their ‘personal’ approach to sustainability, they attempted to conceptualise what ‘sustainability’ ought to be, or when they evaluated, they referred to it as a synergy in which various aspects and agencies interact and cooperate. While interviewees generally share this notion throughout, there are variations to the ways in which it is portrayed and imagined and on how its realisation is evaluated. Depending on the speaker and context, an associated ‘bigger picture’ idea encompasses claims such as that strategies for sustainability have to follow a comprehensive understanding of related matters and/or that sustainability requires a ‘systematic connection’ between sectors, stakeholders and beyond national boundaries. It further entails the acceptance of complexity and ambivalence within the larger context of sustainability-related concerns.

Eight out of nine experts expressed at some point of the interview that ‘sustainability’ is, or should be conceptualised as a synergy. Opposing insufficient strategies and approaches which are commonly assigned to the past, but also to undesirable practices of the present, the experts used terms such as ‘holistic’, ‘integrated’ or ‘systematic’ to name what they consider to be an ‘ideal’ approach to sustainability. These terms all indicate that sustainability is or should be approached as something that is ‘more than the sum of its parts’.

For example, in his comparison of past and present strategies John, who holds a senior managerial position in an NGO, claimed that “there have been some positive signs of a more kind of *holistic understanding* of food systems and the impact that food has”. Robert, whose charity-based senior role entails the development of strategies, offered a similar assessment in stating that “most of the academics, most of the practitioners, even in the business area see that a *systemic solution* is what we need”. Mary, who is sustainability manager at a major retailer, comes to similar findings when she compares past to present approaches. She does not only differentiate a “*holistic view*” from handling “individual issues”, but also from – as she implies, more simple – ethical ambitions to do “the right thing”. In this context she

refers to holism in the sense of the scale of the problem – the “fundamental” challenge to feed a growing world population in a constrained world.

Most experts presented an account of the notion of sustainability as a synergy that is not limited to their personal role or their affiliated organisation(s) but concerns the overall involvement of various stakeholders in the UK. A common theme which represents this account of sustainability is the connection between sustainable and healthy diets. Interviewees frequently took health and sustainability self-evidently as two sides of the same coin, switching between both in their argumentations. Some made explicit that there is a connection established, or to be established, between understandings of sustainable and healthy diets. Robert, for example, expressed this connection as being a central element of his own way of approaching food-industry related issues, but also identified a general development into this direction:

“I am leaning towards diets that are healthier and indeed more sustainable and what I think is one of the interesting things that has happened over the last 10 years in terms of an increasing consensus around what is a healthy diet and interestingly that is probably a more of a sustainable diet in terms of its carbon, water and waste footprint” (Robert).

A prevalent topic in which some saw a clear and consistent connection between ‘sustainability’ and ‘health’ was meat reduction i.e. ‘protein diversity’. While some present this connection to illustrate how approaches towards sustainability have advanced, others consider ways of how to ‘make use’ of it. Thus, it was for example argued that tackling the issue would make sense from both an environmental perspective as well as from a health point of view, but that a marketing focus on health makes most sense, given that consumers would be “more motivated by health on the issue of protein, than they are on environmental impact” (Mary). Although widely welcoming a connection between sustainability and health, some were less optimistic about according implementations and identified struggles. William for example, whose professional background involves previous key positions in retailing and who worked as an industry consultant at the time the interview was held, saw in agents’ differing interests an obstacle to the realisation of a harmonisation of sustainable and healthy diets:

“you’ve got competing messages around health and environment depending on the sectors, so where a health organisation came out talking about the counter risks from processed meat, the meat sector then obviously tries to demonstrate that processed

meat is not bad for you but you are supporting the local farmers and so on – really, really competing issues” (William).

Recognising the importance of integrated approaches, experiences of the past were reflected upon. The experts either portrayed current strategies as being comparatively improved or advocated for revisited strategies for the future. Some claimed that ‘earlier’ approaches to interventions for a more sustainable food system fell short in recognising the importance and allowing for a connection between various aspects and agents that are relevant to the food system.

Robert looked back on a situation of industry-wide single component- and short term-focussed strategies. He believes that what “was absent” then was “the overarching idea [that] we need to move towards an overall more sustainable food system that needs actually multiple areas”. Referring to implementations that have been undertaken by the retailer ASDA, William presented a similar view, assessing that “until 2007, sustainability was still very new; they were not really understanding concepts like life-cycle-assessment”. It was further “less transformational” and focussed on “kind of direct impacts”. Mary reflected on this in the context of her workplace. She finds that in the past, various ‘areas of operation’ have been existent, but not necessarily related. She opposes this situation to the present, where, as she emphasises, “bridges” are “happening”.

Michael, who works as a senior advisor for the food and retail industry, presented a practical example to demonstrate how the changed mind-set business actors has led to the adoption of more responsible strategies as opposed to the past. In his understanding of a development towards a more integrated concept, he focuses on advances in sustainability through the “increasing realisation of the global nature of supply chains and the consequences associated with it”:

“In the early 2000s, if you were to talk to a retailer [...] about sourcing fresh produce around the world and water scarcity, they would have taken the view: ‘well if there is a problem with one growing region, we go to another growing region to source our crops [...]’. Fast forward to 2009 [...] businesses are realising you can’t chase water scarcity around the world because water scares on a planetary level [...] and therefore [...] acting responsibly wherever water scares started to become the mindset.” (Michael)

Two interviewees, James and Joseph, as opposed to most general sentiments, argued that little of the ideal of sustainability as a synergy has been realised so far. James, an NGO-based

senior professional who specialises in food agrees with the ideal of different parts and components of sustainability being drawn together into a synergy. He critically questioned its realisation as of yet and argued that “the UK government has really failed at any integrated food and farming strategy”. He further claimed that strategies were neither “really comprehensive”, nor “long term” oriented or considering “the UK's role on a global stage”. Strategies would have been one-sided and based on investments in “lots in agri-tech-novel-food solutions”. Joseph similarly criticised a lack of comprehensiveness and cohesion while emphasising the complexity of sustainability-related matters. In his opinion, the core obstacle to more sustainable food systems is a far-reaching failure to collaborate. He thus argued that “best practice is not necessarily shared. It is too competitive an environment”.

The idea that sustainability is complex and that related strategies need to cater for various components and integrate several agents was, as the presented quotes demonstrate, widely shared. In some contexts, the idea of sustainability as a synergy was referred to as a self-evidently taken ideal state or objective, while in other cases its importance was explicitly stressed and progress towards it discussed. This notion of sustainability was thus drawn upon particularly as a parameter to determine the level of progress and advance of sustainability-related interventions and strategies in the past or at present.

6.2.2 Implementing it: sustainability as a product attribute

A recognition and evaluation of sustainable product attributes and product segments was identified throughout all interviews. This notion was drawn upon in contexts in which interviewees imagined how sustainability is, can be, or struggles to be implemented. Interviewees expressed ideas to reach a sustainable food system by limiting or removing unsustainable products or by reformulating unsustainable products into sustainable products. A greater availability and/or turnover of, for example, products labelled as ‘organic’ or ‘fair trade’ was thereby commonly emphasised as being a great achievement. The notion of sustainability as a product attribute was further reinforced in a less positive context, when the importance and popularity of ‘sustainability’ was compared with other attributes such as ‘price’ and ‘convenience’. Narratives that feed into this notion are presented in the following two sections (6.2.2.1 and 6.2.2.2).

6.2.2.1 Sustainable vs. unsustainable products

Volume growth of certain products or product segments, their increased availability in shops and popularity amongst consumers were frequently referred to as accomplishments in relation to sustainability. In some cases, these claims were supported with references to numbers and statistics as evidence. David, whose role entails the collaboration with businesses in the food sector, for example, presented the case of organic having “grown perhaps in a niche way” to Waitrose currently having “about 25% of all of the organics which are sold to the supermarkets” as evidence for progress for sustainability.

Retailers’ promotion of sustainable attributes of products and actions to limit their supply to certified products were referred to as positive signs for change towards more sustainable food systems. John referred to the example of the decision of Sainsbury’s from “about 6 years ago” to offer only Fairtrade trade bananas as “positive progress”. Like David, he equated certain certified product segments with ‘sustainability’ and opposed them to undesirable “unsustainable choices”, which are, as he emphasised, thanks to Sainsbury’s initiative, not anymore available in their stores. A clear differentiation between sustainable and unsustainable consumption was also made by Robert. He presented the example of Nestle as a business that has begun to respond to the idea of businesses taking responsibility (as opposed to relying on consumer responsibility). Talking about the introduction of smaller portion sizes in sweets, he self-evidently assumed that the product Kit Kat as such qualifies as being sustainable. He referred to it as a positive example for progress, explaining that Nestle only anymore makes it available in its sustainable version.

“It is interesting to see how businesses are beginning to respond, I mean how Nestle have responded for example on the, on chocolate, how you see smaller portion sizes now in order to help people to select more of the right number of calories as well as having that treat. So, you know, businesses are responding and you don't see a sustainable Kit Kat and a not-sustainable Kit Kat” (Robert).

Single product-related implementations such as the increased or sole supply of certain certified products in supermarkets or the changeover to reformulated products across all retailers are frequently mentioned examples brought up by the experts and referred to as flagship-projects for a sustainable food system. In quotes such as the ones presented here, ‘sustainability’ is portrayed as something that is true to certain product segments or products but not to others. This ‘absolute’ notion of ‘sustainability’ leaves little space for the appreciation of nuances between ‘sustainable’ and ‘unsustainable’. Certain labelled or

reformulated products are self-evidently regarded as sustainable, while the opposite is attributed to their 'conventional counterparts'. The wider impact of these products however remained unquestioned. In that sense, this notion is in conflict with the notion of sustainability as a synergy: while the idea of sustainability as a synergy implies that sustainability has multiple components that have relative significance to one another, sustainability as a product attribute is understood to be self-evidently absolute.

6.2.2.2 Trading off 'sustainability' against other product attributes

The way in which 'sustainability' was conceptualised and opposed to 'unsustainability' in the quotes shown in Section 6.2.2.1 above delivers a rather positive, optimistic and – above all – feasible and partially accomplished picture of a sustainable future. However, the notion of sustainability as a product attribute was also drawn upon in the context of discussions on challenges to the sustainability agenda. 'Sustainability' was then compared to other popular product attributes, such as 'price' and 'convenience'.

Michael for example gave an account of this notion, arguing that most consumers, if given the choice, would not be ready to pay more for a product if sustainability-related issues were the only motivator. Thus, he stated that "[t]here isn't a massive groundswell of shoppers saying 'Oh this is terrible'." They would be, as he further explained, rather "driven primarily by price and then by quality and then by convenience". Mary very similarly argued that consumers "are never going to drive the fundamental change you need to happen". She explained that when it comes to consumers' commitment to 'sustainability' as a product attribute, they "do care but they do not care at the cost of convenience, price or quality". James also referred to a list of product attributes, with 'sustainability' existing as a category alongside others such as 'health', but being ranked relatively far down:

"[W]hen it actually comes to the average person, you know, when they pick up their supermarket basket or trolley, you know, always the first decision that comes in terms of how they make the choice between all sorts of different products and brands is, cost will always come first, there will be safety, health issues. And the sustainability, environmental issues always come fourth or fifth down the line" (James).

In the quotes cited above the idea of sustainability as a product attribute is reinforced through the comparison of 'sustainability' to other product attributes. References to consumers' ranking of product attributes (e.g. 'price' comes before 'sustainability') are in this context taken as evidence for the claim that preferences in daily considerations of

consumers lie not on 'sustainability' but elsewhere. Drawing on this understanding, many argued that 'selling' consumers sustainable products by emphasising product attributes other than sustainability would encourage more sustainable ways of consumption. In particular appeals related to individual health were pointed out as having potential to raise the level of sustainable consumption. Identifying "a big rise in the kind of health-conscious consumer" (James), it was argued that "rather than saying 'oh, you should do this because an animal might suffer [...] which will work for some people, but not for others'" (John), health-appeals would lead to more success: "If it is about your own health and the health of the children then for many that will be more compelling" (John). In these lines of argumentation, the idea of a connection between sustainable and healthy diets is framed as an instrument to influence consumers to consume in more sustainable ways.

The image of consumers who trade-off sustainability against other product attributes customarily came up in the context of questioning providing consumers information to influence behaviour as a way of dealing with unsustainable ways of food consumption. In this context, 'sustainability' discursively still remained to be portrayed as a product attribute, but with the inherent acknowledgement that it should not be left to consumers' individual preferences and choices at the point of purchase whether a 'sustainable' product will be successful or not. Thus, it was argued that sustainability rather needs to be true for products in the first place and that the product attribute 'sustainable' is self-evidently taken as an absolute category.

The following quotation gives a final example of how sustainability is conceptualised as a product attribute when it comes to the respondents' ideas on how to implement 'sustainability' into processes of the food industry:

"if you go there that you are offered a better set of choice, so more sustainable and lower in carbon profile and it is still our choice, you can still choose depending on values that are important to you and etc., but that the worst offenders will be taken off the shelves, the worst ingredients or the unsustainable palm oil or whatever is not featuring so you can get on to choose, making a decision, a considered decision, but not having to think about the other [...]. It is not a black or white, this option is better than this option [...]. It already exists in the United States where you can go on to a website and tick certain box to say "I only want to buy", depending on what you choose, you might say I want to buy locally produced food or I want to buy lower carbon options or I only want to buy fair trade or I only want to buy the cheapest possible one, whatever your particular thing might be, you know, you can, and that

will then instead of being offered 20 000 products, then that filters down for you, to say, ok, you are now offered 1000 products” (John).

Although acknowledging that it is not “black and white” between sustainable and unsustainable products (which is otherwise rarely the case throughout the interviews), John envisions a future in which all products carry some kind of sustainability-credential. Suggesting a choice architecture to counteract the possibility of consumer trade-offs between sustainable and unsustainable products, he applies a reductionist understanding of sustainable consumption in which consumers choose between a variety of ‘sustainable’ attributes.

6.2.3 Legitimising it: sustainability as an economic value

In a third notion that experts frequently drew upon, sustainability was conceptualised as an economic value. This picture was drawn in a twofold way: in relation to products and in relation to production. Contextualised within arguments related to products, the value of ‘sustainability’ was equated with a monetary value, with various explanations and justifications in relation to progress or a lack of progress in relation to more sustainable food systems. This was based on the notion that sustainable products are in fact, or perceived to be, more expensive to consumers than less or un-sustainable products. In relation to production methods, ‘sustainability’ – interpreted as a collective for ‘eco-efficient’ innovation – was regarded to provide benefits to producers and distributors, as illustrated by the example of ‘food waste’.

The notion of sustainability as an economic value was drawn upon in both, products- and production-based narratives and provided an argumentative base to legitimise action (or a lack of action) in the name of sustainability. In relation to the economic value of products, sustainability was portrayed as being wanted for being ‘worth more’ but to be neglected or rejected for ‘costing more’. In relation to production, sustainability was portrayed to be efficient, profitable and consequently ‘naturally’ pursued by businesses. Narratives that feed into these notions are presented in the following sections 6.2.3.1 and 6.2.3.2.

6.2.3.1 Sustainability is worth more and costs more

Some interviewees drew on the notion that sustainable products are more expensive than unsustainable products. They commonly either reasoned that sustainable products are rightly more expensive for various reasons or that in a future situation where environmental

costs could not be externalised, sustainable products would not be more expensive than unsustainable products. In both examples presented in the following, these two argumentations are mixed. Both interviewees justify higher prices for 'sustainable' fish while they at the same time argue that these are not inevitable. David introduces his argument with a critical account of low prices, referring to the endangered material existence of fish. In the further course of his argument, however, he seemingly disregards the sustainability problem related to endangered fish, as he proceeds to argue on the basis of price mechanisms:

"I always used to say to people 'well, if you think sustainable fish is expensive, how much do you think the last fish is gonna cost you?' You know, the answer is pretty clear that, actually, the more fish you have, the cheaper the food is and therefore sustainability is not a cost really, what it is, is actually keeping the cost down, because if you have a sustainable supply chain [...] then it is not gonna be subject to inflated prices because of decreasing availability, you know" (David).

Rhetorically confusing 'price' and 'costs' as well as materialist and environmentalist views, he suggests that 'sustainable' fish could be relatively cheap in the future: while he initially draws attention to unsustainable fish production as a problem by pointing at the related environmental issues, he then changes over to argue on the base of purely economic considerations, self-evidently assuming that 'sustainable' mass production of fish would serve the environment, consumers and businesses alike. The argumentation ends with a binary logic in which substituting 'sustainable' for 'unsustainable' products is regarded to be the answer.

Mary introduces her argumentation with the suggestion that sustainable products do not necessarily have to cost more. She goes on to explain how low prices of products come about. She draws on the vision of a 'real price' of food, arguing that cheap prices on new products only work in the 'short term' because someone on the supply chain has to cover the costs so that they are not burdened on to the consumer.

"It is not inevitable, I don't think that 'sustainable' has to cost more, but I think often when you are trying to disrupt in the way that markets work, it won't cost more on the short term because you are trying to change something and whether that cost gets passed on to the customer is another question. Because you might say your manufacturer or your supplier needs to take on board some of that cost, it might be that you choose to do some of that or it might be that you pass that on to the customer" (Mary).

She then goes on to make the normative point that profit margins cannot be established on the basis of slave labour in the supply chain:

“Often you find that people are being paid enough – they overexploit because they need to make their margin somewhere else, so, and that kind of works conversely interestingly somewhere like fish, so fishing, you have a situation where a lot of the ocean's fishery has been overexploited, so, there are less fish to catch. And what that means it that fishermen get less money. So what they turn into is slave labour. And then they get their margin. That is not cool! But that is what happens, so I think [...] that is a point that something is gonna cost more, I think the point is unless you have clear rules and legislation in place, people will find shortcuts and where there are shortcuts, you are going to be compromising probably on environmental standards or labour standards” (Mary).

In this quote, she finally presents a dilemma. Costs do not disappear: under the given conditions of overexploited fish stocks, costs either have to be covered by an agent along the supply chain or fishermen have to work under slavery-like conditions to save costs. The solution is eventually seen in “clear rules and legislation”, since producers will otherwise always find ‘shortcuts’. An explanation on where this leaves the earlier expressed belief that ‘sustainable’ does not have to cost more, however, remains unspoken.

Both, David’s and Mary’s argumentation is built up in reference to the notion that sustainable products are more expensive, but also more worth than other products. David narrated an ‘everyone profits’-understanding of sustainability that he imagines to be realized through price-mechanisms, whereas Mary drew a less optimistic picture, vaguely calling for ‘clear rules and legislation’. Both experts referred to environmental issues related to fish production while rhetorically confusing ‘price’ and ‘costs’, both, in the sense of ‘money’ as well as in the sense of ‘negative circumstances/consequences’. This tension between valuing sustainable products for being more expensive but ensuring that a sustainable food system does not mean higher prices for food was typical of the examined expert discourse.

6.2.3.2 Sustainability is efficient and profitable

The economic valuation of sustainability was discursively not only supported by the idea that sustainable products are worth more in monetary terms. A further commonly expressed idea was that of ‘sustainability’ as an efficient and financially rewarding way of production.

Quotes drawn from the interview with David demonstrate how sustainable and efficient production are discursively equated. As shown in 6.2.2.1, the interviewee referred to the

growth of the “organic movement” as a positive example for progress towards sustainability. At a later point of the interview, however, he contrasted ‘conventional’ with ‘organic chicken’. He ascribed a low carbon footprint to the former, which he opposed to animal welfare benefits of the latter. In this context, he presented the following reasoning, trading off animal welfare against the different use of resources:

“Now, there is a sense that, you know, organic food is more sustainable than conventionally produced food. [...] I generally approach it through the chicken, so the question is [...] then how long a chicken lives for. It is 36 days for a conventional chicken [...]. 84 days, that is how long an organic bird lives. The bird has the same weight after those 84 days and we need approximately the double amount of food to produce that weight and 3 or 4 times of land resource of another method of producing a bird. So the question you have got to ask yourself is: Which is the more sustainable? And the answer is actually not the organic bird” (David).

Although he presented himself as a proponent of animal welfare, emphasising that in intensive rearing “the consequences for the animal are terrible”, he clearly did not consider animal welfare to be part of ‘sustainability’ in this quote. No sustainability-related benefits of organic chicken other than animal welfare are acknowledged. This description of organic farming is as such opposed to intensive farming, which he pointed out to be more ‘eco-efficient’ and therefore more sustainable.

Supporting claims on efficiency and profitability were not only pointed out in argumentations on ambiguities, but also when, in contrast, the compatibility of various elements was presupposed or emphasised. Non-profit organisation representative James, for example, pointed out the connection between health and sustainability, arguing that “many of the external costs in terms of the 5 Billion the NHS spends on health-related obesity-weighted issues” would not be “reflected in the true price of food”, justifying the establishment of food sustainability in reference to associated savings of economic costs. John, who is also a representative of a non-profit organisation, similarly argued in favour of sustainability on the base of economic grounds. Bringing up the argument of the “true cost of food”, he claimed that “at the moment often a more sustainable choice seems to be more expensive than a less sustainable choice” but that “if the true cost is factored in and you get your head around it, then the less sustainable option would be the more expensive option, once you internalise the health costs and environmental costs etc.”. Robert also argues on grounds of efficiency and profitability for a joint agenda for healthy, sustainable diets.

Similar to James and John, he brings a reduction of “health care costs” into his argumentation, but also points out that “if we ate healthily, we could feed a lot more people with the food we are already producing”.

The topic of ‘waste’ poses a model case for the justification of sustainability on the grounds of efficiency and profitability poses. In the interviews, ‘waste’ was reasoned to be tackled for being a ‘rewarding issue’ that makes sense to everyone. Thus, it was emphasised that there is a “business case” (Michael, Robert) to address waste since “waste costs money” (Michael). This money, in turn, as one key informant argues, “can be reinvested in other things that could be solved by that particular company” (Robert). Waste was further appreciated for being “tangible” (Michael, Richard), “easy to achieve” (Richard) and “something that is in everybody’s interest to take action on” (Richard).

Initiatives and implementations to tackle ‘waste’ were thus associated with economic benefits, portraying it as an opportunity rather than a challenge as well as something that ‘everyone’ agrees upon. ‘Food waste’ was discursively contextualised in a way that it does not only represent ‘sustainability’ but was portrayed as the epitome of ‘sustainability’. Thus, supposing its far-reaching implications, both, Richard, who is a sustainability professional specializing in waste at a major retailer and Robert, who is also professionally engaged with waste reduction, referred to the ‘three pillar concept’ of sustainability (economic, environmental and social) when they emphasise the positive impacts of adaptations in relation to food waste. Robert for example stated that the topic ‘fits’ into every of the three pillars of sustainability:

“I think one of the great things about that issue is that everybody can relate to food waste and everybody can see that tackling is a priority. Whether that’s from an economic perspective, an environmental perspective or social perspective – the need of tackling is clear to many stakeholders” (Richard).

Robert gave a more detailed account of a similar argument. According to him, the ‘social sustainability’ angle firstly concerns the way in which a reduction in food waste “can help people and can particularly make money go further” so that they are enabled to “invest in higher quality food, healthier food”. Secondly, he mentioned the “distribution back from supermarkets” to “food charities” as a social-sustainability implication of food waste reduction. In relation to the “economic angle” he argued that this is “covered off by the cost

savings associated with food waste reduction". The "environmental sustainability hang up", finally, would be drawn upon in strategies that aim

"to create a more circular economy in the food system – recycling food waste or getting the energy out of it and then using that material particularly in agriculture to grant more food using it as a renewable fertiliser" (Robert).

The narratives outlined in this section demonstrate that the legitimisation of sustainability through economic valuation contradicts the tension between better environmental and social outcomes and economic profitability, which therefore remains unsaid. Paradoxically this economic legitimation attributes sustainability a 'holistic' face of balancing environmental, social and economic factors. The economic legitimation simultaneously counteracts a notion of sustainability as a synergy by fostering narrow and contradictory perspectives on food sustainability, by reinforcing considerations of efficiency and profitability as the parameters to 'authorise' sustainability-initiatives.

6.2.4 Conclusion on the notions of sustainability

Reflecting on the past development of the agenda on food sustainability and imagining change for the future, the interviewed sustainability-representatives from retail, non-profit organisations or consultancies, drew upon varying notions of sustainability.

In descriptive or normative statements, sustainability was largely framed as a synergy. Interviewees used attributes such as 'holistic', 'integrated' and 'circular' to define sustainability and emphasise the connection, or the importance to establish a connection, between sustainable and healthy diets. However, as opposed to this, when they expressed their ideas of more sustainable ways of production and consumption and talked about challenges, opportunities or successful examples, they drew on narrow single issue- and market-based understandings of sustainability. Interviewees thus employed a self-evident notion of sustainability as a product attribute and binary distinctions between 'sustainable' and 'unsustainable' products that were commonly determined by a single aspect of production or a certain label. The emergence of certain labels was further drawn upon as a common point of reference when interviewees discussed progress, obstacles and challenges to the sustainability agenda. A tension within discourses was created by the difference between how 'sustainability' was framed when experts described it as a phenomenon as such, and how they implicitly conceptualised it when they came to discuss how change

towards sustainability is or can be accomplished on the other. This tension is reflected upon in the second discussion chapter (Chapter Eight, Section 8.3).

Further, implicitly or explicitly legitimising strategies and implementations in the name of sustainability, a notion of sustainability as an economic value was employed. In one interpretation of this notion, narratives that valorise sustainable products in various ways (and oppose them to unsustainable products) equate sustainability with premium price. In another interpretation, the focus is set on eco-efficient approaches to sustainability. Attributing an economic value to sustainability, an 'absolute' 'everybody wins' understanding of sustainability was enforced. In these lines of argumentation, various aspects associated with sustainable consumption and production were evaluated in terms of their economic viability.

The analysis of the narratives represented by experts ultimately reveals that depending on the argumentative context, different notions of sustainability were drawn upon. David's reasoning when he compared organic to conventional chicken production for example shows the mutability of sustainability notions. Different approaches and methods that are considered to be 'sustainable' in some contexts can be considered as less- or un-sustainable in other contexts. Further, Richard and Robert expressed normative statements on sustainability as a synergy, but presented a rather narrow and contradictory perspective when they self-evidently drew upon the issue as waste as a proxy for food sustainability.²² Most significantly, argumentations on strategies and implementations for sustainability (as displayed in Section 6.2.2), as well as in arguments that legitimise the cause of sustainability (as displayed in Section 6.2.3) reinforce rather narrow accounts of 'sustainability'. As such, these stand in conflict with descriptions of sustainability as a synergy (as displayed in Section 6.2.1).

²² Richard and Robert describe 'food waste' as an unambiguous agenda and see the efficient use of waste as desirable and related courses of action as being available and already largely adopted. They do this, however, on the basis of particular discursive framings. Robert makes claims on how adaptations in relation to food waste would "help people" without taking the involvement of cognitive and labour costs for consumers into consideration and considers donations to charities as an implication of social-sustainability, disregarding the legitimisation of inequality that is inherent in this implication. Richard further simplistically reasons that the fact that food waste is a prevalent issue to stakeholders overall means that tackling it is a priority from a sustainability-point of view.

6.3 Notions of the consumer

In the interviews conducted, the experts commonly shared the understanding that consumers are not the central agents to deliver change towards a more sustainable food system. Still, consumers and their attitudes, behaviours, roles and responsibilities were a central point of reference to interviewees' argumentations in relation to strategies and implementations for sustainability. With the discourse analysis applied, it has been found that the narratives employed overall feed into four prevalent notions of the consumer in the context of the pursuit of a more sustainable food system. These are, firstly that consumers do not make responsible choices for sustainability (6.3.1), secondly that they ask businesses to implement sustainability 'on their behalf' (6.3.2), thirdly that their choices have initiated positive developments in the past (6.3.3) and lastly that they are disconnected from food and farming (6.3.4). Narratives that feed into these understandings are described and discussed in the following.

6.3.1 Consumers do not make responsible choices for sustainability

Interviewees commonly agreed that a reliance on consumers will not be an expedient way to obtain a more sustainable food system. This notion was largely established in relation to the notion of sustainability as a product attribute. Arguing that sustainability has to compete with other product qualities, about half of the interviewees reasoned that consumers would largely not commit to sustainable products. 'Sustainability' would not be central to the choices that they make or would not be strong enough as a trade-off for other qualities. In particular considerations of 'price' were depicted as being difficult to reconcile with 'sustainability'. In another line of argumentation against a reliance on consumer responsibility, the usefulness of consumer information was put into question.

Some recognise that a minority of consumers who are "very interested in sustainable food" (John) and who "will always be prepared to pay more or go out of their way" to "make the right decision" (Mary), but acknowledged that this would only be true for about "five percent of the population" (John) or for a few "early adopters" (Mary), which is seen as being too little to "drive the fundamental change you need to have happen" (Mary). Others similarly imagined a general consumer whose thoughts and decisions are not centred on sustainability or who has sustainability lower down on the list of attributes that they look for in a product. Robert thus asked the rhetorical question "do consumers go in and say: 'I want to buy sustainably!?'", adding his opinion: "I don't think they do". Michael drew on the

common notion that consumers trade-off various product attributes against one another, whereby 'sustainability' is usually ranked lower down on the scale, arguing that "[s]hoppers are driven primarily by price and then by quality and then by convenience". Mary also referred to these three "big drivers in food" and argues that these aspects have to apply as a prerequisite for consumer choice for sustainability to work:

"If you can do those things but then on top of it also give them sustainable food, they will be happy. But they won't sacrifice those three things for sustainability" (Mary).

While the finding that consumers do not take responsibility for sustainability was presented as an inevitable fact, interviewees also provided justifications and excuses for this matter. Interviewees partly drew on the aforementioned 'competing' product attributes, presupposing that acquiring sustainable products would be somewhat inconvenient and costly. Habits and various daily struggles of consumers were pointed out in this context, for example financial difficulties or difficulties to comprehend matters of sustainability and to integrate them into daily life. In the following quote, James draws upon both, the complexity of sustainable product labelling, as well as financial difficulties. He first justifies consumers' misconduct, arguing that the confusing label-landscape is an obstacle to sustainable action. Following this, he excuses financially disadvantaged families from showing responsible actions, implying that their circumstances do not allow them to prioritise sustainability over price.

"Consumers are bamboozled with so many labeling schemes [...] families that are struggling, for them it makes labels always a bit, you know, incidental when if they just want value for their money" (James).

William reasoned that the complexity of related information as well as consumers' habits would get in the way of them transferring their preferences into practice on their own.

"[I]t just stands to reason as well that the vast majority of people in this country are less educated, that is just the demographics of most countries. If you are less educated you are less likely to want to be given complex information to understand when you are trying to do your weekly shop as fast as possible. And then there are people who just want to get in and out of the supermarket, which is why genuinely people buy the same products week after week, because they know how much they cost, where they are in the store."

David, in contrast, did acknowledge that consumers understand "what is going on", but denied that they are responsible for their unsustainable conduct, drawing on the notion that

they have ‘other’ (more important) things to do. While William in the previous quote talked about ‘complexity’ and in that way implicitly proposed that this is for (most) consumers not to deal with, David made this argument more explicit. Although he initially ascribed importance to consumer awareness, he then opposed the consumer to the expert, implying that it is the experts’ and not the individuals’ job to think about sustainability:

“We know that really the whole thing hangs upon how much consumers understand of that what is going on. And the reality is that they understand very much, but, you know, they are not like you and me who spend all the time thinking about it, haha they probably have got other things to do, strangely” (David).

Thus, interviewees generally acknowledged that consumer responsibility is and will not be the main driver for change. Attempting to explain why consumers will not deliver the change that is needed to obtain a sustainable food system, they varied in their argumentation but have all in common that they did not responsabilise or blame consumers, but rather excused them from taking on responsibility and argued that the key agency would lie elsewhere.

6.3.2 Consumers ask businesses to implement sustainability

Although interviewees largely claimed that consumers do not take charge of sustainability and that their daily concerns lie elsewhere, they do accredit sustainable values to consumers. This becomes apparent in the excuses and justifications that serve to legitimise choices that are not determined by sustainability-related considerations. It is even more emphasised in contexts where consumers are portrayed as asking businesses to deliver sustainable conduct on their behalf. All experts argued at some point of the interview that businesses – above all the retailers – are responding to consumer concerns in relation to sustainability, be it the reduction of packaging, food waste or the supply of certain products.

The claim that consumers ask retailers and other businesses to stop the supply of unsustainable choices on consumers’ behalf is particularly common. Consumers would not want to face a situation where they have to decide between a sustainable and an unsustainable product, but rather prefer if unsustainable products are just not available to them. Robert drew on this notion, substantiating it with a generic reference to studies:

“[W]hen businesses do their consumer research, their customers are saying we want you to make sure that what we are buying is sustainable. That is the sort of regular message that they get”

David also draws on this notion by framing sustainable conduct as ‘work’, as a ‘job’ that has to be done. He excuses consumers from taking action themselves, but nevertheless portrays them as delegating the task to businesses, implying that they play a crucial role to the achievement of a more sustainable food system:

“They [the consumers] rely on the businesses, on the retailer that they are using to have done the work for them and you know that's, it is not laziness, it is just a reflection of the fact that they haven't got the time to do it themselves. They want somebody to do the job for them, basically”.

An even more active portrayal of consumers’ agency can be found in the following quote, where consumers’ demand sustainability from retailers is expressed in direct speech:

“[C]ertainly what retailers are generally are told is ‘We want more sustainable products, so just make all your products more sustainable and therefore we don't need to make a decision, just by shopping in Tesco or M&S or ASDA or wherever, we know you are making those products more sustainable, so therefore when I buy it, it is a better product than it was, you know, X number of years ago.’” (William)

While, as shown in the previous section (6.3.1), an end was put to the idea that deliberate responsible consumer choice in the supermarket will obtain change towards a more sustainable food system, this does not mean that ideas of consumer responsibility fully disappeared. As portrayed by the interviewees, consumer responsibility is expanded to a form of influence that goes beyond ‘choice’ but involves their voice in the context of business conduct. It is at the same time reduced, in the sense that a consumer response through ‘right’ choices at the point of purchase is not expected. The major responsibility is on businesses to help consumers “to make the choice that they want to make anyway” (Mary). However, with business conduct being portrayed as a response to consumers, consumers are nevertheless crucial to the *argumentation* employed by the interviewees.

6.3.3 Consumer choice initiated a positive shift in certain areas in the past

Although interviewees largely argued that consumer choice alone will not deliver change for sustainability, when thinking back on the development of ‘sustainability’ in the food industry, some did attribute advances in certain areas to deliberate consumer choice. They all however referred to specific examples related to animal welfare and argued at the same time that the situation is more difficult for other aspects of production or product segments.

The rise of “vegetarianism, veganism and also flexitarian people” has in Mary’s opinion “mainly been a customer driven change”. While Robert claimed the opposite, stating that

“[n]ow what we don't see is consumers are saying ‘Yeah great, I really want to eat less meat!’”, he did attribute positive change in various methods of animal-based production to consumer agency. This “substantial change of the last 25 years” concerns in his opinion the case of “organic food”. He further assessed that “the egg production method, [...] cattle production methods, pig production methods” have all “dramatically changed” (Robert). David presented the example of free range eggs to show that responsible consumer choice can deliver change arguing that the

“whole shift in government legislation [...] was actually to do with consumers moving more towards a free range approach”. He however also emphasised that procedures like these are limited to certain aspects of food production that appeal to consumers and that it would be for example “hard to talk about deforestation or soya [...] and then [...] GM, god!”.

Pointing at what is possible or hard to “talk about”, he hinted at an aspect that is also drawn upon by others who describe successful cases of change through aggregated individual consumer choice: consumer-initiated change is brought about by successful campaigning. Mary for example accredited a higher consumer demand for non-meat based products to “documentaries and bits of information that have come out, that are triggering people on to the idea that your food comes from somewhere and it has an impact”. Robert also claimed that in these successful cases consumers were “motivated by what they see on television, what they see by the campaign groups” and “responded [...] with their purses”. William similarly expressed belief in “social media” and “food bloggers” as a “way in which the shopping behaviour changes”. The examples of change initiated by consumer choice were thus traced back to initiatives that are actualised by engagement and activism of agents that stand outside of the industry. They concerned cases to which the industry does not deliver the change but *has* to change. In this way, interviewees distinguished initiatives of agents other than businesses from industry-based initiatives on labelling, which were overall regarded to provide only insignificant impact on consumers.²³

²³ In terms of industry-based initiatives to change consumer behaviour, interviewees acknowledge their existence and relevance, but less in relation to the consumer. Rather it is recognised that labels drive and legitimate change within companies and supply chains, For example, Mary (retailer) discussed how whilst consumer had perhaps limited awareness of the EU Ecolabel, over the last ten years it had become “increasingly important to organisations like Nestle and Mondelez” (Mary).

6.3.4 Consumers are disconnected from food and farming

A fourth notion that interviewees drew upon is that people do not understand various issues on food that are linked to sustainability because they are disconnected from food and farming. In this context, it was commonly claimed that consumers today do not value food in the way they should. Interviewees supported their argumentation with references to evidence – for example of research that shows people’s lack of knowledge around food, lack of cooking skills or stories on people’s misconceptions in relation to certain products or product attributes. These references were employed to explain consumer’s lack of understanding of issues around sustainability and their responsiveness to insignificant sustainability claims.

James for example argued that a disconnection “from how food is produced, grown, consumed, prepared” causes that little value is attributed to food. He argued that this would be reflected in consumers’ unwillingness to pay higher prices:

“[A]t the end of the day there are more of what I call systemic barriers in terms, you could argue and I would argue, we pay in the developed world too little for food. Consumers still pay too little for food and therefor don't really value it, you know. From the 40s when 40, 50% of the household income was spent on the grocery basket, so now 10, 11% of household income is spent on a grocery basket; consumers still expect really cheap food” (James).

John further identified a “big disconnect which was here 10 years ago, but in lots of ways has gotten worse” referring to “a study from 2012 [...] from an organisation called LEAF” which found that in the UK “36% of 16 to 23 years olds didn't know that bacon came from pigs”. Joseph and David argued similarly that there is a widespread lack of understanding in relation to matters of food and farming, that people have “detachment” from food (Joseph) and that there is a “huge lack of knowledge” in place (David). Both problematized idealised concepts of agriculture by the example of chicken production. People believed that “chickens are living for 5 years before they eat them” (Joseph) or that they do “not understand that free range chicken will on occasions be on a bar” (David) (i.e. living in a cage) but rather simply imagine “a lovely little chicken, bouncing around the field, happy in its life” (David). These misconceptions were regarded as being problematic to “the sustainability issue” (Joseph) or to why people have skewed ideas on which products they see as “superior” (David).

A general lack of knowledge on food and farming amongst consumers was identified as a problem by about half the interviewees. Pointing out the importance of consumers being 'in touch' with the food that they consume, in the sense of being aware of circumstances of its production and being skilled in handling food on their own, they emphasised the importance of the ability of individual participation on the journey to food sustainability. Notably, they did not relate these hopes to ideas of change through deliberate consumer choice. Thus, the ambition to re-connect and re-skill consumers was not regarded as a means to influence consumer behaviour, but more to set off and establish a cultural change.

6.3.5 Conclusion on the notions of the consumer

The interviewed retailer-, non-profit organisation- and consultancy representatives share the understanding that the decisions that consumers make at the point of purchase will not deliver the needed change to establish a more sustainable food system. In the most dominant notion employed throughout the interviews, the idea of consumers as 'choosing agents' who revolutionise the industry was opposed. However, as a point of reference in argumentations related to strategies and implementation, the consumer still plays a central role in discourses on food sustainability.

Firstly, consumer agency was not simply dismissed. On the contrary, the experts did raise the issue of low consumer commitment to sustainable choices and delivered a variety of excuses and justifications for why consumers' daily shopping decisions did not revolve around sustainability. Secondly, although consumers were overall not attributed responsibility to make the 'right' choice, they were still ascribed a central role to the realisation of a more sustainable food system. Interviewees opposed consumer responsibility for sustainability by pointing out the responsibility of businesses. This 'business responsibility' to ensure that as many sustainable products as possible are presented to the consumer was portrayed as being enforced by consumers. Sustainable businesses conduct was thus to some extent portrayed as a response to consumer demand and consumer pressure. Although institutional action to 'activate' deliberate consumer choice was strongly discarded and opposed, references to 'successes' of consumer choice were still in place. Thus, consumers, thirdly, play a role in the analysed expert discourse in the sense that success stories of certain 'sustainable' products or product segments were attributed to an aggregation of consumer choice for the sustainable alternative. Fourthly, some of the interviewed experts

acknowledged a small number of consumers who do consistently commit to sustainable choices, understanding consumers either as vanguards on a bell curve or a consistent minority. Lastly, consumers are central to the discourse in the sense that their misconceptions and unrealistic expectations towards food were emphasised to constitute a difficulty to cultural change.

6.4 Final remarks on the analysis of both empirical materials

The analysis of articles in *The Grocer* as represented in the former Chapter 5 delivered insights into diachronic developments in food industry related discourses on sustainability over the time period from 2005 to 2015. Interviews with key representatives from retail, non-profit organisations and consultancies conducted in 2016 supplement this analysis by adding in-depth insights on the more recent discourse. The findings gathered by the analysis of both allow capturing the essence of notions of sustainability and the consumer that are inherent in the discourses drawn upon.

In articles in *The Grocer*, notions of ‘sustainable’, ‘ethical’, ‘purpose-related’ and ‘green’ products have been found to be changing throughout the years. These changing notions are – in varying degrees – reproduced by the interviewed experts. Interviewees are inconsistent in the ways in which they conceptualise ‘sustainability’. As shown, depending on the argumentative context in which sustainability is referred to (thus, whether being described as what it ought to be, or whether its implementation is imagined or legitimised) different sets of narratives are employed by the interviewees. They are further inconsistent in the ways in which they define the product attribute of ‘sustainability’ as opposed to other product attributes. Thus, depending on the context, one speaker might identify for example ‘organic’ or ‘animal welfare’ as an integrated element of sustainability at one point of the interview but as distinctively separate categories at another point.

In relation to framings of sustainability, core findings identified by the analysis of articles in *The Grocer* are confirmed by the narratives that the interviewed retail-, non-profit- and consultancy-representatives draw upon. Arguments on resource- and energy-efficiency and ‘price’ are central to discourses represented in *The Grocer* as well as in the interviews. A determining factor to how strategies and implementations for sustainability were discussed in the subsequent years was the efficiency-centred conceptualisation of sustainability that dominated discourses in *The Grocer* when they were at their peak in 2007 and remained

thereafter, arguably in a less explicit form than during the 'peak'. Findings on how interviewees (implicitly) legitimise sustainability as a cause to pursue (Section 6.2.3) add clarity to the ways in which these 'win-win' conceptualisations function within discourses.

The same is the case in relation to the relationship between 'sustainability' and 'product premium' as identified by the analysis of articles in *The Grocer*. The diachronic analysis has revealed an on-going connection between understandings of 'sustainable' and 'premium' products. While these were initially dealt with in separate discourses, they were merged during the 'peak period' around 2007. With the aspect of 'price' creating a major tension between aspirations of 'sustainability' and 'premium' in discourses after the economic recession, both are again dealt with in different ways in most recent articles of 2015. Having identified a prevalent notion of sustainability as a product attribute (Section 6.2.2), the analysis of the interviews gives insights on this from a more in-depth and recent setting.

Further, the increasing integration of 'health' into sustainability discourses, which was observed in articles in *The Grocer*, is confirmed by the ways in which the interviewees describe sustainability as an ideal. The idea of 'healthy and sustainable diets' as a joint cause is referred to in argumentations on the overall progress as well as in argumentations on targets and aims alike (Section 6.2.1). It is further a point of reference in the context of considerations that they voice in relation to the implementation of sustainable consumption and production (Section 6.2.2.2) as well as in how they legitimise it as a cause (Section 6.3.2.2).

In relation to notions of the consumer in the context of the pursuit of a sustainable food system, based on *The Grocer* analysis, changing conceptualisations over time were identified. The consumer was central to the argumentations throughout the years, but the framings changed. The initial model of consumers as being unaware of sustainable choices (2005) was soon replaced with a very willing, but 'unable to choose' model of the consumer (2007). In more recent articles, a dominance of narratives that clearly accept a lack of consumer commitment to sustainable choices was identified. Mainly based on references to 'premium price', consumers were regarded to be unable to commit to sustainable choices (2010) and later framed as attributing responsibilities to businesses whilst being unwilling to make choices themselves (2015). These latter notions were, in very similar ways also found in the narratives employed by the interviewees. Further, although interviewees share the

overall sense that consumers will not constitute the main driver of change, they do frequently attribute success in certain areas to deliberate consumer choice drawing on 'old' narratives, as identified by the analysis of articles in *The Grocer* from the years 2005 and 2007.

Chapter 7 – Changing understandings of sustainable food consumption and production

7.1 Introduction

This is the first out of three discussion chapters. It discusses how sustainable consumption and production is conceptualised in expert discourses and approached under changing circumstances of markets and innovations over time. As such, it is concerned with the constitution of the analysed discourses on their own. It also addresses the notions of consumer agency that emerge and are reinforced in these contexts and recognises the key narratives and influences in discourses in ‘sustainable consumption and production’ over time. It identifies differences between former and recent discursive strands on notions of sustainability, sustainable production and sustainable consumption and related business and consumer conduct and agency.

The second discussion chapter (Chapter Eight) is concerned with how these discourses function as common-sense practices of institutions. Drawing on three themes (organic consumption, protein diversity and (food) waste reduction) and the ways in which they associate and disassociate with ‘sustainable consumption’, it discusses how interpretative frames of a discourse are reflected and represented in the practical realities of sustainability policy, i.e. which (argumentative/interpretative) conditions have to be satisfied for a theme to enter the realm of ‘sustainability governance’.

In the third and final discussion chapter (Chapter Nine), I discuss the notions of consumer agency for social change and the related descriptions of, and claims about, mechanisms of social change that have been found in the expert discourses analysed. I locate the findings within established social science debates on consumer agency for sustainability, discussing them in relation to debates on ideas of responsibility and blame, consumer attitudes and behaviour, consumer information, consumer choice and political consumerism.

The chapter at hand offers a discussion of the results of my research on media articles published in the magazine *The Grocer* (see Chapter Five) during the years of 2005, 2007, 2010 and 2015 as well as interviews with retail-, non-profit- and consultancy-based key experts that were conducted in 2016 (see Chapter Six). I interpret these results in the

context of a third dataset which consists of policy documents published between 2005 to 2017 pointed out as 'important' or 'influential' by the interviewees.

The analysis of articles in *The Grocer* and of key informant interviews has shown that notions of 'sustainability' and the associated role of the consumer are constantly on the move. Ideas of what 'sustainable food consumption and production' is and what it entails are re-created and re-constituted with changing times and settings. They are constantly influenced and in exchange with other discursive strands of varying concerns which mobilise the figure of the consumer from varying viewpoints and contexts. Based on the analysis of notions represented in both, articles in *The Grocer* and interviews with experts, I have identified three sets of discursive strands on 'efficiency', 'health' and 'premium produce' continuously interacting and interconnecting with notions of sustainability. Narratives deriving from these discursive strands continuously stimulate the constitution of discourses of sustainable food consumption and production and can thus be understood as independent discourses that interrelate with and are incorporated into discourses on sustainable consumption and production.

Arguments on resource- and energy-efficiency and price are central to discourses represented in *The Grocer* as well as in the interviews. This economic interpretation of sustainability dominated discourses in *The Grocer* when they were at their peak in 2007 (Section 5.4) and, in the subsequent years, remained an arguably less explicit determining factor of how strategies and implementations for sustainability were discussed. The ways in which interviewees (implicitly) legitimised sustainability as a cause to pursue (Section 6.2.3) add clarity to how these 'win-win' conceptualisations function within discourses.

Further, the increasing integration of 'health' into sustainability discourses, which was observed in articles in *The Grocer* throughout the years from 2007 onwards, is confirmed by the ways in which the experts described sustainability, how they imagined its implementation in the food industry, as well as in how they legitimised it as a project. In the interviews, the idea of 'healthy and sustainable diets' as a joint cause was referred to in argumentations on the overall progress, as well as in argumentations on targets and aims alike (see in particular Section 6.2.1).

An on-going connection between understandings of ‘sustainable’ and ‘premium’ products was also revealed by the diachronic analysis of articles in *The Grocer*. While these were initially dealt with in separate discourses, they merged during the peak period around 2007. In most articles of 2015 both were dealt with in different ways. The changing notions of ‘sustainable’, ‘ethical’, ‘purpose-related’ and ‘green’ products represented in articles in *The Grocer* throughout the years are – in varying degrees – reproduced by the interviewed experts. While they generally claimed that sustainability is not ranked very high (or at least not in the top three) on the list of product attributes that consumers take into consideration when they make their choices at the point of purchase, they were inconsistent in the ways in which they define the product attribute of ‘sustainability’ as opposed to other product attributes. Thus, depending on the context, one speaker might have identified for example ‘health’ or ‘animal welfare’ as an integrated element of sustainability at one point of the interview but as distinctively separate categories at another point.

In this chapter, I outline changing notions of sustainability, sustainable production, sustainable consumption, and related business and consumer conduct and agency, found in the expert discourses in *The Grocer*, in the interviews with food sustainability professionals and in key policy documents. I discuss the discursive dynamics that lead to multiple framings of sustainable consumption and production over time. In this way, this chapter responds to all four research questions outlined in Chapter Four;²⁴ with a particular focus on research question one, which is concerned with the ideas and ideals on sustainability in food-industry-related discourses. The chapter is separated into three sections. The first section deals with discursive influences in the past (Section 7.2), while the second discusses recent discourses (Section 7.3). In a final section, the varying impact of discursive strands of ‘premium produce’, ‘healthy diets’ and ‘efficiency’ on notions of food sustainability throughout the years is summarised and discussed (Section 7.4).

²⁴ RQ1: What ideals of sustainability can be found in food industry-related discourses (and what are their consistencies, compatibilities and contradictions)? RQ2: What role do accounts of the discursive figure of ‘the consumer’ play in discourses on sustainable food consumption and what attitudes and behaviours are ascribed to the consumer? RQ3: Which ideas exist on strategies to push sustainable consumption forward and which notions of ‘choice’ can be found in the context of those strategies? RQ4: How are forms of knowledge used to legitimise argumentations on consumers and sustainable consumption?

7.2 Discursive influences in the past

Times of orientation

In the context of the mid 2000s, 'sustainability' was framed as constituting a problem to the industry, rather than an opportunity. As the analysis of articles published during the year 2005 in *The Grocer* has shown, food sustainability was mainly understood as an environmental challenge to the resilience and viability of the food industry that prompted revisions to the ways in which food is produced (Section 5.3.1). In the conducted interviews this period was looked back on as the time when debates were led by "individual issues" (Mary) and when "the evidence" of various aspects being interconnected "just was not there" (Richard). Consumers were portrayed as needing to be informed and convinced to consume more sustainably. In policy documents, this is similarly referred to as a phase of orientation when debates and strategies were led by "emblematic issues" (WWF 2009, 8) which were evaluated on the base of "poor indicator[s]" (CO 2008, 15).

Peak times – everything is 'green', everyone profits, everything goes well

Based on the analysis of articles in *The Grocer*, I have described the year 2007 as the 'green hype' period of the sustainability discourse (Section 5.4). During this period, narratives on environmental challenges to the food industry were replaced with a framing of sustainability as an opportunity. Statements on eco- and cost-efficient adaptations in production were paired with statements on customer satisfaction in relation to 'green' business activities that were evidenced with growing demand in sustainable products.

The potential attributed to eco-efficient production established a notion of sustainability as a business case and moved the previous problem-centred notion of sustainability towards a 'win-win' notion, focused around environmental and economic benefits. Most centrally, feeding into this were narratives on adaptations for reduced packaging as a means to achieve more eco- and cost-efficient ways of production. With eco-efficient adaptations on packaging epitomising 'sustainable production', it was described as making "financial sense" (40_2007). This was significantly pointed out in WRAP's original Courtauld Commitment

(WRAP 2018a),²⁵ constituted the key narrative to WRAP's *Grocery Futures* report (WRAP 2006) and was represented in *The Grocer* in articles of the year 2007 (Section 5.4.1 and 5.4.3). Narratives of cost- and eco-efficiency helped to move 'sustainability' notions from being centred on problems and challenges to be more focussed on 'opportunities' in cost-efficient production.

Narratives of 'premiumisation' (in the sense of premium quality and premium price) additionally penetrated notions of sustainability, adding the idea of consumer demand for green products. Firstly, these were fostered by narratives that presented consumers as being "cash rich, time poor" (WRAP 2006, 43) and prepared to pay a premium for better food, enhancing the 'productive' aspects of 'sustainable production' with the element of 'consumer demand' for sustainable consumption. Secondly, the introduction of additional normative ideas to notions of 'sustainability' enhanced their discursive repertoire of associated issues. Premium produce was thus associated with a wider sense of ethical production (Section 5.4.1). On the basis of these two factors, notions of responsible consumer choice for produce that consumers 'trust' in relation to sustainability were strengthened. As such, the extensive establishment of 'green' brands that consumers respond to was seen as the way forward to deliver a more sustainable food system. As Forum for the Future's *Retail Futures 2022* puts it: in a context where "[p]eople are more challenging and more questioning" and "feel they can make their own choices" (FftF 2007, 18), an "intimate relationship with consumers" (FftF 2007, 5) and the establishment of "trust and willingness" (FftF 2007, 17) would "support their efforts to live more sustainably" (FftF 2007, 5).

At the same time, narratives on 'health' and 'healthy diets' also started to penetrate notions of food sustainability, some of which were re-assuring, while some others were challenging the 'sustainable path'. Sets of narratives relating to both were found in the 2007 sample of *The Grocer* (see Chapter Five) as well as in policy documents. In various examples of articles in *The Grocer* or in policy contexts, matters such as "climate change, disappearing forests and declining fisheries to packaging, obesity and community cohesion" were all listed as

²⁵ The Courtauld Commitment arguably "brought food waste onto the agenda" (WRAP 2018a). It is a government-funded voluntary agreement aimed at improving resource efficiency and reducing waste within the UK grocery sector. In its initial phase (2005-2009) it focussed on new solutions and technologies so that less food and primary packaging ended up as household waste. It brought food waste onto the agenda.

constituting issues of “sustainable development” (FftF 2007, 8), drawing on the notion of ‘health’ and ‘sustainability’ as two sides of the same coin. In other contexts, however, categories of ‘green’ and ‘healthy’ were compared and portrayed to be standing in competition (Section 5.1.1). This understanding was frequently picked up in relation to consumer trends, for example in references to reports showing that consumers were “more likely to take ethical factors into account than health or convenience” (8_2007) or the contrary, that “healthy eating” is “number one”, while “corporate responsibility, encompassing sustainable development, social standards and corporate governance, ranks just fifth” (4_2007). ‘Health’, thus, in parts contributed to the ‘green hype’, but in other contexts it was framed as a competing trend that could possibly be outperformed.

The simultaneous influence of narratives on ‘efficiency’, ‘ethical premium’ and ‘healthy diets’ fostered the establishment of a positive and opportunity-focused ‘everybody wins’ notion of sustainability. This was firstly built on the idea of methods with increased resource, energy, and at the same time cost-efficiency, and secondly on ideas of a growing consumer trend to spend increasing amounts of disposable incomes on premium priced foods. It fed into the establishment of the idea of ‘sustainable food consumption and production’ as an all-encompassing business approach.

Times of upheaval – the ‘price’ issue

With the effects of the recession of 2008 starting to manifest and sales figures of products previously been framed as ‘sustainable’ beginning to fall, the combination of ‘cost-efficiency’ with ‘premium price’ soon started to create a tension within the notion of sustainability that had established over the past years. All-encompassing positive narratives about consumer commitment to sustainable choices that had been established by 2007 were altered during this period. In the Government’s *Food Matters* report of 2008 for example, this price-led shift is made explicit, stating that the consumer trend which led to more people being “prepared to pay a premium for better food [...] coincided with a period in which food prices were falling in real terms and average real incomes were rising”, whereas “[m]ore recently, food prices have been increasing” (CO 2008, 9).

In articles published in *The Grocer* in 2010, the incorporation of ‘ethical premium’ into notions of sustainability was still apparent. In the context of falling sales of associated products, however, tensions within the win-win portrayal of sustainability come to the fore,

making 2010 the period when narratives of consumers being willing, but unable to commit to sustainable choices peaked in *The Grocer* (Section 5.5.2). Related argumentations were all centred on one explanation, which at the same time served as a legitimisation: price. Consumers were portrayed as not being “in a financial position to think about green or ethical issues” (1_2010). The identification of this ‘price’-centred ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ delivered the argumentative base for calls upon manufacturers and retailers to provide a better choice architecture.

Ethical premium narratives, which introduced ‘price’ as a determinant of sustainability in the first place (Section 5.4.1), played a substantial role in the concept of ‘choice editing’ finding its way into sustainability-related articles in 2010. The association of ‘sustainability’ with ‘price’ had a transformative effect on discourses in the sense that it served as a reference to consumers’ incapability (or their perceived incapability – Section 5.5.2) to translate their sustainable attitudes into behaviour. The understanding of this incapability had then been existent for a while (SDC 2006), but was not made explicit at all in articles in *The Grocer* during the ‘green hype’ in 2007. By 2010, references to consumers’ financial struggles deliver the legitimisation of ‘choice editing’ conducted by businesses and other institutional agents.

It was not only the ‘premiumisation’ aspect of sustainability that caused tension as the phase of the ‘green hype’ flattened out. Questions on the compatibility of ‘sustainable’ and ‘healthy’ diets also became more central to sustainability debates. “The potential tensions between dietary advice to consume fish and real concerns about over-exploitation of many of the world’s fish stocks” (CO 2008, 56) constituted a topic of particular prevalence in this context. In key policy papers, as well as in *The Grocer*, calls to define “a healthy, sustainable diet” (DEFRA 2010, 10) and to clarify the meaning of eating “healthily in environmentally and ethically sound ways” (7_2010) were raised. From about the year 2008 onwards, efforts were made to transform the increasing tensions between ‘health’ and ‘sustainability’ into one diet-related goal that encompassed both aspects. This made ‘healthy diets’, as a formerly implicit or conflicting aspect of sustainability debates more explicit and visible within sustainability debates and further provided more space for the issue to emerge within the framing of ‘sustainability’. Thus, also narratives of ‘health’ caused tensions to the

concept of sustainable consumption and were modified in their relation to ‘sustainability’ during this post-recession period.

In contrast to the transforming ‘premiumisation’ and ‘health’ narratives, ‘efficiency’ narratives gained strength within the concept of ‘sustainability’ during this period. With respect to policies, WRAP’s ‘Courtauld Commitment’ initiative continued to establish, which fostered debates on innovative solutions for increased efficiency, and the issue of ‘food waste’ gained overall importance and presence in sustainability debates (WRAP 2009). Arguments on global food security and access to food (e.g. in reference to the event of the global food price crisis) further helped ‘efficiency’ to surpass environmental considerations (Section 5.5.1), as well as influencing the shift from a consumer-centred idea of sustainable consumption towards a stronger focus of business provisioning (Section 5.5.3). Businesses were constituted as the main agents for concerns around food sustainability. Not only in reference to consumers’ difficulties to buy sustainable products, but also on the base of references to the event of the economic recession of 2008 and the failure of the Copenhagen Summit of 2009, governments’ and other stakeholders actions were portrayed as being insufficient or counterproductive (Section 5.5.3). As opposed to this, a ‘let’s do it’ spirit was shared amongst businesses, whereby the industry was portrayed to “make sustainability an urgent priority” (26_2010) and to “provide positive [l]eadership” for sustainability (1_2010). In this way, the aim to achieve ‘eco-efficient sustainable production’ was strengthened.

7.3 Recent discourses

In recent discourses, two underlying notions of ‘food sustainability’ are in place: food sustainability in the sense of pro-environmental activities of production and in the sense of ‘premium’ brands and products.

Narratives in which a notion of sustainability as pro-environmental activity is employed embody a sense of food sustainability as an integrated, ‘normal’ element of business conduct. Several organisations presented new reports (such as the Marks and Spencer *Plan A* update that was analysed within this project) in which they look back on their successful sustainability achievements over the past decade whereby new external targets or regulations (such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals) were portrayed as contextualising already existing implementations rather than setting new targets (see M&S

2017 and Section 5.6.3). These narratives are confirmed in the interviews, with experts indicating that the industry and other key agents have generally developed a better understanding of 'sustainability' and the complexity it entails (Section 6.2.1). Further, consumers were described as taking sustainability-related considerations and actions of businesses as a given (Section 6.3.2 and 5.6.3).

Environmental sustainability is removed from its former consumer-facing contextualisation in more recent discourses. Related to this, the price tension that was prevalent in the period after the recession is resolved. Sustainability is regarded as being largely a responsibility of agents other than the consumer, namely businesses, governments and other organisations. Sustainable production is thereby conceptualised as being first and foremost fostered by adaptations in the supply chain and through provisioning, rather than being driven by a collective of consumers who make deliberate choices for sustainable, and against less sustainable, products. In line with consumers being described as taking sustainability in businesses conduct for granted, there is an established notion that consumers are not prepared to compromise on 'price' and other product attributes in order to consume 'sustainably' (Sections 6.3.1 and 5.6.3).

The interviewed experts largely talked about 'sustainability' as something that is, or has to be approached as a composite and systemic concept (Section 6.2.1). This was largely meant in the sense of 'managing the environment' in order to keep up with the demands of global planetary and demographic challenges. Implementations for 'sustainability' were portrayed as having to be 'productive' in the long run and to involve strong collaborations between different agents. Demands of global planetary and demographic challenges, such as the necessity of having to "feed 9 billion people" (e.g. Mary and Robert) were drawn upon and catchwords such as 'zero waste' and 'circular economy' were heavily used (M&S 2017, WRAP 2015). Thus, the concept of 'efficiency' constituted the central reference to explain, legitimise and, lastly, define strategies and implementations in the name of sustainability in an environmental sense, as the following quote from DEFRA's "Food 2030" strategy exemplifies:

"Global economic growth, climate change and an increasing population are challenges that will have a significant impact on the natural environment, and therefore on food production. [...] Given the importance of our productive relationship with the environment we should go beyond simply protecting it, but

actively engage in managing it for the ecosystem services we need.” (DEFRA, 2010, 32-33)

Environmental sustainability is however also described as a cause subordinated and incidental to, or even conflicting with, the idea of a good connection between brands and consumers. Thus, the experts frequently argued that consumers have to be approached with “positive messages” and “motivating factors” (e.g. Richard) in relation to the foods that they consume. This is opposed to “negative doom and gloom messages” on for example “greenhouse gas emissions” or other impacts on the planet, which “societies, individuals, are quite fed up with” (James). This is a point in which the difference between sustainability in the sense of ‘environmental sustainability’ and in the sense of ‘premium’ brands and products is particularly prominent.

Although an environmental interpretation of ‘sustainability’ is largely removed from actions of the consumer in the marketplace, the formerly established normative element stays central in relation to consumer communications. ‘Purpose’ and ‘cause’ of brands is conceptualised as the focal point of good business conduct in the eye of the consumer in recent discourses and represents the established sense of good businesses conduct.²⁶ Incorporating the normative sense of ‘green’ sustainability (Section 5.4.2), ‘purpose’ surpasses ‘green’ in its relevance for business communications. The evidence presented to confirm consumer’s desire for ‘brand purpose’ is very similar to arguments for ‘sustainability’ during the ‘green hype’, with arguments still revolving around ‘consumer connection’ and ‘trust’. However, while these aspects were then considered as a means to establish sustainability, they were presented as a means in its own right in the context of the recent discourse – ‘trust’ is, as an article of *The Grocer* cites PepsiCo’s CEO, considered to be “the intangible trading currency for consumer industry Companies” (17_2015).

In this discourse where ‘purpose’ is opposed to environmental sustainability, companies were advised to focus on “consumers” and “work [...] around happiness”; “community and people” as opposed to “trees” (18_2015). Environmental issues would be “too big, too distant and too difficult” (M&S 2017, 2) to ‘work’ within a ‘mainstream premium’ agenda to appeal to consumers. As opposed to this, it is associated with issues “at a local level” which

²⁶ In business literature, ‘purpose’ has over the last years been widely drawn upon as a buzzword and advocated for as a strategy, a ‘secret ingredient’ that represents an organisation’s impact on the lives of people and can achieve competitive advantage (Kenny 2014, O’Brien and Cave 2017)

“are the ones customers [...] feel empowered to tackle” (M&S 2017, 2) since they “think more about their square mile” (William). It is supported by references to research that shows that the “ethical priorities” of consumers “normally” are on “stuff that is closer to home, so health, British, [...] and animal welfare” (Mary). In this way, it is argued that when it comes to consumer communication, ‘purpose’ is not only crucial, but also has to be given priority over distant and complex environmental issues.

Health narratives have, as the analysis of articles in *The Grocer* has demonstrated, over time continually been blended into notions of sustainability. After struggles and tensions, established claims on health-related messages reaching consumers in deeper, more direct and rewarding ways than messages about the environment (Section 6.2.2.2, CO 2008) stabilised through the establishment of a self-evident concept of ‘healthy and sustainable diets’. In this concept, the individualistic focus of ‘health’ goes in accordance with the consumer-facing and cause-related-marketing elements of ‘premium purpose’. The focus on health is thus normalised as a way to address food sustainability.

Although ‘efficiency’ or ‘sustainable intensification’ as one report frames it (WRAP 2015), dominates debates about implementations and strategies for the environment, these remain separated from debates on sustainable consumption and the consumer as a sustainability agent. The ability to successfully “develop new sustainable products and services” (M&S 2017, 2) only remains as an ambition within the subordinated goal of ‘purpose premium’. Sustainability is thus implied in this ‘purpose premium’ framing as a virtue, but not on its forefront. References to “Britons’ culinary curiosity, their love of good food and their desire to eat healthily” (The Waitrose Food and Drink Report 2014, cited in: WRAP 2015, 37) thus serve this dominant narrative just as well as people’s interest in “guarantees that a company would improve the environment” or “ethical standards” (15_2015), as long as this can be related to superior principles such as “co-creation, value sharing, transparency and accountability” (19_2015).

Hence, in these recent discourses, ‘premiumisation’ narratives have developed a momentum of their own, with their original focus on ‘ethics’ (Section 5.3.1) being broadened to a wider sense of ‘purpose’ that encompasses various ‘feel good’ qualities, from help for charities and communities, to animal welfare and personal health and do not necessarily imply ‘premium prices’. ‘Purpose premium’ is understood in two major ways: in a general ‘mainstream’ sense

in relation to public presentation and consumer communication, but also in ways that are similar to the 'original' framing of 'ethical premium' as the commercialisation of products that are seen as superior and potentially costing more. A focus on "product transparency and storytelling" (WRAP 2015, 37), "confidence" and "trust" of consumers (M&S 2017, 2) has thus been established as a goal in its own right and remains as the context for debates on consumer involvement.

Marks and Spencer's *Plan A 2025* (M&S 2017) which is the follow-up document to their original 'Plan A' sustainability initiative launched in 2007 is an illustrative example of a discursive shift of focus from environmental-, ethical- and 'green'-centred argumentations towards argumentations centred on consumer trust.²⁷ Although the updated version of 2017 covers a similar set of topics as the original 2007 'Plan A', the focus is strongly reversed. The 2007 version was based on five pillars, with the first three centred on environmental challenges: "climate change" – with a focus on carbon emissions; "waste" – which encompasses food waste, packaging and recycling; and "sustainable raw materials" – with a focus on recycling and certification (free range, organic, sustainable fish). The further two themes were given the titles "fair partner" and "health". The former involved responsibility for "communities", with specific examples on Fairtrade commitments, charity engagement and a set price for milk farmers. 'Health' centred on healthier diets, in reference to the 'Eat Well' nutritional standards in a very technical sense with a focus on salt and fat reduction (M&S 2007).

As opposed to this, in the version of 2017, the program is presented by three pillars of "nourishing our wellbeing", "transforming lives and communities" and "caring for the planet we all share". Not only are 'health' and 'community' mentioned before the environmental aspects, which are now summarised in one 'pillar', the way in which these three pillars are described shows a commitment to the objective for *Plan A 2025* to: "focus on [...] customers and [to] be integrated into the brand purpose" (M&S 2017, 4). "Health" is, as it is emphasised, not only about 'physical' aspects, it is about enabling people to "live happier and healthier lives", about dealing with "mental health" and to "offer support to tackle

²⁷ *Plan A* constitutes an exemplary case and has further arguably also been leading in industry approaches to food sustainability as such: both t David and William argued that Marks and Spencer's *Plan A* has been "influential" (David) "driven" things to "really start to take effect" (William) and other interviewees suggested *Plan A* as a key policy document.

mental health, loneliness, and dementia” (M&S 2017, 8). Aspects of social inequality are not only tackled with labour standards and charity work, but by “taking a lead on transforming communities” by “enabling local economies to thrive, building socially connected communities, and improving local environments” (M&S 2017, 8). And the third pillar is about the “planet we share” (M&S 2017, 14), reinforcing the centrality of ‘people’ and ‘us’ as a community. In comparison to the original *Plan A*, which was led by a rather serious rhetoric on environmental degradation and climate change, this more recent paper reads more like a return to traditional marketing that is centred on ‘cause’ and ‘purpose’ with an added ‘feel good’ touch on care of the natural environment. This is exemplary for recent discourses in which ‘premium purpose’ supersedes (and implicitly incorporates) ‘sustainability’, enforced with a strong focus on ‘health’ and related aspects that are centred on the wellbeing of the individual consumer.

Comparing recent debates with policy statements and media articles from the mid-2000s overall, it can be shown how environmental concerns that are named as such have declined and remain present in a comparatively marginalised way and within a framing of ‘efficiency’. These are framed as ‘the other sustainability’ which has got ‘negative’ and ‘complicated’ attributes attached and is explicitly detached from consumer-related contexts. ‘Sustainability’ is framed as integrated, ‘normal’ element of business conduct that happens ‘behind the scenes’ and ‘out of sight’ without ‘troubling’ the consumer. What defines recent discourses is thus a separation between ‘sustainable consumption’ and ‘sustainable production’, whereby neither is led by environmental challenges as such. The former is centred on ‘purpose’ and ‘cause’ in relation to ‘consumer trust’ and ‘consumer connection’, whereas the latter is centred on matters of ‘efficiency’.

7.4 Conclusion

Notions of sustainability have constantly been ‘on the move’ since the mid-2000s. Narratives on ‘premium produce’, ‘healthy diets’ and ‘efficiency’ have had varying impacts on the reinforcement of these notions throughout the years. As represented in Figure 1 below, from 2005 onwards, notions of sustainability were centred on environmental challenges. In this way, sustainability was a subject to production-focused debates embedded in the pursuit of future viability and resilience of the food industry. In the subsequent years, a strong focus on eco-efficient innovation was established. It came along with ‘opportunity’-

led narratives on efficiency, which soon superseded challenge-based and future-directed narratives on sustainable production. The consumer trend for ethical premium produce further fed into the notion of sustainability, generating a 'green hype' that peaked in *The Grocer* in the year 2007.

During and in the aftermath of the recession, this 'green' interpretation of sustainability remained in place. However, with the prospect of cost-efficiency as a determining factor of sustainable production on the one hand and 'premium price' as a determining factor of 'sustainable products' on the other, tensions within the notion of sustainability became more visible during the period 2012 – 2017 and led to a change of emphasis. While the notion of cost-efficiency in sustainable production was reinforced by narratives that portrayed the pursuit of sustainability, as well as the significance of business agency for it, 'premium price' was downplayed or justified as a determining factor of 'sustainable products'. Thus, while ideas of 'efficiency' strengthened notions of sustainability, ideas of 'premiumisation' began to be again disassociated with sustainability (as was the case before the 'green hype' around 2007 – Section 5.3.1). Additionally, acknowledgements of complexity and calls for a clearer definition of 'sustainability' became prevalent. These acknowledgements established a connection between notions of 'sustainability' and 'health' and fostered the concept of 'sustainable and healthy diets'.

Ultimately, in most recent discourses, 'sustainability' is portrayed as an integrated element of business conduct. It is treated as ordinary to the extent that its explicitness and lucidity have strongly declined: in consumption-related contexts, environmental forms of production are not regarded as noteworthy but as being 'normal' and taken for granted by consumers. Emotional attributes that were formerly attached to the marketing of sustainable products (for example relating products to a purpose, building a connection and trust through and with products) remain crucial to the (non-environmental) 'purpose'-focused, consumer-facing side of sustainability. Thus, while 'sustainability' in the sense of environmental commitments is portrayed as being well underway and has in this way receded from debates, the concept of 'purpose', which developed within food sustainability discourses over the years, establishes as a central brand- and product-, and therefore consumer-focused, pursuit in its own right.

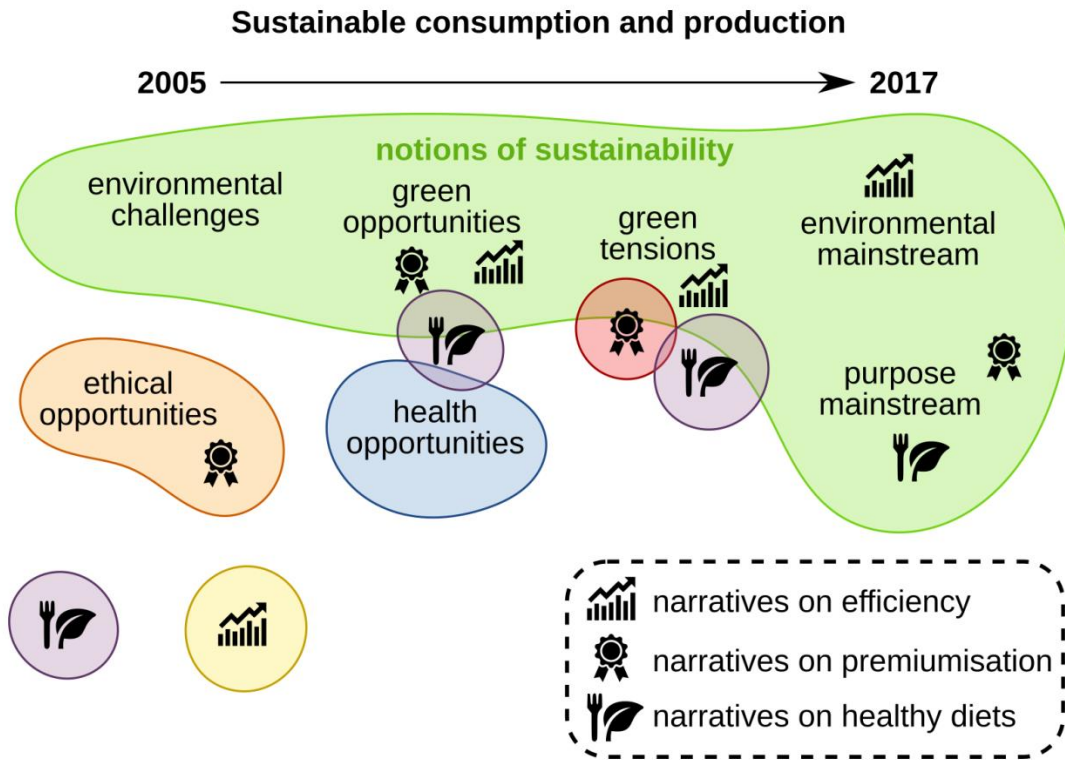


Figure 1: Changing understandings of sustainable food consumption and production

While experts argued that progress has taken place and that sustainable actions now constitute an integrated ‘mainstream’ part of business conduct, the analysis has shown that this progress is – at least in parts – also a result of altered notions of sustainability. Comparing recent food sustainability discourses with initial discourses as represented in articles in *The Grocer* of 2005, it was shown that these share similarities in the sense that sustainable production and sustainable consumption are treated as separate aspects. However, the ways in which actions ascribed to both production and consumption are described differ significantly between the earliest and the most recent discourses. In comparison to the mid-2000s, recent discourses on ‘sustainable production’ are built on a more specified and narrowed notion that is dominated by ideas of environmental efficiency. ‘Sustainable consumption’ is referred to in a much broader, rather mainstream sense, whereby activities such as charitable engagement for the local community, gaining consumer trust or following a consumer-centred approach serve as testimonials for ethics/purpose being served.

This discursive constitution can be seen as a consequence of the discursive developments in the years in between, when both, matters of sustainable production and the consumer

communication/marketing aspects of consumption, were blurred into one ‘green’ agenda. Firstly, the development and expansion of eco-efficient innovation transformed challenges into opportunities during this period. Secondly, the unification of the attributes of ‘ethical’ and ‘sustainable’ transformed a lack of consumer interest in sustainable products into a mainstream consumer trend. Crucial was thereby the prioritisation of their common denominators of ‘consumer trust’ and ‘brand purpose’, as well as the establishment of a link to concerns of ‘health’. These developments are outlined in Figure 2.

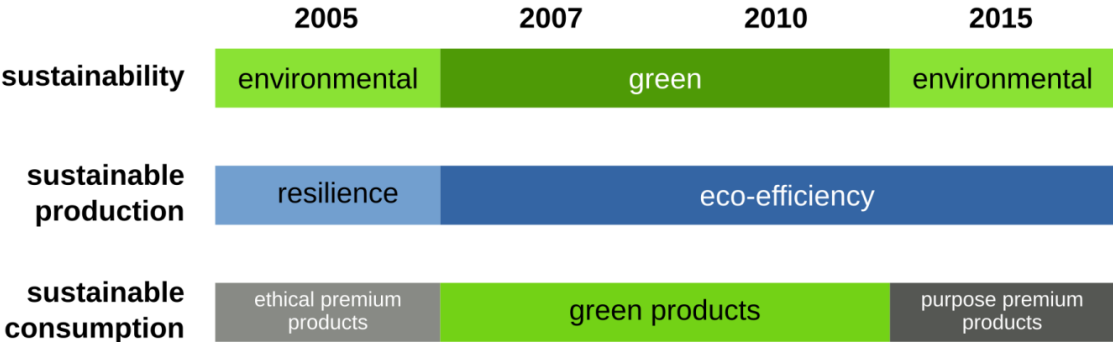


Figure 2: Dominant understandings of sustainability, sustainable production and sustainable consumption of food

The underlying framing of ‘sustainability’ after a ‘green’ period has in recent discourses plateaued off back to the framing that was in place in the mid-2000s, but with the difference that the ‘eco-efficiency’-based understanding of ‘sustainable production’ has been continuously strengthened and manifested as the dominant interpretation of sustainable production. In relation to understandings of ‘sustainable consumption’ it has been shown that its emergence and existence was very much interrelated with and dependent on the ‘green’ period in between. Both in the discourse of the mid-2000s and also in the recent discourse, there is little recognition of, or advocacy and support for, sustainable consumption in a sense that aligns with sustainable production. However, in the recent discourse, established understandings of ‘sustainable products’ are incorporated into a wider concept of ‘products with a purpose’, which opens up ‘sustainable consumption’ to a larger interpretative space. As it stands, experts describe the ‘ideal’ of sustainability with concepts such as holism, systemic thinking and circularity (Section 6.2.1). As constituted in recent debates, however, underlying notions are satisfied with either references to eco-efficient adaptations for ‘sustainable production’ in the supply chain or feel-good consumer-communication for ‘sustainable consumption’.

Chapter 8 – Sustainable food consumption: A discursive framework

8.1 Introduction

The collective interrogation of discourses found in media articles, expert interviews and policy papers has delivered insights into the compatibilities, contestations and contradictions within and between discourses on food sustainability throughout certain times and spaces. In the previous chapter, it was discussed how sustainable consumption and production is conceptualised in expert discourses and approached under changing circumstances of markets and innovations over time.

In order to complete the research in a discourse analytical sense as outlined in Chapter Four (see in particular Section 4.4.3), another step of analysis is needed. This goes beyond the analysis of discursive dynamics and interrelations presented in the previous chapter. Discourse analytical methods enable the research to “chart what is said and can be said in a given society at a given time [...] and to uncover the techniques through which discursive limits are extended and narrowed down” (Jäger and Maier 2009, 36). In this research, discourse analysis thus also functioned as a method to map the spectrum and limits of the “sayable” (Jäger and Maier 2009, Jäger 2001) in expert discourses on sustainable consumption and production of food. This chapter is concerned with the interpretative frames of ‘sustainable food consumption’ in expert discourses as represented by the three analysed sets of data (articles in *The Grocer*, expert interviews and policy papers).

Three interpretative frames were identified: (1) consumer sovereignty, (2) economic rationality and (3) stewardship. These set the conditions upon which issues enter debates on food sustainability and, at the same time, limit the rhetorical spaces within which issues can be addressed. In this chapter, I demonstrate, by drawing on three themes as examples - organic consumption, protein diversity and food waste reduction – that issues have to be framed and contextualised in a way that complies with these interpretative frames in order to become established as themes within discourses on sustainable food consumption.

I start this chapter with a brief outline of the interpretative frames of ‘consumer sovereignty’, ‘economic rationality’ and ‘stewardship’ (Section 8.2). In order to illustrate how those three function as interpretative frames and thereby constitute the discursive

framework of expert discourses over time and discursive spaces, I thereafter exemplify their significance and performance by discussing the discursive dynamics of three themes of sustainable food consumption: organic consumption, protein diversity and (food) waste reduction (Section 8.3; the analytical process that led to the identification of these interpretative themes is described in Chapter Four, Section 4.4.3). I then summarize the core overall findings on the discursive framework within which expert discourses on sustainable consumption operate and discuss related implications on agency and action for food sustainability (Section 8.4).

8.2 Three interpretative frames of ‘sustainable consumption’

Discourses are “instances of the production and circulation of frames” (Keller 2006, 236). In this way, they are representative for the system of social structures and institutions, the relations between these structures and institutions, as well as the practices that they entail. Fairclough (2001) has noted that the most dominant framings represented in a discourse are disguised through a process of naturalisation. By identifying those ‘naturalised’, common sense components of discursive practice (Fairclough 2001), the ‘framework’ that limits the rhetorical space in which discourses operate can be made visible. This further helps to explain why certain topics are disregarded or marginal while others dominate the discourse. In this project, various themes that emerged in all three datasets were scanned for argumentative patterns in order to identify these disguised interpretative frames of expert discourses on ‘sustainable consumption’ (Section 4.4.3).

Borrowed from the field of sociology of knowledge, interpretative frames are understood as socially typified schemata that are available in the context of a certain knowledge-community. They represent the schemata for the attribution of meaning and cognitive ordering drawn upon by individuals and collective actors. Interpretative frames thus accentuate the link between texts or speech and social practices (Keller 2006).

The analysis of argumentative patterns that recur in the context of various different themes of sustainable consumption eventually led to the identification of three ‘interpretative frames’ (Keller 2006, 2007) that I termed as follows: consumer sovereignty, economic rationality and stewardship. As ‘naturalised’ common sense practices of discourses (Fairclough 2001) on sustainable consumption, they function in a twofold way. The discussion of the framework on the basis of three themes in the following section (8.3)

demonstrates that for an issue to gain significance within discourses on sustainable food consumption, it has to be built on arguments that are positively connected to each of those three interpretative frames as ‘schemes’.²⁸ The ways in which these interpretative frames are related to and drawn upon are varied - variations in their conceptualisation over time have been identified. If arguments, concepts or characteristics of a certain topic do not confirm those schemes in some way, but rather oppose and contradict them, these issues do not become established or remain as issues within expert discourses under the umbrella of ‘sustainable consumption’. As ‘frames’ they confine the ‘sayable’, the principles that may not be rhetorically violated but have to be rhetorically preserved and reinforced in order to fit into the discursive framework of ‘sustainable consumption’. In this way, each interpretative frame crucially confines the ways in which issues have to be addressed in order to emerge and establish as a theme within the discursive framework of ‘sustainable consumption’.

Figure 3 portrays the three frames and the reference issues through which they are addressed. Thereafter, a brief description of their defining features as identified by the analysis is presented.

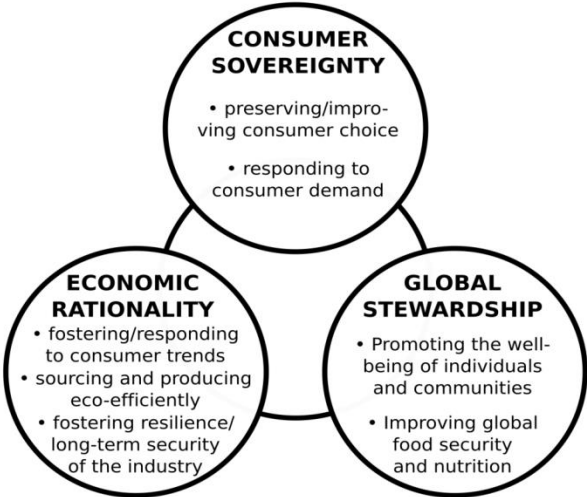


Figure 3: The discursive framework of sustainable food consumption

²⁸ The term ‘interpretative frame’, as adopted from Keller (2006), is translated from the German term ‘Deutungsmuster’, which was originally introduced by Ulrich Oevermann. ‘Muster’ can be understood as ‘frames’ or ‘schemes’. For the purpose of this research, I have chosen the term ‘frames’ to emphasise the limitations inherent in the identified discursive framework of sustainable consumption. However, it has to be acknowledged that the discursive framework operates as a ‘model’ that represents and reproduces ‘patterns’ of interpretation – in this way, the interpretative frames operate as ‘schemes’.

Consumer sovereignty — The rhetorical satisfaction of the sovereign consumer ideal (Section 2.6) is central for issues to become established in debates on sustainable food consumption. Implementations or strategies that come along with alterations or innovations are commonly argued as constituting a response to consumer demands or desires. Further, arguments such as that limitations of choices would be demanded by consumers or that the removal of ‘bad’ choices and replacement with new and ‘better’ sets of choices (‘choice architecture’, see Thaler and Sunstein 2008) actively reinforce the idea that ‘sustainable consumption’ establishes different ways of consumption whilst preserving the principle of consumer sovereignty. References to sales figures and the popularity of certain product segments and brands, but even more so to consumer surveys and anecdotal evidence (e.g. on specific consumer demands or the value-action gap) constitute crucial rhetorical devices for the reinforcement of consumer sovereignty (Sections 5.4.2, 5.5.2, 5.6.2, as well as 6.5.2 and 6.5.3).

Overall, there are two argumentative ways in which the interpretative frame of ‘consumer sovereignty’ is satisfied within expert debates on sustainable food consumption. Firstly, and particularly in ‘earlier’ debates, consumer sovereignty is rhetorically preserved by attesting ‘consumer choice’ as a key element of ‘sustainable consumption’. Strategies and implementations are set out for ‘sustainable consumption’ under the premise of ‘consumer choice’. In another line of argumentation, which is particularly dominant in more recent debates, implementations in the name of ‘sustainable consumption’ in themselves are framed as consumer demand (e.g. ‘choice architecture’). Strategies and implementations are thereby framed as a means to adopt the desired ends and to meet consumer expectations.

Economic rationality — A second interpretative frame of expert debates on sustainable consumption is constituted by the principle of economic value creation through the establishment of different ways of consumption. Strategies or implementations have to be rhetorically framed as ‘advantageous investments’ from a managerial and financial perspective in order to ‘qualify’ as viable strategies and implementations for sustainable food consumption (Sections 6.2.3 as well as 5.3.3, 5.4.3, 5.5.3, 5.6.3). Based on the analysis of the three data sets analysed in this project, three ways in which the interpretative frame of ‘economic rationality’ is satisfied have been identified. In one line of argumentation, strategies and implementations in the name of ‘sustainable consumption’ are narrated as

being inherently profitable through cost savings in eco-efficient production along the principles of 'reduce, reuse and recycle'. In another line of argumentation, strategies and implementations are narrated as being profitable through consumer demand. They are then framed as activities that foster and respond to consumer trends. Lastly, in a third line of argumentation, strategies and implementations for 'sustainable consumption' are portrayed as a means to establish resilience or long-term security of the industry. Planetary boundaries and scenarios of scarcity are central to this latter line of argumentation.

Stewardship – The third interpretative frame can be summarised as 'stewardship'. 'Stewardship' stands for the responsible planning and management of resources in order to increase the wellbeing of individuals or communities on a local or global level. This means that for an issue to establish as a theme of sustainable food consumption in expert discourses, it has to be argued on the basis of commitment and integrity of some sense of 'care' and 'doing good' to people, with an anticipated outcome of change on an individual or structural level.

In the expert discourses analysed in the context of this study, it was found that in order to rhetorically satisfy the interpretative frame of 'stewardship', first and foremost claims of enhanced social well-being in the sense of healthier and happier individuals and communities are drawn upon to refer to initiatives for 'sustainable consumption'. Individualistic interpretations of health as well as the improvement of local communities constitute thereby common references – in particular in the most recent discourse (Sections 5.6.1 and 7.3). Further, structural aspects of a global scale (e.g. challenges associated with a growing world population and food security) also play a role but commonly as a rhetorical 'hook' that leads over to the context of enhanced well-being of individuals and communities.

8.3 Three exemplary themes

8.3.1 Introduction

In the following, the significance of the discursive framework composed of the three interpretative frames outlined above is demonstrated by three exemplary themes. These are 'organic consumption', 'protein diversity' and '(food) waste reduction'. It has to be noted that other identified themes such as 'sustainable fish', 'free range produce' or 'fair trade' also operate on the base of those three interpretative frames, but for the illustration of the discursive framework, the three mentioned above were chosen. Two aspects were decisive

for this selection. Firstly, they play a crucial role to the dynamics of discourses on sustainable food consumption. Secondly, by the combination of those three particular themes, a good representation of the major structural shifts over the analysed period can be achieved, since they differ significantly in the way they relate to discourses on sustainable food consumption.

‘Organic consumption’ is incorporated into the discursive framework of ‘sustainable food consumption’ in the early ‘green hype’ phase, but dissociated from it in more recent discourses, whereas ‘protein diversity’, which currently constitutes a major element of discourses on sustainable food consumption, was not a theme to debates until recently. ‘(Food) waste reduction’, in contrast, was a key element to the emergence of discourses of sustainable food consumption as such right from the beginning and is strongly represented in recent discourse; it delivers the ‘model case’ for sustainable food consumption.

Each of those themes plays a particular role towards discourses on sustainable food consumption and each has its unique role and story within those discourses. On the basis of their joint contribution to and interrelation with discourses on sustainable food consumption, it can be illustrated how the interpretative frames of consumer sovereignty, economic rationality and stewardship remain an underlying constant throughout the discursive dynamics over time.

8.3.2 Organic consumption

Organic consumption initially emerged as a theme in business-policy food sustainability discourses during the period when food sustainability discourses were at their ‘peak’ (roughly from 2006 until early 2008; see Table 1 in Chapter Four and Section 5.4). Both, the peaking of food sustainability discourses and the emergence of organic consumption as a ‘theme’ was enabled because during this period notions of ethical premium merged with notions of sustainability into a ‘green hype’. Being portrayed as a superior and premium-priced product category, ‘organic’ functioned as a proxy for ‘ethical premium’. It enhanced the discourse of sustainable food consumption by drawing on rising sales figures of this product category as evidence for consumer commitment to sustainability and their willingness to pay a premium price for sustainable products (Section 5.4.1).

Organic consumption ‘worked’ in discourses of sustainable consumption during its peak time, firstly because it corresponded with a ‘consumer choice’-centred interpretation of

'consumer sovereignty'. This was in reference to the basic reasoning of 'organic' pressing "the current consumer buttons" (43_2007) which was evidenced by growing sales numbers. When sales numbers started to fall from 2008 onwards, a lack of consumer demand for organic produce was initially explained in reference to the recession – the supply of organic produce was still interpreted as a commitment to consumer attitudes, which intermittently could not be translated into actions because of financial struggles (Section 5.5.3).²⁹

The theme of organic further fed into the interpretative frame of 'economic rationality' in the sense that a consumer trend for this segment promised profitability through the potential for the development of a new "mass market" (32_2007), whilst being associated with premium prices. During and shortly after the recession, initial reactions were built on claims that sales were only briefly disrupted but would pick up again soon (Section 5.5.3). During the 'green hype' (prior to the recession) the idea of 'organic consumption' as an element of sustainable food consumption had established. This circumstance enabled the theme of 'organic consumption' to subsist during the recession.

The theme of organic consumption further fed into the interpretative frame of 'stewardship' in a sense of integrity in relation to standards of production and provenance. 'Organic' was portrayed as a trend that opposes dubious methods of intensive agriculture and a market segment resistant to any scandals or concerns in relation to food safety, such as "pesticides" (Joseph) or "horsegate" (David). In this way, it was loosely related to health benefits.

Having been introduced through its attribute of 'premium' during the 'green hype', organic consumption was from the beginning a 'weak case' to the framework of sustainable food consumption, given that it was premised on 'premium'. Given the circumstances during these 'peak times' of discourses it nevertheless managed to penetrate these discourses and to become a constituting element.

In more recent discourses on sustainable food consumption, however, 'organic' is barely visible. During its decline in sales over time (Co-operative Bank 2010, Soil Association 2018), aspects that were bracketed out during the 'hype' were made explicit. With its superiority in relation to 'health' being put in question and organic produce's comparatively low

²⁹ Market Reports on the sales of organic food and drink in the UK have shown that sales peaked in 2007 and 2008 and continuously dropped thereafter until they started to pick up again from 2012 onwards (Co-operative Bank 2010, Soil Association 2018).

performance in terms of 'efficiency' being emphasised (e.g. through the comparison between the organic and the conventional chicken, see OC 2008 and Section 6.2.3.2), 'organic consumption' is now retrospectively rejected as a misconception or a 'misnomer', as it is termed by an interviewee (Michael) and recedes from discourses of sustainable food consumption.

With sales having been in decline for years, little evidence for a considerable degree of consumer demand for organic products was available and organic consumption has lost its credentials to the interpretative frame of 'consumer sovereignty'. The decline opened up space for negative narratives on its relation to sustainable food consumption to become established. Comparisons to conventional produce in terms of 'efficiency' in production impacted the relation between organic consumption and both the interpretative frame of 'economic rationality' and the interpretative frame of 'stewardship' negatively. Even though sales numbers have currently picked up again (Soil Association 2018),³⁰ evidence of organic production's inefficiency outweighs its potential as a growing market segment or niche product. These notions of organic consumption, which lead to its dropping out of the scope of 'economic rationality', are further nourished by arguments on demographic growth and questions of food security and how to feed a growing global population, which detaches organic consumption further from the interpretative frame of 'stewardship'.

Following the discursive development of the theme 'organic consumption' over the years and drawing from various sources of speech (media articles, expert interviews, policy documents), tensions can be identified. When the interviewees thought about the development of the sustainability agenda, on the one hand, they located 'organic produce' in the past and referred to it as an example of success in terms of food sustainability. However, from a viewpoint that aims to identify the 'current state' of the agenda, they stated on the other hand, that 'organic' would be falsely associated with 'sustainability'. The diachronic analysis has shown that in the case of the former, experts do refer back to a time when 'organic consumption' was an integrated part of the discursive framework of 'food sustainability', while the latter argumentations are normative statements deriving within the recent discursive framework from which it is detached.

³⁰ Sales figures of organic produce continuously dropped after 2008, but picked up again from 2012 onwards, leading to another peak in 2017 (Soil Association 2018).

8.3.3 Protein diversity

In recent food sustainability discourses, the theme of ‘protein diversity’ constitutes a central theme. The focus on ‘protein diversity’ transforms the issue of meat consumption from a problem that is associated with potential constraints and limitations towards a positive, forward looking opportunity to create and potentially foster more varied diets. Rather than talking about ‘meat’ as an issue, experts’ speech focuses on the benefits of “protein diversity” (James), “plant proteins” (Robert) or “new alternatives to fish and poultry and other such proteins” (Michael). In doing so, the issue is placed as a problem within questions of appropriate diets and personal health rather than socio-environmental sustainability.

Related argumentations endorse ‘protein diversity’ on the underlying interpretative frame of consumer sovereignty, delivering the basis of narratives on the supply of more, improved and better sets of choices. In this framing, the opportunities are not only about meat, but also about varieties of plant-based products. The focus is thereby firstly on the promotion of the consumption of “better meat” such as free-range, organic, pasture-reared, locally sourced meat – so to re-invent meat as something special, but secondly also on the provision of “non-meat or lower-meat choices” (Dibb and Fitzpatrick 2014, 17). In its ‘purest form’, this argumentation is made explicit by the ‘Eating Better’ alliance (see e.g. Dibb and Fitzpatrick 2014), which is positively referred to by both the interviewees John and Mary. In addition to ‘health’ being presented as a core concern of consumers, references to ‘protein diversity’ serve to maintain the idea of ‘consumer sovereignty’. Thus, although little consumer commitment to a reduction of meat consumption out of environmental intentions is openly acknowledged, an argumentative detour via consumer choice for health is put in place to reinforce a narrative of ‘protein diversity’ for healthier diets.

Inherent in the theme of ‘protein diversity’ is also a chance for innovation. Arguments that are framed in the sense of a need for more ‘protein diversity’ rather than ‘meat reduction’ thus reinforce the ‘economic rationality’ interpretative frame in a twofold way. It is firstly facilitated by calls for *more* ‘diverse’ proteins for human consumption. The emergence of new varieties of plant-based proteins thus promises sales of new protein-based product segments *in addition* to established animal-based segments. They create the potential for ‘growth’ through the establishment of new markets for vegans, vegetarians, flexitarians and other health-conscious or ‘protein-curious’ consumers. Secondly, the issue of high – and

potentially rising – levels of meat consumption is taken as a given, which means that the continuation of meat markets per se is not put in question. In this respect, alternative proteins are not only drawn upon in the sense of ‘new’ food for direct human consumption but also for their potential to deliver more efficient forms of livestock feed in the sense of “[s]caling up sustainable animal feed innovation to meet demand for animal protein” (FftF 2018). In this context, ‘protein diversity’ is utilised for its potential of delivering more eco- and cost-efficient ways of livestock keeping, which further ascertains prospects for the opening of new markets and opportunities “for business and policymakers to engage” (WRAP 2015, 1), supporting the ideal of ‘economic rationality’.

The ‘protein diversity’ framing further feeds into the interpretative frame of ‘stewardship’. Making the problem of a lack of supply of protein in other parts of the world visible, a core concern of ‘stewardship’ is touched upon. Placing the issue of food security in relation to a growing world population at the heart of the argumentation reinforces the idea that an increasing need for the production of protein is inevitable. A focus on ‘protein’ (as opposed to ‘meat’) suggests nutritional associations and further reinforces the notion of it being a crucial, potentially scarce element of an appropriate diet. Thus, while it is appropriated to the discourse of sustainability on the basis of an agenda for a global challenge to “meet the protein needs of 9 billion people” (FftF 2018), it is utilized by narratives on ‘better foods’ for consumers in the UK.

Within the theme of ‘protein diversity’, narratives on the challenge to feed a global world population pair up with narratives on the importance to foster improved, healthier diets in the UK, developing an understanding of a need for ‘better protein for everyone’. With ‘protein diversity’ functioning as a proxy for ‘good nutrition’, the argument that ‘developed’ countries over-consume meat, which suggests the reduction of meat intake without replacing it with any protein substitutes, is discursively converted into the notion of a (potential) lack of appropriate protein intake of people living in developed countries such as the UK.

The analysis of food sustainability discourses over time shows that the theme of ‘protein diversity’ was non-existent in the years before 2015. Until recently, issues of ‘meat consumption’ were addressed, but remained marginal to debates on food sustainability. The focus was then on a problematisation of the high levels of meat consumption. This was, for

example, associated with “greenhouse gas emissions” and an emphasis on the need to “address the pattern of food consumption in developed economies such as the UK” (WWF 2009, 1) and to adopt diets of lower impact that “would contain less meat and fewer dairy products than we typically eat today” (CO 2008, 16). If related to ‘health’, potential risks such as diseases related to the consumption of certain meats (WWF 2009) or deficiencies associated with too little intake of meat, such as “[i]ron deficiency anaemia” (CO 2008, 16) were voiced. Interviewees refer to this previous framing of the issue of ‘meat consumption’ as a “very simplistic, sort of ‘stop eating meat’ argument” (John). In their opinion, commands such as “you must eat less meat” (James) and campaigns that take “a grassroots [...] ‘eat less meat!’” way of communication would not work and would not be the “appropriate way” (Robert); “[T]ackling meat [...] is difficult” (Mary).

Taking a discourse analytical perspective, it is found that the ways in which the issue of ‘meat consumption’ was addressed and commented on in earlier discourses did not ‘fit’ into the basic framework that entails the interpretative frames of ‘consumer sovereignty’, ‘economic rationality’ and ‘stewardship’. Although the latter was arguably in place from the beginning, it was not narrated in a way that was compatible with the former two. With the focus being on achieving “low-impact diets” which should “contain less meat” (CO 2008, 16), as opposed to established meat-based UK diets, related adaptations were framed as an interference into consumer’s lives. An emphasis on reduction of meat without suggestions for substitutions further interfered with the idea of ‘economic rationality’.

Being now embedded in the theme of ‘protein diversity’, however, ‘meat consumption’ constitutes an established theme in discourses on sustainable food consumption. The increasing unification of ‘sustainability’ and ‘health’ over time was vital to this development, allowing the issue to be framed as something that is in the interest of ‘everyone’. It shifts debates on the issue of extensive meat production away from a conceptualisation as an environmental problem of heavily meat-based diets in the ‘developed’ Global North that cause global warming, limits biodiversity and the productivity of farmland and further contributes to malnutrition in the ‘developing’ Global South. As opposed to this, the incorporation of meat into the theme of ‘protein diversity’ shifts the focus to a less contested problem to tackle: better diets for the global population. Rather than making meat consumption an issue, its importance was reinforced by a focus on the supply of

‘protein’ as the core nutrient for overseas consumers and UK consumers alike. Thus, contrary to some interviewees’ claims that ‘meat consumption’ recently managed to be made visible in sustainability debates, the diachronic analysis of the recent discourse demonstrates that it is not the problem of ‘meat consumption’ that is discussed, but the opportunity of ‘protein diversity’, which operates on the basis of an entirely different set of interpretative frames.

8.3.4 (Food) waste reduction

Waste reduction is a leading theme of food sustainability discourses. While it has been an agenda-defining theme to discourses on food sustainability over the past, it delivers the model case of action in more recent food sustainability discourses. While the theme was originally centred on the issue of packaging waste, food waste was gradually taken up and incorporated into debates and gained prominence.

The theme of (food) waste reduction is inherently intertwined with the interpretative frame of ‘economic rationality’. Even though the topic originated with a focus on packaging waste independently from the discourse of food sustainability (see WRAP 2018a for WRAP’s ‘Courtauld Commitment 1’), ‘waste reduction’ was established as the centrepiece of the efficiency discourse within debates on food sustainability during the period of the ‘green hype’. In this period, retailer and manufacturer actions to reduce or recycle packaging waste represented flagship examples for achievements related to food sustainability (Section 5.4.1). Even though it does not directly concern food as such, with its inherent potential to save costs, the example of packaging waste reduction delivered the evidence for the economic viability of food sustainability during this period. The focus however soon moved on from packaging waste to food waste, adding to the narrative of waste reduction as a win-win approach. Reductions of food waste are highlighted as being “likely to have both financial and environmental benefits” (WRAP 2009, 75), with recycling being considered to add further opportunities “to extract the maximum renewable energy” (CO 2008, 94) as well as “to realise efficiencies” or to “create new high value by-products from undervalued waste streams” (WRAP 2015, 1). In these ways, action on ‘waste’ is portrayed as an economically rewarding aspect of sustainable food consumption.

Through the notion of waste and the action of throwing things away being intrinsically ‘a bad thing’, ‘waste reduction’ further touches upon the interpretative frame of ‘stewardship’.

While this association was already inherent in earlier discourses centred on the issue of packaging, with the issue of food waste becoming more central, it is further reinforced. Arguments related to food supply on a global scale are central here: in the negative sense of 'waste' taking away food from those in need, but also in the positive sense of 'waste reduction' delivering a potential tool to deliver a higher degree of access to food globally. Related argumentations underpin the idea that "throwing away food makes people feel guilty in a world where so many are going hungry" (Richard) and foster the notion that a reduction of food waste would have the potential of "putting downward pressure on prices and allowing more food to be available for those in greatest need" (WRAP 2009, 75). The interpretative frame of 'stewardship' is further drawn upon in the sense of helping the individuals to save money and to overall increase their wellbeing. This is for example reinforced with arguments such as that industry innovations around food waste could help those with "busy lives and little time", as well as that the reduction of avoidable household waste "could save the average family £700 a year" (WRAP 2014).

The 'consumer information' narrative of 'waste', dominated by the WRAP's 'Love Food, Hate Waste' campaign which was released in 2007 (WRAP 2018b), was set out to introduce the issue of food waste to consumers, to encourage them to review their own behaviours as well as to provide help for them to do so. It served the interpretative frame of consumer-sovereignty in the very sense of educating the consumer to enable them to adapt more sustainable patterns of behaviour. Aside from this, another narrative that relates to the interpretative frame of consumer-sovereignty has been simultaneously prevalent. Already during the period of the 'green hype', when narratives on 'consumer choice' for food sustainability generally peaked and other themes were supported by evidence of high sales numbers, the theme of 'waste' was rooted in arguments on consumer desire for adaptations in packaging that were responded to by businesses (Section 5.4.1). In this way, the interpretative frame of the 'sovereign consumer' was satisfied in the sense that businesses' reduction of unnecessary packaging was legitimised as being a response to consumer desires. This narrative can still be found in recent times, when it blends in with the reassurance of the existence of consumer commitment to other aspects of sustainable consumption although not represented in sales figures (Sections 5.6.2 and 6.3.2).

‘(Food) waste reduction’ is further an unique topic to the interpretative frame of ‘consumer sovereignty’ in the sense that it rarely concerned actions of consumption at the point of purchase, but was always centred on either supply chain adaptations of manufacturers and retailers or on behaviours of individuals in households. It was thus, unlike most other consumption-related themes, never measured by the quantity of sales and it never implied the potential of higher costs for consumers. It was, consequently, never interrupted by sales-related issues, which was the case to most other themes (to which a disruption of ‘consumer choice’ centred narratives meant a transformation towards ‘choice architecture’-centred narratives). Waste reduction, consequently, represents an exceptional case in relation to the interpretative frame of ‘consumer sovereignty’ in the way that ‘consumer choice’ never functioned as a parameter of consumer commitment to ‘waste reduction’, which means that it never ‘threatened’ the principal of freedom of consumption. Implementations never had to be justified and explained as being no threat to consumer choice but were always framed as being done for/on behalf of the consumer.

8.3.5 Summary

Each of the three presented themes has a different relation to and ‘argumentative story’ within changing expert discourses on sustainable consumption. As major (or formerly major, in the case of ‘organic consumption’) themes within discourses of sustainable consumption, they constitute representative examples of how the interpretative frames of consumer sovereignty, economic rationality and stewardship are reinforced within those discourses. On the base of their joint contribution to and interrelation with discourses on sustainable food consumption, it can be illustrated how the interpretative frames remain an underlying constant throughout the discursive dynamics over time, while the issues and topics come in and out of focus and themes are constantly reframed. Figure 4 illustrates the ‘journey’ of those three themes in relation to the changing notions and discursive influences of ‘sustainability’ within discourses on sustainable consumption and production.

‘Organic consumption’ constituted the ‘model case’ of ‘ethical consumption’ in the early discourse of 2005. During the ‘green hype’, the discourse of ‘ethical consumption’ was incorporated into and mixed with the discourse of ‘sustainable consumption’, and so was ‘organic consumption’. With organic having been framed as a ‘premium product’

throughout, it was affected by the ‘green tensions’ after the recession and, over time, lost presence within discourses on sustainable consumption.

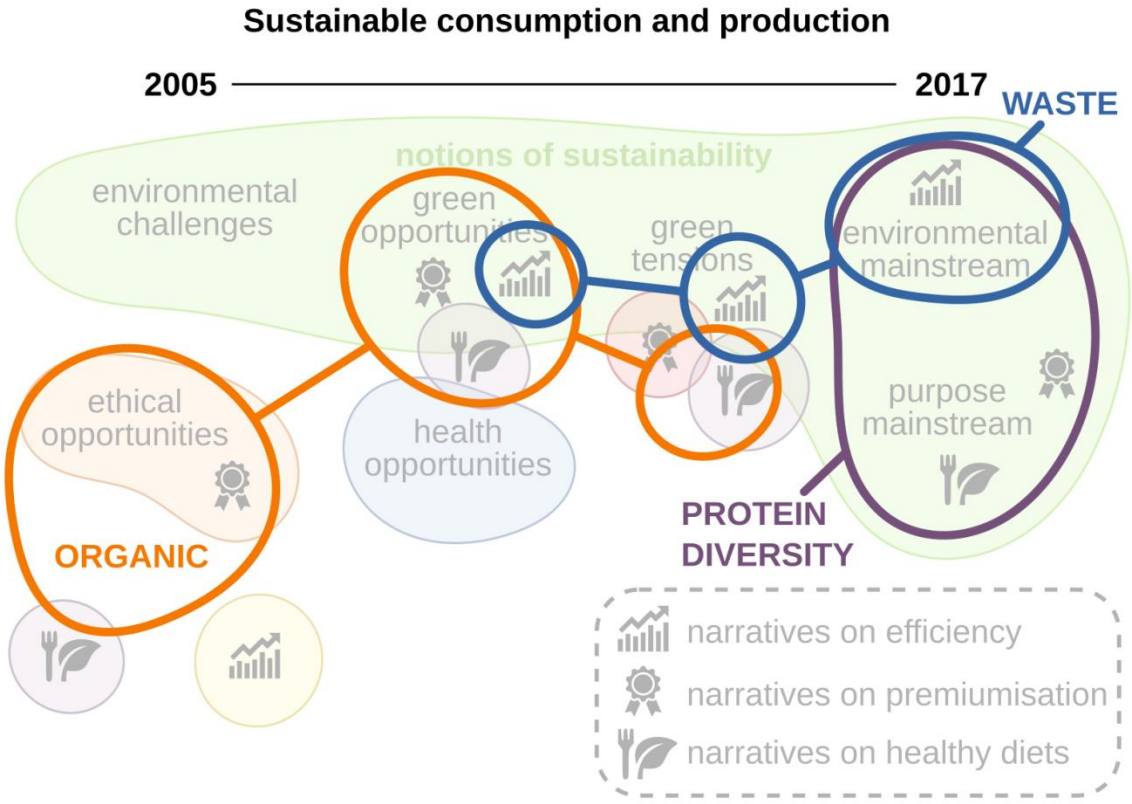


Figure 4: The themes of consumer sovereignty, economic rationality and stewardship in the context of discursive dynamics over time

As opposed to this, ‘protein diversity’ is a topic that only emerged recently. Framing issues around meat production and consumption as a matter of protein it is not only new to discourses on sustainable consumption and production, but constitutes as such a relatively recent theme in general. The third theme presented here, ‘(food) waste reduction’, in contrast, was a key element to the emergence of discourses of sustainable food consumption from the beginning and has persisted throughout the period studied. As a discursive theme it emerged with its inherent focus on ‘efficiency’ right at the core of the ‘green hype’ and became thereby a major constituting element of discourses on sustainable consumption that sets the standard for other themes. As such, it delivers the ‘model case’ for sustainable food consumption.

8.4 Conclusion

Three interpretative frames determine discourses on sustainable food consumption as identified by the analysis of expert discourses in the period from 2005 to 2017 in the UK: consumer sovereignty, economic rationality and stewardship. These interpretative frames shape the 'discursive framework' and therefore represent the 'interpretative conditions' for issues being discussed as issues of sustainable food consumption. As schemata for interpretation, consumer sovereignty, economic rationality and stewardship limit the rhetorical spaces within which topics can be addressed and establish as themes. As demonstrated by the three exemplary themes – organic consumption, protein diversity and (food) waste reduction - discussed in this chapter, an in-depth examination of discourses over time helped to reveal how and why issues come in and drop out of food sustainability debates, for example, how 'waste' could become established as such a dominant issue, why 'organic' fell off the agenda and why it took so long for debates on meat to become established as a concern of sustainability policy.

Chapter 9 – The discursive mobilisation of the rhetorical figure of the consumer

9.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter Three, some scholars see the greatest potential for social change in consumer agency (Section 3.2), while others strongly oppose this, arguing that too little attention has been paid to the importance of commitments of governments, businesses and other institutions (Section 3.3). In order to contribute to these debates from a discourse analytical perspective, the second research question was concerned with the role that accounts of the ‘discursive figure’ of the consumer play in discourses on sustainable food consumption and with the attitudes and behaviours ascribed to them (Section 3.1). A major aim of this research was thus to interrogate the ways in which experts draw upon and utilise the rhetorical figure of the consumer and how these framings feed into their portrayal of processes of social change.

Adopting a discourse analytical lens, in this project ‘the consumer’ was viewed as a rhetorical figure mobilised in discourses (Barnett et al. 2011). This means that rather than investigating consumers’ roles, attitudes, behaviours and responsibilities in relation to sustainable consumers from a normative or instrumental perspective, a meta-perspective on related expert debates is taken, interrogating the ways in which these associations are brought up, framed and mobilised in discourses on food sustainability.

This chapter discusses the joint results of the analysis in relation to different angles from which ‘the consumer’ has been understood in academic, commercial and political debates on social change for sustainability (see Chapter Two and Three): responsibility and blame, consumer attitudes and behaviour, consumer information, consumer choice and political consumerism. Firstly, it is argued that in the analysed expert discourses, responsibility is less attributed to consumers but assumed by or attributed to institutions, whereby the rhetorical figure of the consumer plays a critical role (Section 9.2). Further, an attitude-behaviour gap in the sense of a linguistic and methodological separation is identified (Section 9.3). It is also found that in the analysed narratives there is little differentiation between consumer education/awareness raising efforts and marketing methods such as product labelling and signposting (for individuals to choose certain products over others), with both being considered as strategies to ‘activate’ the desirable consumer choice (Section 9.4).

Thereafter, the dependence upon an evidenced consumer desire for sustainable products in references to consumer attitudes and behaviours in ‘choice’-related arguments as well as argumentations in support of a ‘sustainable choice architecture’ are discussed (Section 9.5). The identified dominance of narratives on ‘choice architecture’-based activities as opposed to ‘consumer choice’-based activities leads to some considerations on potential implications for the idea of ‘political consumerism’ (Section 9.6). A concluding section summarises the ideas of consumer agency for social change and the related claims and descriptions of mechanisms of social change that have been found in previous and recent narratives (Section 9.7).

9.2 Responsibility and blame

In the previous chapter (Chapter Eight) I have argued that the ‘consumer sovereignty’-ideal constitutes a central underlying interpretative frame within expert discourses on sustainable food consumption. Scholarly work on political consumerism (see Section 2.5) considers social and environmental ‘activism’ to be exercised through individual sovereign consumers who ‘vote’ with their money, whereby the supermarket is constituted as the central site of action. Consumers have been ascribed moral responsibility, with “choice as power and therefore duty” (Sassatelli 2007, 187) constituting a key aspect of consumption. In this line of thought, consumers’ aggregated choices in the supermarket are regarded to carry the potential to deliver change towards sustainability through the transformation of the market (Micheletti and Stolle 2012, Micheletti 2003). These approaches have been subjected to extensive critique. Arguing that a focus on consumer responsibility is an insufficient target for intervention in relation to aims associated with sustainability (Shove 2010, Walker 2015), a critical stance towards the expression of citizenship through individual rational choice for sustainable consumption has been taken.

Based on the analysis of various expert narratives, it is found that – unlike some social science scholarship suggests (see Section 3.3.2) – the responsabilisation of consumers as choosing agents is not the dominant framing in the discourse on sustainable food consumption. The focus is rather on other agents’ responsibility, in particular that of retailers’. As such, critical perspectives that frame the dominance of the idea of consumer responsibility as a problem commonly serve as an entry point to narratives on other agent’s responsibility. In fact, in the analysed expert discourses, claims on the dominance of the idea

of consumer responsibility posing a problem are far more common than claims that emphasise consumer responsibility as such.

From all analysed discursive settings, articles that were published in *The Grocer* in 2005 are arguably most representative of a rhetoric that conceptualises choosing consumer agents as the core problem to food sustainability. It was then argued that consumers' lack of knowledge on sustainability issues would make it hard to deliver change, suggesting that a certain demand is needed for businesses to adjust. Implied in this rationale on 'consumer power' is the idea that 'if only' consumers were aware of sustainability issues, they would push change through demand. However, although the problem is framed as a problem of consumer behaviour, even in this context there is little evidence of a "tendency to blame the consumer or [to] individualise responsibilities for affecting change" (Evans 2011). Rather, the industry is called upon to show initiative to raise consumer awareness (Sections 5.3.2 and 5.3.3).

Similarly, in the 2007 sample of *The Grocer*, which was dominated by the idea of 'consumer choice' as the key to deliver change not consumers were responsabilised or blamed, but businesses and other institutions. Consumers were actually portrayed as wanting to make sustainable choices but being hindered by extrinsic factors. They were portrayed as being overwhelmed by an "overload of information" (35_2007) or by "confusing and unhelpful" labelling that could hinder "the kind of food choices that need to be made" (37_2007).

As shown primarily by the analysis of articles in *The Grocer*, I identified a discursive shift in the ways in which the consumer has been portrayed over time, whereby in the more recent years of 2010 and 2015 consumer agency was barely associated with ideas of choice in the supermarket. These narratives are confirmed by interviews with experts that were conducted in 2016, as well as by policy documents throughout the years. Although interviewees argued that consumers want food sustainability, they emphasise that responsible consumer choice in the supermarket is "never going to drive the fundamental change you need to have happen" (Robert, see also Section 6.3.2). The policy documents also strongly support these narratives. As early as in the paper *I will if you will* which was published by the Sustainable Development Commission in 2006, and echoed by the Government's *Food Matters* report (CO 2008), it was emphasised: "[d]on't put the burden solely on green consumers" (SDC 2006, 3).

In *The Grocer* samples of 2010 and 2015, when low consumer commitment to sustainable choices was openly identified, businesses and politicians were the subjects of blame; businesses, more than the consumers, were primarily responsabilised for having to “take the lead” on sustainability (20_2015) and identified as being “in danger of consigning it to the backburner” (26_2010). In this context, but also in the expert interviews and policy documents, consumers are rather portrayed as the initiators, who drive sustainability and actively pressurise or passively expect businesses to ‘act on their behalf’, as expressed in the frequently recited phrase of the *I will if you will* report (SDC 2006).³¹ The lack of consumer choice for sustainable products is thereby excused and legitimised instead of being made a subject of consumer responsabilisation and blame (Section 6.3.2). Following the analysis of expert discourses on food sustainability, it is found that consumers are not held liable for the consequences of their actions, whether it is argued for or against ‘consumer choice’. While a language of consumer responsabilisation might be applied in campaigns that are designed to communicate with the consumer (Barnett et al. 2011), this is not the case for the analysed expert discourses. Responsibility is rather attributed to retailers, manufacturers, governments or other institutions. Ideas on what this responsibility entails are varied. Crucially, however, ideas of responsibility of institutional agents are commonly legitimised as being consumer-directed. This applies to appeals for responsibility to raise consumer awareness and/or to implement labels and signposting to enable consumer choice, as well as to calls for acting on consumers’ behalf, which are central to ‘choice architecture’-based notions of change. Thus, although consumers are not responsabilised as agents, they are mobilised as a rhetorical point of reference in argumentations on businesses’ and other institutions’ responsibilities.³²

³¹ Notably, the report referred to the government’s “responsibility to act as choice editors on behalf of citizens, who often struggle to understand what issues of concern mean for their shopping routines” (SDC 2006, 22). Reports that followed, as well as in expert interviews and media articles, however, primarily referred to businesses acting as choice editors on *consumers’* behalf. What these latter further include, in comparison to *I will if you will*, is the association with consumer *expectation* or *evidence on consumer expectation* that business should ‘act on their behalf’ (CO 2008, M&S 2017, Interviewees William, James and John)

³² Marks and Spencer for example portray the recently published ‘strategic update’ of their *Plan A* as being “repurposed [...] to make it more customer-focused” (M&S 2017, 2), stating the following: “We’ve listened closely to our customers. [...] And as always, we must keep pace with their needs and expectations. We’ve sought the views of more than 750,000 customers and in particular, their attitudes, hopes and fears for the future, to help inform our new strategy. We believe our customers and society more broadly do care about the future. But most people feel that the issues facing our planet are too big, too distant and too difficult for them to influence personally. They expect big business, government, NGOs and other organisations to tackle these issues on their behalf”.

9.3 Consumer attitudes and behaviour

In the previous Section 9.2, it was demonstrated how ‘the consumer’ constitutes a central point of reference in argumentations on businesses’ and other institutions’ responsibility towards food sustainability. References to consumers’ attitudes and behaviours constitute common ways in which consumers’ relation to food sustainability is apprehended. References to consumers’ positive values towards food sustainability and their failure to make consistent sustainable choices are key points of reference in relation to various strategies and implementations for sustainable consumption (such as consumer information and labelling, but also choice editing). Consumers are ascribed positive attitudes on sustainability-related issues, but are also identified as lacking in sustainable behaviour. Both, sustainable attitudes, and a lack of sustainable consumer choice, are paired to a line of argumentation of consumers wanting to be more sustainable, but being unable to translate their attitudes into behaviour. A gap between ‘attitudes and behaviour’ or ‘values and actions’, i.e. an inconsistency between what people say or express through their values and what they actually do, has been widely described in literature on debates on sustainable consumption. In academic, as well as in stakeholder debates, a disparity is recognised between the values that individuals attribute to the natural environment and the level of actions they take to counter environmental destruction (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2003, Shaw et al 2016).

As this ‘gap’ is drawn upon in the analysed expert discourses, notably, in the context of claims on ‘*unsustainable*’, *negative behaviour*, individuals are conceptualised in their agency as ‘*consumers*’, whereas in relation to ‘*sustainable*’, *positive attitudes*, a rather ‘*citizen*’-understanding of individual agents is applied (e.g. Cohen 2003). In narratives on consumers’ lack of knowledge or their inability to make consistently appropriate choices, clear statements for the importance of *helping consumers* to make sustainable choices at the point of purchase are made. For example, in one report, the necessity of “[e]mpowering consumers with the information they need to make better, more sustainable decisions, creating clear and consistent labelling on how products are made, what’s in them, and how to deal with their associated waste” (FftF 2007, 61) is emphasised. Reasonings of this kind, which refer to strategies and implementations for consumer information, labelling or

signposting, are particularly prevalent in articles published in the earlier years (2005 and 2007) in *The Grocer* and are also found in policy papers published during the same period.³³

In all other discursive contexts (i.e. in more recently published policy papers and articles in *The Grocer* as well as in the conducted interviews), consumers are predominantly conceptualised with a focus on their *agency as citizens*. These differ from the former information-based contexts in the way that the discrepancy between consumers' attitudes and behaviours are mainly referred to as a foundation for arguments in support of strategies and implementations to create a more sustainable choice architecture. The aim is not to enable consumers to make their own, informed choices as "a public, other-related, and therefore, political action" (Sassatelli 2007, 188) but to create a choice architecture, in which consumers 'cannot go wrong', whatever their choice is. The implementation of a sustainable choice architecture is framed as a response to sovereign consumers, whose voices are expressed in market research and whose 'commands' are heard and followed (Schwarzkopf 2011). Consumers are thereby portrayed as citizen-consumers desiring and preferring choice-editing over making sustainable choices themselves. In other words; ideas of implementations that limit consumer choice are portrayed as a response to citizen desires. Thus, as opposed to earlier approaches, which focussed on 'helping' the consumer as a 'voter' at the point of purchase to transform their attitudes into behaviour, in these later approaches, consumers are portrayed as 'informed citizens' that are actively pushing the industry to take responsibility or to take the industry's care for these issues for granted.

Whether an argument is made in support of strategies and implementations to get consumers to make the 'right' sustainable choice by themselves, or for the industry to adapt a more sustainable choice architecture, the reasoning is continually embedded in references to a gap between citizen-consumers' attitudes and their behaviours. Thus, the rhetorical figure of the citizen-consumer as a sovereign political persona is a central reference point to legitimise business conduct in the analysed expert discourses on sustainable food consumption, either in reference to citizen-consumers' 'right to choose', and represented as a 'voter' at the point of purchase, or in reference to citizen-consumers' 'right to be heard',

³³ These are Forum for the Future's *Retail Futures* (FftF 2007), the Government's *Food Matters* report (CO 2008) and, to a lesser extent, its follow-up report 'Food 2030' (DEFRA 2010) as well as WWF's *One Planet Food Strategy* (WWF 2009).

and represented as a jury member in market surveys or opinion polling (Schrader 2007, Tybout and Zaltman 1974).

Crucially, in the expert narratives analysed the attitude-behaviour gap is constituted by a rhetorical separation of the elements of 'the citizen' and 'the consumer', or what others have termed the difference between "thick democratic imagination" and "thin democratic imagination" (Huddart, Kennedy et al. 2018) or between "neoliberal and "deliberative" models of environmental citizenship (Swaffield and Bell 2012). The ways in which 'attitudes' are determined thus considerably differ from how 'behaviours' are determined. Attitudes are quantified in a variety of ways to which 'care' and 'awareness' constitute common reference points. These are expressed with references to ideas of citizenship in the wider sense (Trentmann 2007) for example, in relation to a general "care about the environment" (e.g. William and James) or to people being "increasingly discerning [...], more challenging and more questioning" (FftF 2007, 18); or "increasingly aware of injustice" (M&S 2017, 1). As opposed to this, behavior towards sustainability is throughout conceptualised as something that 'happens' through consumer action in the supermarket and is thus quantified as a (neglect of) appropriate 'choice' for sustainable products at the point of purchase. Thus, in the analysed discourses, the following four core factors through which a lack of consumer behaviour is explained are identified: (1) consumers' lack of knowledge to make appropriate choices, (2) consumers' inability to consistently make appropriate choices, (3) consumers' inability to consistently commit to appropriate choices and (4) consumers' unwillingness to make choices themselves (Sections 5.3.2, 5.4.2, 5.5.2, 5.6.2).

In the *Food Matters* report, this separation is explicitly displayed by deploying a reference to the 'attitude-behaviour gap': "on many issues there is still a significant gap between what people say that they *believe, as citizens*, should be done and how they *behave as consumers*" (CO 2008, emphasis added). The attitude-behaviour gap, thus, as it is constituted in the analysed narratives, is less of an actual gap, but more of a linguistic and methodological separation the conceptualisation of sustainability issues as political on the one hand ('attitudes') and the implementation of strategies that are narrowly centred on the action of purchase in the supermarket ('behaviour') on the other.

9.4 Consumer information

Social science debates on behaviour change for sustainable consumption have dealt with questions on the significance of people's knowledge. In particular recent literature has argued that too much weight has been put on the idea that increased consumer information would lead to the adaption of more sustainable choices. The 'information deficit model' has been subject to much critique (Halkier and Jensen 2011, Hargreaves 2011) and scholars have argued that information campaigns and labelling schemes might increase individuals' level of knowledge and have an impact on their attitudes, but not lead to the desired effect of a change in consumer choice (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). This is also widely discussed in expert narratives analysed in the context of this project (Sections 5.5.2, 5.5.2 and 6.3.1). While provision of consumer information in some contexts is portrayed as necessary to increase demand for sustainable choices, in other contexts it is suggested that information provision should not be relied on as the sole strategy for food sustainability. When it is argued that information provision should not be relied on as the sole strategy, it is commonly argued that more sustainable consumer choice can work in relation to certain products, but not others, where 'consumer choice' is fully rejected in favour of strategies for choice editing.

In a long-standing intellectual tradition, the idea of educating the public is associated with the ideal of a functioning democratic society. In this line of thought, education of citizens is understood as a key task of a democratic society in order to allow its citizens to develop personal and political maturity, autonomy and emancipation. Education in and for a democratic society is understood as a means to free citizens from their state of '*Unmündigkeit*' ('minority' or 'mental immaturity') towards a state of maturity and responsibility. Reaching this state, it is argued, an individual would be able to have the "courage to rely on oneself without the guidance of another" (Adorno and Becker 1999, 21). The educational reformer John Dewey (2004) emphasised that the capability of individual members of society to show participation and personal initiative is of particular relevance in relation to social change - which is, arguably, inherent in the idea of 'sustainability'. For Dewey, if education does not enable members of society with those skills, they would be unable to comprehend and be confused and overwhelmed by processes of social change.

Further, also from the perspective of neo-classical economic theory, the idea of education, public awareness and access to information constitute key principles to be fulfilled in 'consumer-citizenship'. The provision of consumer information is seen as constituting a necessary prerequisite to balance out the asymmetries of information between consumers and traders in order to enable consumers to successfully participate in the economy (Hadfield et al. 1998, Howells 2005). This perspective has been found to be held by industry, consumers and governments alike (McGregor 2005) and is inherent in consumer policy, where information is considered as a means to empower and protect consuming individuals but also as a motor to promote business standards:

"Information seems to offer a win-win solution. Consumers are given the means to protect themselves and drive up standards, whilst business is allowed flexibility to provide the goods and services the market demands without restrictive and potentially anti-competitive substantive regulatory controls." (Howells 2005, 350)

However, in the analysed policy documents, as well as in articles in *The Grocer*, little difference between consumer education/awareness raising efforts (for individuals to understand sustainability-related issues) and methods such as product labelling, signposting and marketing (for individuals to choose certain products over others) is acknowledged. With aspects such as 'product information', 'consumer guidance', 'marketing' and 'advertising' being equally considered as "choice influencing" strategies (WWF 2009, 14), concepts of education and marketing are discursively mixed. 'Information' is thereby conceptualised as a 'tool' to guide individuals towards making pre-defined sustainable choices. Framed in this way, 'information' rather opposes than supports the 'democratic' idea of maturity and responsibility. Drawing on the underlying idea of "advertising as information" (Nelson 1974) instead, the democratic understanding of citizen education is incorporated into the notion of a 'consumer democracy' (Schwarzkopf 2011).

This becomes particularly prevalent in arguments which suggest the specification and revision of consumer-directed messages with the aim to increase consumer choice for sustainable products. Expert narratives refer to the importance of campaigns and emphasise the importance of 'optimising' those by removing messages that are "unlikely to resonate with consumers" in favour of messages that focus on "consumers' aspirations" (CO 2008, 64). It is thereby argued that the latter are "more likely to effect changes in consumption" (CO 2008, 64). Further, the idea that consumers should be approached with messages that

focus on 'health' or 'premium purpose' rather than on environmental messages have gained increased prevalence over time support (see Section 6.2.2.2). In a similar way, the idea to "appeal to the positives" and recourse to "motivating factors [...] with messages targeted at appropriate segments of the population to help them change" (Robert) is widely emphasised. Related comments such as that people would be more interested in 'health' than they are in the 'environment' or that they "want more positive stories" (James), suggest manipulating information in a way that its contents serve consumers' aspirations and desires. The rhetorical figure of the consumer thereby inhabits a central place in rhetorical legitimisations to spread 'targeted information' in a 'consumer democracy'.

Regardless of whether a position for choice influencing, choice editing, or both is taken, consumer information is represented as a potential means to 'sustainable choice', but not as an approach in its own right. Thus, 'information' is not regarded as a means to societal change, but as a means to a particular behaviour: the purchase of products that are marked as being 'sustainable' over supposedly less- or un-sustainable products. In other words; while individuals should be equipped with knowledge on sustainability-related issues, their scope of influence is reduced to the market, where they find a predetermined idea of the 'right choice'. The following quote taken from Forum for the Future's *Retail Futures 2022* demonstrates this by opposing 'choice editing' to potentially daunting effects of "too much information":

"Choices based on sound information can move consumption in a sustainable direction. But too much choice and too much information may put consumers off. For choice to 'work' from a sustainable development perspective, the majority will need to choose to become ethical consumers, and very few of our interviewees thought that this would happen. At some point in the future, the freedom to choose unsustainable products will have to end. And one of the simplest and effective ways of achieving this is through editing out unsustainable choices." (FftF 2007, 58)

In statements such as the above, consumer information is portrayed to largely 'fail', since it does not lead to the 'required' outcome of individuals turning into 'ethical consumers' who express their participation and initiative by buying products that are predetermined as the 'right choice'. As opposed to this, 'choice editing' is presented as a solution to 'failing' consumer information. It would, as it is claimed further on in the report, help consumers "to make the sort of choices they want at a wider level" (FftF 2007, 58).

'Choice editing', aiming to limit, and possibly circumvent, the uncertainties that come with the freedom to choose (e.g. Akenji 2014), in order to establish 'sustainable consumption' (understood as the consumption of 'sustainable' products), is portrayed as a response to consumer desires. Thus, the rhetorical figure of the consumer serves as a point of reference to legitimise calls for 'choice editing' in a similar way as in relation to calls for 'positive', 'health-' or 'purpose'-related messages to convince consumers. In Government papers for example, consumer choice is reassessed in terms of choice editing by consulting

"studies [that] have found that consumers expect industry and the Government to edit environmental problems out of the production process before the products reach the shelf" as opposed to research that has "found that [...] consumers wanted this information" (CO 2008, 60).

Similarly, retailers conclude that consumers would want them "to make it easier for them to do the right thing and make a difference" (M&S 2017, 1). A turn away from a reliance on consumer choice as a means to establish sustainable consumption is thereby equated with a turn away from consumer information, with both being portrayed as a response to consumers. Thus, by mobilising the rhetorical figure of the consumer as the decision maker, the deliberate modification or limitation of consumer information regarding sustainability-related implications of food is portrayed as a service to the consumer.

Scholars have critically remarked that consumer information would "tell individuals exactly what actions they should be taking" (Hobson 2002, 103), which means that consumers are confronted with pre-determined sets of 'right choices'. What is crucial here is that such a consumer information-based model of 'responsibility' falls short in taking the participatory 'citizen'-element of responsible consumption into regard. As educational science scholars have argued, this is to allow individuals to assess and produce different forms of information, to determine their interests and to exercise *inner reflection* to consequently be able to take personal initiative (Ehgartner et al. 2017, McGregor 2005, Owens 2000).

Thinkers of participatory democracy have developed the idea of citizen education as an essential democratic institution in building civil society and citizenship (Peters 2017). It was first and foremost the educational reformer Dewey (2004) who drew attention to the importance of individuals' "constant expansion of horizons and consequent formation of new purposes and new responses" (Dewey 2004, 196). In this line of thought, "[u]niformity of procedure" and the pursuit of "prompt external results" (Dewey 2004, 196), as exercised

in conventional ways to encourage consumers to take action for sustainability, is considered counterproductive to the development individuals' citizenry responsibility, which is inherently considered as determined by the ability for reflexivity.³⁴

Scholars of sociology of consumption have drawn upon the concept of 'reflexivity' by reviewing consumption in relation to identity formation of the individual (Slater 1997, Warde 1994) in response to thoughts of reflexive-, late-, post-modern writers (e.g. Bauman 1991, Beck et al. 1995, Giddens 1991). From the perspective of practice theory, questions on whether and in which ways consumption is based on conscious and reflective actions are discussed (Warde 2005, 140).³⁵ Further, Halkier (2010, 73) has noted that "[r]outinization and reflexivity are always combined in practical handlings of environmentalised food". However, the potentials and limits of *consumer information* to foster individuals' reflexivity are not of concern in these accounts on 'reflexivity'. Sociology of consumption has thus paid little attention to 'reflexivity' in relation to matters of consumer communication and education.

By contrast, scholars concerned with deliberative democracy have defended the value of 'reflexivity' and introduced it to environmental political theory (e.g. Dryzek 1987 and 2002) and policy (Burgess et al. 1998, Owens 2000). Scholars of educational science have made efforts to integrate the concept of participatory democracy into philosophical interpretations and practical realisations of social and environmental challenges of our time (McGregor 2005, Peters 2017, Thiele and Tarrant 2015). This literature, building on ideas of deliberative democracy, suggests how to 'activate' civic 'responsibility'. Thus, for example Heidbrink (2015) has argued that in order for consumer-related strategies of 'responsibilisation' to work, the principles of democratic deliberation and collective participation are required:

³⁴ Most memorably in the current context of global social and environmental challenges, Dewey argued that "A society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they do not perceive. The result will be a confusion in which a few will appropriate to themselves the results of the blind and externally directed activities of others" (Dewey 2004, 84)

³⁵ Giddens' proposition that 'reflexivity' is practiced by individuals for their own identity-formation and strategic adoption of lifestyle options (Giddens 1991) has led some scholars to identify consumers as agents of 'self-directed life politics' (Lyon 2006). Critics opposed this, arguing that consumption is based on processes such as habituation and routine and that "[p]erformance in a familiar practice is often neither fully conscious nor reflective" (Warde 2005, 140).

“society members have to be included in the design of the choice architecture that shall ease the implementation of sustainability goals [...]. For actors to voluntarily limit their freedom for the benefit of long-term aims, institutional forms of participation are necessary” (Heidbrink 2015, 186).

Moreover, the importance of a shift in consumer education towards a more critical approach on informing consumers has been pointed out. In order to accomplish this, a move is needed towards seeing the empowered consumer not as someone who commits to choices that they are told are ‘sustainable’, but as someone who is capable of “inner reflection” and “who has found his/her inner power and social potential to challenge the status quo, to change the system from a holistic perspective and to appreciate that empowerment” (McGregor 2005, 446).

9.5 Choice

The analysis of expert discourses in a variety of contexts has shown that the consumer constitutes a central rhetorical figure to the explanation and legitimisation of strategies and implementations in the name of ‘food sustainability’. References to attitudes, behaviours, roles and responsibilities of ‘the consumer’ in relation to social change for sustainability thereby always concerns ‘choice’. This is the case although the idea of individual consumer choice is overall attributed little potential or explicitly discarded as a mechanism for change.

A reliance or focus on deliberate individual consumer choice as a way to deliver social change is widely rejected in narratives of different data sets. On the contrary, inefficiencies and uncertainties in relation to individual choice are emphasised and the need for alternative is stressed. Suggested alternative ways to deliver change are framed as ‘choice editing’ or the provision of a sustainable ‘choice architecture’. These terms are applied for a wide range of strategies and implementations, such as ‘sustainable’ default settings, industry- and government approaches towards comprehensive certifications, regulations, innovations and market transformations. With these being argued as consumer-directed and reflected in the choices that consumers find at the point of purchase, notion that food sustainability happens through product purchases in the supermarket is reinforced.

Crucially, by framing these strategies and implementations as ‘choice editing’ or the installation of a ‘sustainable choice architecture’, they are portrayed as constituting an industry response to consumer desires. Rather than being pursued as goal in their own right, these approaches are portrayed as something that consumers “expect” from businesses and

other institutions, that they “take for granted” or “ask” them to do (e.g. M&S 2017, CO 2008, most interviewees, see interpretative frame of ‘consumer sovereignty’ in Chapter Eight and Section 3.2.2). In some contexts, choice editing is referred to as a method to “help” consumers to make the choices that they would want to make anyways (FftF 2007, 58, interviewee Mary), reinforcing an understanding of ‘choice editing’ as being a result of ‘consumer choice’. Suggestions of ‘sustainable choice editing’ as the alternative approach to ‘sustainable consumer choice’ are further often complemented with warranties of the maintenance of consumer choice, arguing that a sustainable choice architecture would not be “at the expense of individuals’ freedom of choice” (CO 2008, 36), but that consumers would be given “a new and better freedom of choice” (FftF 2007, 58) or “a better choice of choice” (FEC 2013, 8).

9.6 Political consumerism

Identifying a public interest in fairness, good labour practices and sustainable development in the commodity chain, scholars have argued for a re-evaluation of the equation of ‘consumerism’ with hedonistic and self-interested decision making. In this line of thought, consumer behaviour (such as boycotts or ‘green consumption’) is understood as having the potential to “enable, enact and engender democratic values” and therefore, to be political (Schudson 2007, 239). Micheletti (2003) has defined political consumerism as “actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (Micheletti 2003, 2), contesting the consumer/citizen contrast.

The analysis conducted shows that in expert narratives on food sustainability, ‘sustainable consumption’ is rooted in a politicised understanding of the market. A civic understanding of consumption is adopted, with consumers being described as concerned about the social or environmental value attached to the products that they consume (Sections 5.4.2, 5.5.2, 5.6.2, see also Section 3.2). However, the idea of ‘political consumerism’ as a way to express sustainability-commitments and values through the purchase of products, is rather opposed

than endorsed in recent and most dominant expert discourses.³⁶ Thus, 'consumer choice' is commonly described as being insufficient and not fully reliable.

In the most dominant understanding of the role of the consumer, an emphasis is put on the consumer as a political subject although it is argued that 'consumer choice' in the sense of 'political consumerism' (Micheletti 2003) falls short to deliver the necessary change. As opposed to 'consumer choice'-centred ideas of social change, the idea of a consumer democracy' is established through consumer surveying and opinion polling. Not the potential of 'voting via purse strings' (Shaw et al. 2006) in the sense of 'individualised collective action' in the 'everyday arena of the market' (Micheletti 2003) is centred upon, but the expression of opinions in relation to brands and products. Thus, delivering the 'proof' of democratic participation of consumers 'whose 'commands' [are] [...] followed by the industry" (Schwarzkopf 2011, 11), consumer surveys, market polls or other references to consumers' 'sustainability'-desires deliver the 'democratic base' to legitimise businesses and other institutions 'taking the lead' (Section 4.5.3). References to consumers desires discursively 'work' to legitimise that sustainability concerns are taken out of consumers' and into institutional agents' hands, although these often not evidence-based or based on methodologically and epistemologically weak studies.³⁷

Barnett et al. (2011) have found that the practice of consumer campaigning establishes the figure of a 'choosing' consumer in the context of 'political consumerism' and thereby contributes "to the production of self-evident truths for public policy and governmental

³⁶ The idea of the consumer as a choosing agent does exist. Advances in certain consumer products or segments are attributed to deliberate consumer choice (section 6.3.3) and statements that refer to an 'increasing' number of consumers who make deliberate choices for sustainable products are found throughout (section 6.3.2). It is however commonly emphasised that a reliance on consumers will not be an expedient way to obtain a more sustainable food system, whereby various explanations are given that excuse and legitimise low consumer commitment to sustainable choices (section 5.5.2 and 6.3.2).

³⁷ Interviewee William makes this function explicit, when he talks about his experience conducting a survey in which only people who signalled they would be interested "to talk to us about environmental issues, [...] about food and those kind of issues" in the first place, where asked about their opinions on retailer activities for food sustainability and – unsurprisingly – responded positively. He explains how it "really helped" to be able to the evidence that "they cared [...] about product assortment and choice editing". The survey enabled him to approach the "new product development team" by saying "Look, you are creating new products, but you are missing a massive opportunity. Customers want these products to be more sustainable, look, here is the evidence, it shows that they want it to be more sustainable! So let me and my team help you, let us give you some guidance. That might be just around the packaging to start with, rather than what went into the ingredients in the food, but at least you know, let's start to have these discussions". He thus argues that retailer- activities on "future supply chain resilience" would work out in much more straightforward ways if they were not only done on the base of "cost saving" and "efficiency" grounds, but as a Response to consumer desires.

practices” (Barnett et al. 2011, 39). The analysis of expert discourses in food sustainability has shown that the practice of consumer surveying serves a similar function to the figure of a trusting, ‘choice-editing’-proponent citizen-consumer. Other than in the concept of ‘political consumerism’, the citizen-element of the citizen-consumer notion is not enforced through consumers’ ‘right to choose’, but through their ‘right to be heard’ (Schrader 2007, Tybout and Zaltman 1974). However, politicising the consumer through surveying, their civic activity is removed from the ‘market arena’ (Micheletti 2003). As opposed to this, consumers are portrayed to democratically ‘elect’ sustainability agents such as retailers and to entrust them with their concerns. In this way, the link between civic participation and ‘consumerism’ established in the concept of ‘political consumerism’ is rhetorically utilised to discard the consumer as an active agent to sustainability. Thus, just as “ethical consumption campaigning takes place when there is a concerted effort by organisations and institutions” (Barnett et al. 2011, 37), consumer surveys reflect of the efforts and activities of organisations and institutions: they confirm activities conducted by businesses, governments or other actors to be desired by consumers.

9.7 Conclusion

In recent expert discourses on food sustainability, potential for social change is less attributed to deliberately responsible ‘consumer choice’ and more to the conduct of businesses, governments and other institutions such as NGOs. Consumers are neither ‘responsibilised’ nor, for most parts, expected to commit to sustainable choices at the point of purchase. However, they remain a central *figure of reference* in argumentations, explanations and legitimisations of other agents’ conduct.

Institutional agency is throughout framed as intervention towards a maximisation of sustainable choices and a minimisation of unsustainable choices. To some extent, this can be observed in calls for consumer information or awareness raising campaigns, signposting or labelling. These suggestions for institutional agency as a means to establish a more sustainable food system are framed as consumer-directed actions. While these suggestions are primarily found in earlier discourses, calls for ‘choice editing’ constitute the most prevalent framing of institutional action that is particularly dominant in recent discourses. Related actions are framed as positive impacts on consumer choice, although they ultimately concern producers’ and manufacturers’ modifications along the supply chain. In this way,

the figure of the sovereign consumer plays a performative role – also in narratives that seek to delimit the individual consumers' responsibility of choice.

As summarised in Table 4, consumers are throughout rhetorically represented through their inability or unwillingness to make sustainable choices (see left column on 'claims on consumer behaviour towards sustainability'). The identification of a lack of 'sustainable consumer choice' is a constant parameter and reference point in the expert discourses analysed. Consumers are described as being unable to identify sustainable choices, lacking necessary resources to consistently commit to these choices and being unwilling to make these choices themselves. Notably, these descriptions of the consumer mobilised to, firstly, legitimise or excuse individual consumer behaviour and, secondly, draw conclusions for the agency of businesses, governments and other institutions. Applying discourse analytical methods, it was thus shown that although a lack of consumer choice is a central point of reference in discourses, this – to a large degree – is not accompanied by a focus on the consumer as sustainability agent. Attention is rather distracted from consumer agency, whereas the focus is instead on other agents, such as retailers whose efforts are regarded as the driver of social change (see two columns at the right).

Two key findings are most notable in relation to the mobilisation of the rhetorical figure of the consumer. Firstly, the analysis has identified that in expert discourses on sustainable food consumption there is little differentiation between consumer education/awareness raising efforts and marketing methods such as product labelling and signposting (for individuals to choose certain products over others). Both are in fact considered as choice-influencing strategies, whereby 'information' is conceptualised as a 'tool' to guide individuals towards making desirable choices at the point of purchase. Secondly, a linguistic and methodological separation into 'consumer attitudes' and 'consumer behaviour' was found as having been in place throughout the years. While sustainability issues are conceptualised and comprehended as political on the one hand ('attitudes'), ideas of its implementation are narrowly centred on the action of purchase in the supermarket ('behaviour'). Thus, an attitude-behaviour gap in the ways in which both are discursively mobilised was identified.

Claims on consumer behaviour towards sustainability	Evidence presented on consumer attitudes		Description of agency and relationships	Description of mechanisms of social change
	Source of evidence	Evidence presented		
Previously dominant narratives				
Lack in awareness to make sustainable choices	Surveys that test consumer knowledge	Consumers lack in knowledge and awareness	Consumers need help provided by businesses (and other agents)	awareness rising, signposting and labelling for consumer choice
Unable to choose consistent, appropriate choices	Surveys on consumer satisfaction with sustainable choices	Consumers want to consume in sustainable ways, but struggle to identify the 'right' choices		
Unable to commit to consistent, appropriate choices	Surveys on consumer commitment to sustainable choices	Consumers struggle to integrate sustainability into other needs (e.g. affordability)		
Recently dominant narratives				
Unwilling to make sustainable choices themselves	Surveys on consumer commitment to sustainable choices	Consumers want to consume in sustainable ways but cannot/do not want to get out of their way for it	Consumers demand help provided by businesses (and other agents)	Changes to the choice architecture

Table 4: Claims and presented evidence on consumer attitudes and behaviour and related ideas of agency and social change in previous and recent narratives

The identification of a misalignment between consumer behaviour and their attitudes is central to arguments made in relation to the description of agency and mechanisms of social change. These argumentative structures make the relevance of the rhetorical figure of the consumer for the approval and determination of agency of businesses, governments and other institutions particularly apparent. In dominant narratives, the attitude-behaviour gap is mobilised to legitimise direct actions of businesses and other agents in relation to

sustainability, in the context of consumer choice being regarded as insufficient to deliver change. References to evidence on consumer attitudes and behaviour underpin argumentations for institutional agency for sustainability. Consumer surveys, opinion polls or sources of – often anecdotal – evidence are drawn upon to legitimise institutional action.

In the context of previous narratives which deploy a consumer choice-based description of mechanisms of social change, these encompass evidence on a lack of consumer information and guidance on sustainable choices. In the context of recent and dominant narratives, in which ‘change’ is ascribed to ‘choice editing’-based actions, evidence on consumer disengagement with sustainable choices is referenced. Thus, where social change is attributed to the accumulation of deliberate individual choices, references to the existence of an ‘attitude-behaviour-gap’ are mobilised to legitimise businesses’ and other agents’ activities to influence consumer choice (see column at the right).

In more recent narratives, various attempts of institutional agents to establish certifications, regulations, innovations or market transformations or other actions for sustainable change are portrayed as action ‘on consumers’ behalf’ are framed as ‘changes to the choice architecture’ (see bottom row in Table 4). References to consumer desires do not only confirm that consumers want sustainability, but that they cannot act upon their values without institutional help. In their advanced variant, these references also affirm that consumers specifically ask institutional agents (in particular retailers) for help. This way of mobilising the rhetorical figure of the consumer is the consequence of the civic element of consumption that was established by the concept of ‘political consumerism’ being fitted to align with the closure of the idea of consumer choice as a means to deliver change. As such, it constitutes a dominant line of argumentation that substantially impacts the ways in which citizen participation for sustainability is imagined: consumers are largely described as ‘electing’ institutional agents to make choices on their behalf. They are further described as wanting information to be more positive, appealing, less complicated or based on specific topics. In this notion of citizenry participation, the consumer is limited to the role of a critical observer and/or trusting receiver of actions taken by institutional agents. In comparison to ‘individual choice’-focussed argumentations, in these ‘choice editing’-focussed argumentations, in which consumers are seen to participate and exert pressure through social media, participation is removed from a narrow focus on ‘choice’ at the point of

purchase. In this way, it could be argued that the mode of participation is rather 'public' than 'private'. However, change is still confined to processes that happen through consumption in the marketplace. With consumers being disintegrated from these processes, the potential of 'democratic participation' is still limited.

Chapter 10 – Conclusion

10.1 Addressing the research questions

In this thesis I have sought to engage with discourses on sustainable food consumption and production by examining three sets of data: articles published in *The Grocer*, the British market leading magazine devoted to the grocery sector; interviews with key representatives from retail, consultancies and non-profit organisations as well as policy documents in relation to food and sustainability. The articles and policy documents were published at various points between the years 2005 and 2017 and therefore represent material for the study of discourses over time, as well as recent accounts. This diachronic account was complemented by semi-structured interviews in which highly experienced senior professionals were encouraged to reflect on the ‘status quo’ in the context of developments over time. Conducted in 2016, these expert interviews represent recent accounts but their analysis also allows insights on whether and how interviewees’ reflections are located in or referred to past notions and ideas.

This project was organised around four main research questions. In this section I offer summarising responses to each of them. The following sections constitute further reflections on theoretical findings in relation to discourses on sustainable food consumption (10.2) as well as on how the consumer is thereby mobilised as a rhetorical figure (10.3). Lastly, I reflect on the strengths and limitations of this project and suggest some avenues for future research (10.4).

Research Question One:

What ideals of sustainability can be found in food industry-related discourses (and what are their consistencies, compatibilities and contradictions)?

The analysis of recent media articles, policy contributions and conversations with senior professionals alone would have certainly delivered insights which would help to respond to this research question. Current conditions of discourses on a phenomenon are, however, just like the socio-political conditions they are embedded in, constituted by historical developments. Discourses are dynamic and represent as such a conglomerate of a variety of discursive strands which are rooted in various developments of the past. Scholars of discourse analysis have emphasised the historicity of discourses with the potential to reveal

changes and disruptions that inform insights into recent socio-political conditions (see Jäger 2009, Wodak 2001b). I thus conducted a diachronic analysis on the basis of which I identified the year 2005 as the earliest point of discourses on sustainable consumption and production as approached within this project (Section 3.3.1 as well as Section 4.2 for the identification of 2005 as ‘the start’) and systematically collected data from this point onwards. The analysis of all three data sets revealed the dynamic of ideas and ideals of ‘sustainability’ in expert discourses in the field of ‘food consumption and production’ over time and within recent debates.

Regarding the constitution of (underlying) understandings of food sustainability in relation to sustainable consumption and production, I identified three major discursive influences: ‘efficiency’, ‘premiumisation’ and ‘health’. These constitute three ‘external’ discourses which come in and out of focus and mix, associate and disassociate with notions of sustainability over time (see Chapter Seven). The discursive dynamics over time are also schematically represented in Figure 5 below, which illustrates the dynamic of ‘premiumisation’ discourses first entering, and then leaving the discursive context of sustainable consumption and production (termed as ‘ethical opportunities’ and ‘purpose mainstream’).

The analysis has shown that during the time period from about 2007 until about 2012, the implicit definition of ‘sustainability’ encompassed a very wide range of themes under the umbrella of ‘green’: from eco-efficient packaging to organic produce and thus matters of sustainable consumption and production. While in an earlier phase (2005-2012) this was framed overall in a positive and opportunity-focussed way, in a later phase (2013-2017) this was dominated by tensions and difficulties in reference to the economic recession following the financial crash of 2007-08. As opposed to this, in most recent discourses, I identified two diverging discursive strands: environmental sustainability in the sense of eco-efficiency on the one hand and sustainability in the sense of ‘purpose-relatedness’ and consumer communication on the other. In the former, ‘sustainability’ is interpreted as ‘environmental commitments’ and portrayed as an integrated and ordinary element of business conduct. Crucially, considerations of this strand concern matters of ‘sustainable supply chain management’ and are largely removed from consumer-facing contexts. This discursive strand is thus constituted by narratives that shape ideas of ‘sustainable production’. In the latter, emotional attributes that were formerly attached to the marketing of ‘ethical’

products, for example relating products to a purpose, building a connection and trust through and with products, constitute another major discursive strand that can be summarised by the contemporary, fashionable business term ‘purpose’. In this context, sustainability is portrayed as profitable through consumer demand – constituting narratives that shape ideas of ‘sustainable consumption’.

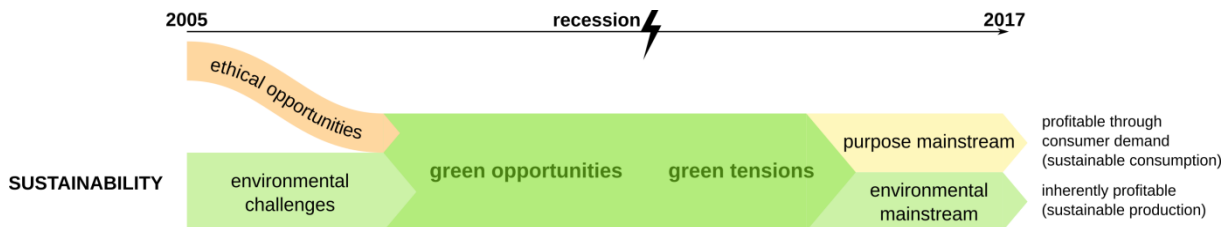


Figure 5: Changing notions of ‘sustainability’

Concerns of economic performance and long-term environmental issues are associated with matters of sustainable supply chain management, whereas the social dimension is captured as a symbolic value and dealt with as a matter of ‘brand equity’ or ‘brand purpose’ as a core determining factor for consumer communication and marketing. The former is dealt with as a postulate of ‘sustainable production’ in the sense of a management of operations that is dominated by incentives of legal demands and demands of pressure groups, responses to stakeholders, competitive advantages and reputation management regarding mainly environmental concerns. It is thus understood in a sense of business administration, portrayed as the fulfilment of environmental criteria through the “management of material, information and capital flows as well as cooperation among companies along the supply chain” (Seuring and Müller 2008, 1700). As opposed to this, the latter social dimension is based on a postulate of ‘sustainable consumption’ in which a rather marketing-based understanding is applied, understanding that

“[...] trust can account for the success (or the failure) of a socially responsible company in the marketplace [and the idea that] socially oriented companies can achieve competitive advantage in those areas where trust is crucial in determining consumer choices [as well as that] investment in social reputation (of any kind) must be complemented by investments in product lines where a company’s specific kind of social reputation.” (Castaldo et al. 2009, 13)

Research Questions Two and Three:

What role do accounts of the discursive figure of ‘the consumer’ play in discourses on sustainable food consumption and what attitudes and behaviours are ascribed to the consumer?

Which ideas exist on strategies to push sustainable consumption forward and which notions of ‘choice’ can be found in the context of those strategies?

The analysis has shown that matters of these two research questions are strongly intertwined. Since a response to one of them inevitably has to draw upon findings related to the other, I have, for the purpose of this brief concluding response, decided to give a joint account of both. A key point regarding both research questions is constituted by the discursive framing of ‘consumer behaviour’ as ‘sustainable choice’ (Sections 6.2.2 and 9.2). The identification of a lack of consumer behaviour in support of sustainability (i.e. choosing sustainable over less sustainable products in the supermarket) constitutes a dominant reference point in discourses throughout time and argumentative contexts. However, in recent discourses – as opposed to earlier discourses in articles in *The Grocer* – this is not framed as an issue or difficulty regarding the pursuit of a more sustainable food system.

In the interviews with experts, as well as in the most recent sample in *The Grocer*, consumers are largely described as not making responsible choices for sustainability, whilst being very committed to sustainability expressed through expecting or demanding business commitments to sustainability (Sections 5.6.2, 6.3.1 and 6.3.2). In contrast to earlier notions of unaware and unable consumers, in more recent representations of ‘unwilling’ consumers, their role is described through their attitudes, rather than their behaviours at the point of purchase.³⁸ While consumers were earlier described as *being in need* to be provided with help from institutional agents, in more recent discourses they are described as *demanding* help from institutional agents in order to be able to consume in sustainable ways (see Figure 6 below). However, although the idea of consumer ‘activity’ through consumer choice as a way to deliver change is largely discarded in recent narratives, consumers are nevertheless attributed a very active role in relation to sustainability as they are portrayed to assign

³⁸ In policy papers, claims on consumers showing positive attitudes toward sustainability, but expecting food retailers and other institutions to commit to sustainable conduct and to thereby help ‘edit’ food choices on consumers’ behalf, emerged much earlier and most notably in the *Food Matters* report from 2008 (CO 2008).

responsibility to institutional agents. Regarding research question two, it is found that accounts of the discursive figure of 'the consumer' play a central role in the analysed discourses, even if the idea of accomplishing more sustainable food systems through their choices at the point of purchase is discarded and responsibility is mainly associated with institutions. This result challenges earlier social science contributions which identified a framework of attitude, behaviour and choice in "which responsibility for responding to climate change is thought to lie with individuals whose behavioural choices will make the difference" (Shove 2010, 1274) to constitute the dominant account of social change for sustainability.

To describe the findings in relation to consumer behaviour and attitudes in more detail, Figure 6 represents a simplified schematic of varying notions of the consumer in relation to sustainability. This schematic is mainly based on articles in *The Grocer* but is pertinent to how recent discourses on sustainable consumption and production are constituted. In articles of each chosen year, a different notion of 'the consumer' dominated the discourse. In 2005, the understanding of 'unaware consumers' who lacked information about sustainability related issues and therefore showed low support for sustainable business conduct and thus held back industry developments was central (Section 5.3.2). In 2007, consumers were seen as being fully on-board the industry's green journey, but in need of some guidance in order to transform their preferences for sustainability into action (Section 5.4.2). This notion was reinforced in articles of 2010, although in reference to financial struggles associated with the economic recession, consumers were portrayed as being unable to commit to choices (Section 5.5.2). In articles of 2015, lastly, consumers were still portrayed as supporting sustainability, but being mostly unwilling to take responsibility for environmental issues themselves, and instead choosing brands with 'equity' and products with a 'purpose' (Section 5.6.2).

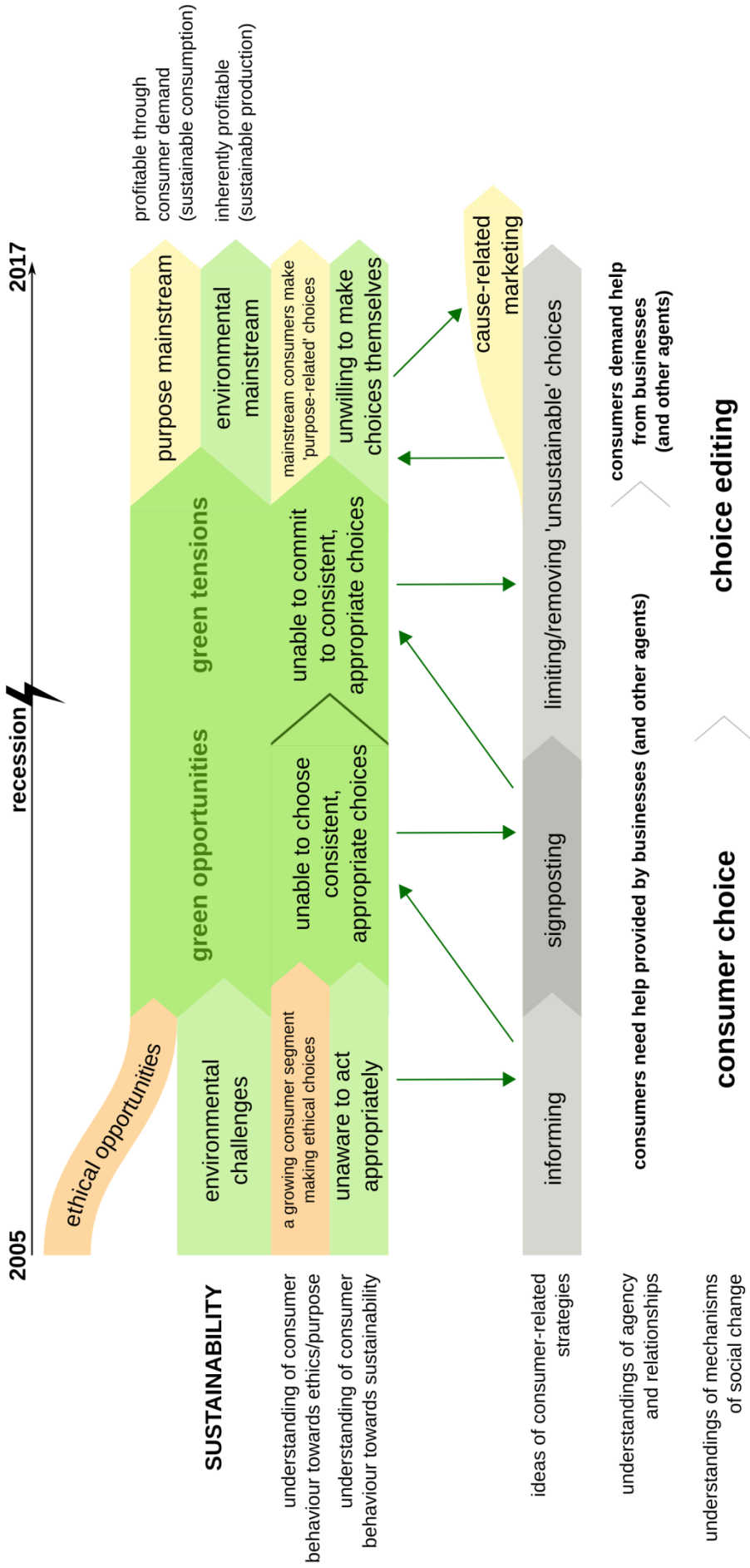


Figure 6: Ideas of strategies and mechanisms for change in the context of varying notions of sustainability and the consumer

As further shown in Figure 6, ideas of how to foster sustainable consumption derived from the prevailing understanding of consumer's inability to make sustainable choices. In each following year analysed, the respective strategy appeared implemented and another problem with consumer choice had emerged. Thus, in articles of 2005 where it was largely argued that consumers would not command enough knowledge to be aware of the importance of their behaviours *as* consumers, better consumer information was argued for as a strategy to foster sustainable consumption (Section 5.3.3). Only two years later, in 2007, consumers were portrayed to be fully aware of sustainability-related issues and to be seeking to make sustainable choices in the supermarket. However they were also described as not fully able to choose appropriate products consistently because of a lack of, or confusion with, product information and signposting. Calls for better product labelling and signposting derived from this view (Section 5.4.3). In 2010, the problem was less framed as a consumers' inability to identify the 'right' products to choose, but in relation to their inability to consistently commit to sustainable choices given financial restraints or other priorities. The limitation or elimination of undesirable 'unsustainable' choices was suggested as a strategy to foster sustainable consumption (Section 5.5.3). In 2015, this understanding of the consumer and related mechanisms for sustainable consumption was reinforced even more strongly. Consumers were no longer portrayed as struggling to commit to sustainable choices, but to be actually unwilling to do so. What derived from this in relation to strategies for sustainable consumption was firstly the reinforcement of the idea to limit or eliminate undesirable and 'unsustainable' choices available to consumers regarding 'environmental sustainability'. Secondly, for brands and products 'with a purpose' to appeal to consumers, ideas of 'sustainable' cause-related marketing was established as a legitimate strategy (Section 5.6.3).

To respond to the element of strategies to push sustainable consumption forward, as expressed in research question three, it can be concluded that descriptions of strategies in recent discourses are strongly reminiscent of how strategies were separated in the discourse of 2005 (as represented in articles in *The Grocer* published during that year). Then, 'ethics' were dealt with in discourses that were largely removed from sustainability discourses. Strategies for 'ethics' or 'purpose' are, in recent discourse framed as active investments to attract consumers to products by eliciting trust from consumers' interest in 'products with a purpose' in the sense of cause-related marketing (Adkins 1999). Based on business

opportunities for sales and building ‘trust’ and ‘connections’ with consumers’ ‘ethical’ concerns through products, however, recent narratives concern the mainstream market, as opposed to the niche, ‘growing segment’, that was associated with the ‘ethical market’ in 2005 (Section 5.3.3 and 5.6.3). As opposed to this, suggested strategies in relation to ‘environmental sustainability’ are framed as happening “‘behind the consumer’s back’, or perhaps ‘on their behalf’ [whereby] the only requirement of ‘the consumer’ [is] to continue buying and eating [what] they were buying and eating anyway” (Evans et al. 2018, 652).

‘Choice’ constitutes an all-encompassing concept to the framing of ideas on strategies for sustainable consumption. The framing of choice as an “instrument for change” i.e. “to achieve policy goals” (Brooks et al. 2013, 154), is inextricably linked with the presumption that sustainability is a product attribute, leaving little space for the appreciation of nuances between ‘sustainable’ and ‘unsustainable’ products (Section 6.2.2). As a consequence of this, relationships between institutional agents and consumers are very much described in relation to ‘choice’ and the scope of strategies is at least in its rhetoric limited to the realm of the supermarket. The strategy of consumer information is thus largely understood in a narrow sense of providing consumers with the skills and tools to make the ‘right choice’. Further, the implementation of consumer-facing labels and signposting are understood as more specific and goal driven variants of ‘consumer information’. These strategies aim at ‘improving’ consumer choice. Opposed to this, some strategies are based on the acceptance that consumers will largely not adapt their behaviours towards consumer choice for sustainable consumption. Such strategies suggest that the limitation or removal of ‘unsustainable’ choices presupposes – again – a self-evident differentiation between ‘sustainable’ and ‘unsustainable’ products. Associated strategies of ‘choice editing’ are further legitimised as a commitment to help and assist consumers, rather than restricting them. This is often with the emphasis that consumers would ask for unsustainable choices to be removed on their behalf. In this way, even the limitation of choice is presented as a consumer choice (Section 9.6).

Research Question Four:

How are forms of knowledge used to legitimize argumentations on consumers and sustainable consumption?

This research question constituted the general, overarching approach that I applied to the research conducted in relation to this project. Experts draw on various forms of knowledge to legitimise their argumentations in relation to issues, strategies and implementations for change. Most central are thereby references to consumer surveys or other events in which consumers (supposedly) express their voice. In some contexts actual (in-house or externally conducted) surveys are referenced or referred to, while in many others comments such as that ‘consumers want’ or ‘consumers say’ suffice.

The analysis has shown that references to consumer’s attitudes, wishes and demands are central to the legitimisation of strategies and implementations. In order to call for the implementation of labels, experts refer to consumer desires for better labelling and signposting, so that it is easier for them to make the right choice. In order to implement choice editing, experts refer to consumer desires for choice editing on their behalf, so that they cannot go wrong with their own choices. In order to advertise sustainable products not for their environmental, but for their individual benefits, experts refer to consumer’s over-saturation with negative messages and their desire for positive messages. Experts even refer to consumers’ desire for healthy products in order to legitimise a shift of focus from ‘sustainable food’ onto ‘healthy, sustainable diets’ (Chapter Seven). Following the discourse over time, I have further observed that every institutional concern, observation or implementation called for, was at some point transformed into a consumer desire. ‘Consumers are not informed’ – ‘consumers want to be informed, so we have to provide them with information’ (Section 5.3.3). ‘Consumers don’t make enough ‘right choices’ – ‘Consumers want better signposting’ (Section 5.4.3). ‘Consumers cannot afford sustainable choices’ – ‘Consumers want businesses to take the lead’ (Section 5.5.3). ‘Consumer choice will never drive change for sustainability’ – ‘Consumers take sustainability in products for granted’ (Sections 5.5.3, 6.3.1 and 6.3.2). Thus, my analysis of expert discourses has shown how actors (authors of media articles and policy papers, as well as the interviewed key representatives) engage with other (collective) actors in the field (such as various industry related individuals and institutions, or myself as interviewer) through the continuous

mobilisation of the discursive figure of the consumer (Clarke et al. 2007) by referring to and speaking through consumer desires.

Further, descriptions of consumer attitudes and behaviour constitute a central form of knowledge that is drawn upon in the analysed texts. The constitution of the presented evidence in itself reinforces the presumptions of 'sustainable behaviour' as equal to 'sustainable choice' and sustainability as a product attribute. Thus, sales figures of certain product segments (such as 'Fair Trade' or 'organic'), or rankings of consumers' 'trade-offs' of product attributes, are presented in order to give evaluations on the state of 'sustainable consumption'. These forms of 'evidence' are, as such, influenced by the underlying notion of sustainability. Thus, while references to sales figures on 'organic' were drawn upon as an indicator for 'sustainable consumption' during the 'green' period between around 2007 and 2012, this was not the case in earlier debates and it is neither in recent ones (see Chapter Seven). Further, also the attributes listed in rankings vary – thus, depending on the argumentative and temporal context, 'sustainability' or 'environment' could be put in contrast to 'ethics', or all those could be joined up in one category and put in contrast to 'price' and 'quality'. Sometimes, 'quality' and 'ethics' would be considered as one and the same category, etc. In this way, it was shown that 'evidence' on increases or declines in consumer demand for 'sustainable products' is highly context-dependent. Thus, notions of sustainability constitute a key determinant to the identification of increases or declines of consumer demand for 'sustainable products' (Sections 5.3.2, 5.4.2, 5.5.2, 5.6.2 and 6.2.2.2).

Lastly, suggestions for strategies and implementations for 'sustainable consumption' rhetorically derive from the continuous identification of a lack of 'sustainable behaviour' (e.g. labelling for the 'confused consumer' or choice editing for the 'unwilling consumer'). However, strategies and implementations are largely justified as being 'demanded' by consumers (e.g. green labels in order to respond to consumers' desire to make green choices, removing non-Fairtrade bananas from the shops to respond to consumers' desire to be able to choose only between 'sustainable bananas'). Thus, the ways in which forms of knowledge on 'the consumer' are mobilised in relation to strategies and implementations crucially establish the idea that consumers have positive attitudes on sustainability, but struggle to transform these into actions and therefore reinforce the idea of a value-action gap (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2003, Shaw et al. 2016).

10.2 Reflections on the discursive framework of sustainable food consumption

A common framework to describe matters of 'sustainable development' encompasses three interdependent and mutually reinforcing elements: an economic, an environmental and a social dimension (Ekins 2002). This three-dimension model is widely shared between commercial, political, academic and civil society agents as a commonplace model and serves as a common ground for numerous implementations of policies and standards. It is, however, a discursively highly flexible concept that has been interpreted and mobilised in varying ways. Thus, there is no clear consensus on definitions of these three elements and on how these are interrelated. Many have critiqued the model and attempted to develop or expand it, for example suggesting to change the focus or to add further dimensions.

In the organisational context, the concept of the 'triple bottom line', coined by Elkington in the 1990s has been established as a common ground and model to operationalize those three dimensions (Elkington 1997). Commonly referred to as the 'three P's': People, Planet and Profit, it is drawn upon as an accounting framework that businesses, non-profit and governmental organisations refer to in order to evaluate their sustainability performance, for example in annual sustainability reports. Indicator systems, which have largely been developed by consultancy firms, and practices of corporate reporting have been subjected to critique. This mainly concerns an identification of a fragmentation and imbalance in the ways in which the three elements are considered. In particular the over-representation of the economic dimension, with 'eco-efficiency' as a dominant concept and neglect of the social sphere, has been pointed out as problematic, and the application of a more integrated perspective has been called for (Dyllick and Hockerts 2002).

The discourse analysis that I conducted in the context of this project can be regarded as a contribution to these debates in the sense that it reveals the discursive framework within which UK policy for sustainable food consumption operates. As discussed in Chapter Seven, I have identified three interpretative frames of 'naturalised common sense' discursive practices (Fairclough 2001) in expert discourses on sustainable food consumption. They can be understood as the 'common sense world' of sustainable consumption, in the sense that they constitute as self-evident predeterminants for how an issue has to be framed in order to gain significance within expert discourses on sustainable food consumption (Fairclough

2001). If argumentative concepts or attributed characteristics of a certain topic do not confirm all three schemes, they do not become established as major themes within the discursive framework of 'sustainable food consumption'.

One major constituting element of this discursive framework is the interpretative frame of 'consumer sovereignty', which is either satisfied by pledges of a preservation or improvement of consumer choice or through pledges on responses to consumer demand. The second interpretative frame can be summarised as 'economic rationality': signalling that an idea or recommendation has to imply a reasonable chance to either foster/respond to consumer trends (and therefore profit), to support eco-efficient sourcing/production or to foster resilience/long-term security of the industry. The third and final interpretative frame of 'stewardship' means that a suggestion or idea, in order to become established as a theme within discourses of sustainable food consumption, has to be related to the promotion of either individuals' and communities' wellbeing, or the improvement of global food security and nutrition.

In Figure 7, this framework of the 'common sense world' of sustainable consumption is interpreted in the context of the triple bottom line of 'people, planet and profit'. What is most apparent here is a strong focus on the dimension of 'profit'. It is represented by two interpretative frames - economic rationality and consumer sovereignty. More interesting than this finding by itself is the dominance of a rhetorical adherence to satisfy the sovereign consumer model. Given that it constitutes an interpretative frame by itself, it represents an inevitable factor that has to (rhetorically) remain preserved and inviolate in themes associated with sustainable food consumption.

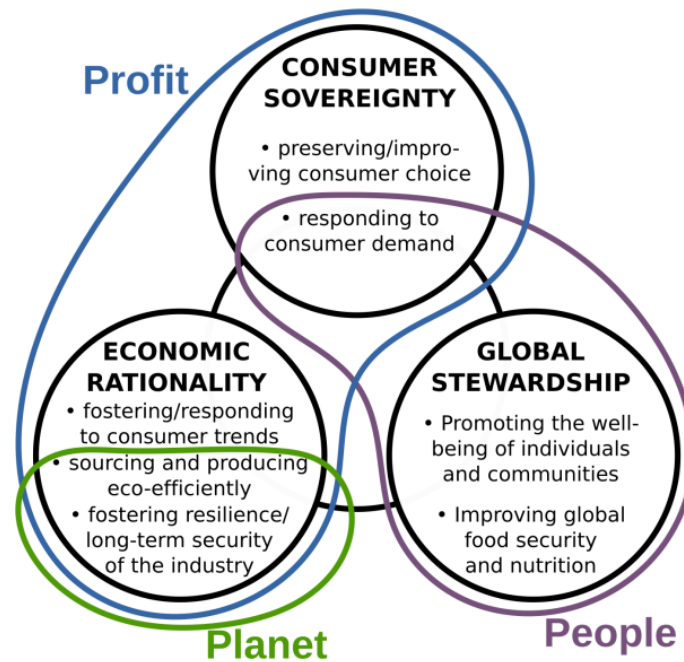


Figure 7: The discursive framework of sustainable food consumption in the view of the triple bottom line

The ‘people’ dimension is fully represented by the interpretative frame of ‘stewardship’. This implies that the social dimension is well covered and that it constitutes a central element to how themes are rhetorically framed in the expert discourses on sustainable food consumption. However, the aspect of ‘people’ in the context of the interpretative frame of ‘stewardship’ is less understood in the sense of social equity, but more in a broader sense of global food security and nutrition in the context of population pressure on the one hand, and on improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities on the other. As the analysis of the three exemplary themes – organic produce, food waste reduction and protein (Section 8.3) has shown, the idea of a sense of food security globally or in the ‘Global South’ is commonly used as an argumentative hook to introduce arguments on the wellbeing and health of people in the UK. The overall focus on the latter becomes also apparent in argumentations that portray proposed ideas as a response to consumer demand for wellbeing. Thus, even pledges to consumer sovereignty contribute to the social dimension. This makes apparent that in the analysed expert discourses the social/people dimension is inevitably represented in established themes of sustainable food consumption, but in an individualistic interpretation that focuses on aspects of health, wellbeing and charitable work for local communities rather than on social cohesion, equity and access to key services.

The dimension of planetary concerns, i.e. 'the environment', is drawn upon in two argumentative lines within economic rationality, which are as such not independently constituted as 'environment', but intertwined with economic ideas. These argumentative lines are inherent in testimonies of contributions to eco-efficiency, as well as to 'resilience' or long-term security of the food industry. Thus, most notable to the representation of the environmental dimension in the discursive framework of sustainable food consumption is that it does not occupy a full interpretative frame by itself. Thus it does not constitute *in itself* a condition to be met in order for discursive components to emerge within discourses on sustainable food consumption.

Fairclough (2001) has noted that "[t]he naturalisation of the meanings of words is an effective way of constraining the contents of discourse and, in the long term, knowledge and beliefs" (Fairclough 2001, 87). Mapping the discursive framework identified in the analysis of expert discourses onto the basic triple bottom line model (Elkington 1997), which is held as a fundamental framework to sustainability commitments, the institutionalised 'ways of seeing' (Fairclough 1992) 'sustainable consumption' can be identified and the underlying 'common sense' of discourses can be foregrounded (Fairclough 2001). Based on the analysis conducted in this project, it is found that although 'sustainable consumption' is commonly held as a policy aim to steer societal change at the interface of the three dimensions of the economic, the social and the environment, it is built on an underlying knowledge- and belief-system that is based on 'economic rationality', 'consumer sovereignty' and 'stewardship'. With respect to this finding, for each dimension, I would like to foreground a core social and political implication.

In experts' naturalised, common sense meaning of sustainable consumption, 'consumer sovereignty' constitutes a crucial determinant to the 'economic dimension'. For matters to be discussed as matters of sustainable consumption, the ideal of consumer sovereignty has to be rhetorically satisfied. This means that it does not suffice to communicate strategies and implementations for sustainable consumption as a means to foster sustainability as such, but as a means to serve or respond to consumers. Even in contexts in which the idea of individual consumer choice for social change is abolished, argumentations are consumer-centred, for example the limitation of choice by retailers ('choice editing') is itself presented as constituting a response to consumer desires. This argumentative detour via the consumer

represents a considerable limitation to strategies and implementations for sustainability that needs to be taken into consideration by scholars and policy makers.

The social dimension appears to be well covered and established. However, the representation of this dimension is dominated by individualistic interpretations of wellbeing and health, whereby matters of welfare and social equity remain in the background. In particular, the analysis of recent discourses has revealed that generic ideas of 'purpose' as an 'added value' attached to a product are central and normalised. This is to the extent that the commitment to people's wellbeing as such is not treated as a category within 'sustainability', but as an aim that is superordinate to sustainability (Section 7.3). Given this development, which intensified in the past few years, speculatively, one can imagine sustainable consumption disappearing as a distinct discursive formation in the future.

The environmental dimension occupies a minor presence and is only represented within the interpretative frame of 'economic rationality'. Thus, in expert discourses on sustainable consumption, the environmental dimension occupies a quite peripheral position. While the preservation of consumer sovereignty and social wellbeing occupy strong positions in the belief- and knowledge-systems that are drawn upon in expert discourses on sustainable consumption, the consideration of belief- and knowledge-systems on environmental protection are rather marginal. While this finding can be seen as concerning, in the sense that environmental pressures are not 'enough' for an issue to be considered as an issue to 'sustainable consumption', it constitutes a symptom of 'sustainability' being idealistically described and theoretically conceptualised as a holistic, systemic concept. In relation to strategies and implementations, this is mostly interpreted in an economic sense of a 'win-win' outcome.

10.3 Reflections on the role of the consumer as a political agent

In this study consumer sovereignty has been identified as a central interpretative frame to the ways in which 'sustainable consumption' is seen and approached. Thus, knowledge- and belief-systems that underlie 'consumer sovereignty' are inherently intertwined with knowledge- and belief-systems on 'sustainable consumption'. Central to this finding is that strategies and implementations to foster sustainable consumption are legitimised as constituting either an effort to preserve/improve consumer choice or a response to consumer demands (Section 9.5).

The analysis of expert discourses has shown that the idea of civic participation in the sense of ‘voting through choosing’, as drawn upon (Dickinson and Carsky 2005, Micheletti and Stolle 2012, Shaw et al 2006) and criticised (Shove 2010, Wheeler 2012) extensively by social science scholars, holds a marginal presence in recent industry debates. As opposed to this, instantiated by the *I will if you will* report by National Consumer Council and Sustainable Development Commission (SDC 2006), and, most notably, again drawn upon in the UK Government’s, Cabinet Office Strategy Unit *Food Matters* report (CO 2008), choice architecture based-argumentations emerged early in policy contexts of ‘sustainable consumption’. On a larger scale, these narratives began to take hold in the aftermath of the economic recession, as the analysis of articles in *The Grocer* shows (Section 5.5) and constitute the dominant ways in which consumers’ involvement in ‘sustainable consumption’ is interpreted in recent discourses (Sections 5.6 and 6.3.2).

As I have shown, consumer’s attitudes constitute a core reference by which strategies and implementations in the name of ‘sustainable consumption’ are legitimised. In the context of choice architecture-based argumentations, ‘citizen-consumers’ are thereby mainly drawn upon as a market research respondents (Schwarzkopf 2011), who express their opinion via surveys, polls or social media. This has two major implications. Firstly, with industry-based implementations being portrayed as consumer-directed and reflected in the choices that consumers find at the point of purchase, the notion that food sustainability happens through product purchases in the supermarket is reinforced. Secondly, the fact that references to consumer desires and attitudes are established as a legitimate way to authorise industry action for sustainability raises questions in relation to the spaces within which consumers can be ‘political’ regarding sustainability. Given this new focus on ‘choice editing on behalf of the consumer’ as opposed to ‘providing for individual consumer choice for sustainability’, potential implications on the ‘political’ element of the concept of ‘consumer-citizenship’ (Spaargaren and Oosterveer 2010, Trentmann 2007) will needed to be further explored (Ehgartner 2018).

10.4 Potential avenues for future research

This study explored expert discourses on food sustainability in the UK and identified a discursive framework which confines the ways in which issues have to be framed in order to become established as themes within discourses on ‘sustainable consumption’. This

concerns the dominant ways in which issues are mediated by the most influential agents and does therefore not imply the absence of 'alternative' discourses. Numerous individuals and groups, needless to say, although exposed to this dominant framework of sustainable consumption, apply interpretative frames that are different from the ones presented here. Further, the discursive framework is, although strong, dominant and persistent since the 'green hype' in 2007, not set in stone and, as the diachronic analysis demonstrated, interpretations within this framework can vary strongly. Alternative narratives can also continuously penetrate discourses and change them from within. Likewise, there is potential for themes to become established within 'sustainable consumption' if the ways in which they are communicated are altered to touch upon the key interpretative frames. The theme of 'protein diversity' could potentially constitute such a case. While the case of 'meat consumption and production' was never established as a key theme within discourses on sustainable consumption, it constitutes a major concern within the recently emerged case of 'protein diversity'. Different interviewees repeatedly emphasised the potential of a 'protein diversity' agenda as opposed to a 'meat reduction' agenda or described how 'the issue of meat' is difficult to raise. The example of the recent establishment of the theme 'protein diversity' could thus potentially be the outcome of deliberate efforts made by certain institutional agents' to narrate the issue in a way that fits into the discursive framework of 'sustainable consumption'. However, the establishment of a theme within sustainability discourses does never solely result from the simple wish and effort of agents - the discursive circumstances also matter. Given the strong interrelatedness with concerns of 'health' in the way this theme is discussed, it is uncertain whether it would have had a chance to become established during the 'green hype' in 2007, when the relation between 'sustainability' and 'health' was still unsteady. While its embeddedness in health discourses is inevitable, it has to be noted that not only 'health', but also other 'external discourses', namely 'efficiency' and 'premiumisation' could have had an impact on the rise of the theme of 'protein diversity'. Given its recent rise and its inherent argumentative complexity, the case of 'protein diversity' constitutes an interesting example of a discourse that could be further explored.

Another case which appeared intriguing in the analysis of the data but was given little attention to in the context of this thesis is fish consumption. Fish was central to the tensions between dietary advice and concerns about over-exploitation of world's fish stocks during

the key 'green period' from about 2007 until about 2012. In recent discourses, the issues seem to be resolved in the sense that 'fish' is not problematized as an issue to 'sustainability', whereas 'sustainable fish' constitutes an established term and is portrayed to be largely established and recommended for consumption. An investigation of how the topic has been negotiated and discussed between various collective agents as well as between concerns of 'health' and 'sustainability' could deliver crucial insights on the contribution of discursive dynamics alongside actual institutional adaptations and changes.

It has to be emphasised that this study explored expert discourses on food sustainability in the UK, and therefore within a certain geographical and socio-political space. Although no comparative study has been conducted, expert discourses on 'sustainable consumption' in other countries almost inevitably operate within discursive frameworks different from the framework identified in this UK-based study, given that 'alternative discourses' are not only supported by some marginalised groups, but also by renowned institutions. In relation to 'organic consumption', for example, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) offers a solid 'alternative interpretation' that key collective agents in other countries might reinforce (FAO 2018). Thus, while the theme has been found to have 'dropped out' of recent discourses on sustainable consumption, this might not be the case in discursive settings other than UK-based expert discourses. Further, a comparative study from 2004 on values associated with 'organic food choice' in the UK and Germany found that, as opposed to the German group, in the UK group, "dominant perceptual orientations do not acknowledge nature, or the environment at all" (Baker 2004, 1007). While this finding is confirmed by the study at hand, in which a separation between 'environmental' and 'ethical' discourses (with 'organic' belonging to the latter) was identified in articles in *The Grocer* published the year 2005, it indicates that discourses were constituted differently elsewhere and therefore points to the importance of comparative studies, which could constitute a further avenue of research.

In the writing up stages of this project I was struck by the analytical opportunities afforded by the concept of 'imaginaries' as defined by Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) and Fairclough (2013). While discourses, and in particular expert discourses on a contested and complex field such as 'sustainable consumption and production' posit problems as causes of 'difficulties' and therefore entail problematisations (Fairclough 2012), they also include

imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002). Although the scope of this project did not allow developing the concept in my data, ‘imaginaries’ crucially represent the interpretative repertoires available in discourses on a certain matter and therefore prove invaluable for research that aims to investigate the compatibilities and tensions between how an issue is problematized and envisioned to be tackled. One line of possible future development therefore could be to reanalyse elements of my data, applying the concept of ‘imaginaries’. Alternatively, this conceptual development could be applied to work that is concerned with future scenarios.

Whilst this research was based upon the basic premise of discourse as a social practice, it was outside of the scope of this research project to explore how the examined discourses are incorporated into non-discursive practices. The research at hand was concerned with the identification of socio-political structures. In the final step of the analysis I thus identified the framework behind the “self-evidentness of conventional (and ultimately arbitrary) ways” (Fairclough 2001, 89) of expert communication on sustainable food consumption. Pursuing this, I found that the three interpretative frames of ‘consumer sovereignty’, ‘economic rationality’ and ‘stewardship’ regulate the continuities and changes of discourses on sustainable consumption. Given the intertwining of discourses with social structure and conventions, which is claimed by discourse studies (Fairclough 2001), these interpretative frames have a simultaneous effect upon, and are determined by, the organisation of collective infrastructures and related practices. While the analysis at hand recognised this intertwining and was to a great extent motivated by the power inherent in it, it focused on the analysis of texts without involving the other, non-linguistic elements. In relation to this, it has to be brought to mind that the resources which experts

“have in their mind and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts are cognitive in the sense that they are in people’s head, but they are social in the sense that they have social origins [...]. People internalise what is socially produced and made available to them, and use this [...] to engage in their social practice, including discourse” (Fairclough 2001, 20).

Thus, fieldwork in organisational settings, for example in marketing, product development, CSR or management, could deliver insights on the material manifestations of the discursive practices that I identified.

Lastly, in another avenue of further research, discourse analysis could be applied on a sustainability-related field other than food and on discourses other than expert discourses. For example, in relation to mobility, many studies have explored the influence of the physical infrastructure on the adoption of behaviours (e.g. Nykvist and Whitmarsh 2008, Schwanen et al. 2012), whilst the discursive dimension (e.g. 'normalised', 'common sense' assumptions about the use of certain types of transport in relation to comfort, safety, costs, etc.) is less explored. An analysis of policy and public discourses in this field could constitute a valuable contribution to the research field.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Analysed media articles

The following articles published in *The Grocer* were in the final sample:

- [1_2005] "Preview of 2005" (8 January 2005)
- [2_2005] "Wrigley third big name to depart from Co-op" (15 January 2005)
- [3_2005] "Policy may backfire" (29 January 2005)
- [4_2005] "The Saturday Essay" (5 February 2005)
- [5_2005] "It's a wrap!" (5 February 2005)
- [6_2005] "CSR : With great power..." (19 March 2005)
- [7_2005] Review ordered of levy body workings (19 March 2005)]
- [8_2005] "FSA 'must think wider'" (26 March 2005)
- [9_2005] "Retail price of pigmeat to rise" (20 May 2005)
- [10_2005] "Unilever alternatives" (21 May 2005)
- [11_2005] "Compromise idea in row over order" (2 July 2005)
- [12_2005] "So many miles to go" (6 August 2005)
- [13_2005] "No buzz generates lots of buzz" (17 September 2005)
- [14_2005] "Talking Point" (17 September 2005)
- [15_2005] "Opinion" (24 September 2005)
- [16_2005] "Making ends meet" (22 October 2005)
- [17_2005] "It's quality, ProvenancE and trust" (12 November 2005)
- [1_2007] "Are there lights at the end of the tunnel?" (13 January 2007)
- [2_2007] "Birds Eye back on MSC trail" (13 January 2007)
- [3_2007] "Retailers open their heats, and wallets" (20 January 2007)
- [4_2007] "Health at top of agendas worldwide" (20 January 2007)
- [5_2007] "Don't panic over the interest hikes" (20 January 2007)
- [6_2007] "Will punters be neutral about carbon footprints?" (20 January 2007)
- [7_2007] "Soundbites" (27 January 2007)
- [8_2007] "New products 'must clear ethical hurdle'" (27 January 2007)
- [9_2007] "The retailer's view: sustainable goods are key" (27 January 2007)
- [10_2007] "Hot Reads" (3 February 2007)
- [11_2007] "A third of mushroom growers in cash crisis" (10 February)
- [12_2007] "World News" (17 February 2007)
- [13_2007] "Meet the New Mr Bean" (17 February 2007)
- [14_2007] "Consumer" (24 February 2007)
- [15_2007] "Brits gain taste for more unusual fish" (10 March 2007)
- [16_2007] "The X-factor makes them ones to watch" (10 March 2007)
- [17_2007] "Sun is shining on winter sales" (7 April 2007)
- [18_2007] " 'Flawed' local definition needs to go, says Tesco" (7 April 2007)
- [19_2007] "Small label – big difference?" (14 April 2007)
- [20_2007] "Use waste food before recycling" (14 April 2007)
- [21_2007] "Ghostbusting – putting life back into our communities" (14 April 2007)
- [22_2007] "Eastern promise" (14 April 2007)
- [23_2007] "Time to go green (...and yellow)" (28 April 2007)
- [24_2007] "Talking shop" (28 April 2007)
- [25_2007] "Can carbonates still sparkle?" (5 May 2007)
- [26_2007] "Buyer Survey" (5 May 2007)
- [27_2007] "Meet America's green man" (26 May 2007)
- [28_2007] "Omega 3" (26 May 2007)

[29_2007] "living La vida local" (1 June 2007)

[30_2007] "In the can" (2 June 2007)

[31_2007] "Britain's favourite supermarket Tesco: Dominates in range, service and stock (16 June 2007)

[32_2007] "A victim of its own success?" (16 June 2007)

[33_2007] "Fish" (23 June 2007)

[34_2007] "In Brief" (11 August 2007)

[35_2007] "Think you know your labels?" (18 August 2007)

[36_2007] "Tesco's 2020 vision" (1 September 2007)

[37_2007] "Tory group in call for single nutrition label" (15 September 2007)

[38_2007] "Trends & Developments" (15 September 2007)

[39_2007] "Soundbites" (15 September 2007)

[40_2007] "Suppliers come Under pressure" (29 September 2007)

[41_2007] "How Green are the grocers?" (29 September 2007)

[42_2007] "The ultimate global food showcase" (29 September 2007)

[43_2007] "Chocolate with a conscience" (6 October 2007)

[44_2007] "Is Cadbury losing the Bournville identity?" (13 October 2007)

[45_2007] "Shoppers say M&S is the most ethical" (20 October 2007)

[46_2007] "Lean, mean and" (20 October 2007)

[47_2007] "Bogofs as persuasive as television adverts" (10 November 2007)

[48_2007] "The tastiest opportunities" (17 November 2007)

[49_2007] "M&S has the most respect" (24 November 2007)

[50_2007] "M&S organic turkey sales go over £1m" (15 December 2007)

[51_2007] "How to make the most from Christmas trading" (15 December 2007)

[1_2010] "Industry must take green lead" (9 January 2010)

[2_2010] "20 questions for 2010" (9 January 2010)

[3_2010] "A sexy new look" (30 January 2010)

[4_2010] "Unilever warns of a tough year ahead as profits slump by 2bn" (6 February 2010)

[5_2010] "The right tools for the Job" (6 February 2010)

[6_2010] "Love it or hate it: Unilever's 2009 results divide opinion" (13 February 2010)

[7_2010] "Second opinion? We must define a sustainable diet" (13 February 2010)

[8_2010] "Climate scandal must not hit CSR" (20 February 2010)

[9_2010] "Third party? We should still eat meat – just a lot less of it" (13 March 2010)

[10_2010] "More crop per drop" (13 March 2010)

[11_2010] "Splashing out again" (20 March 2010)

[12_2010] "Greenpeace points finger at Nestlé over palm oil policies" (27 March 2010)

[13_2010] "Join the barbecue" (27 March 2010)

[14_2010] "The Saturday essay? Reports of organic's death are exaggerated" (3 April 2010)

[15_2010] "Third party? Simple methods can reduce carbon by 60%" (10 April 2010)

[16_2010] "GM will be vital to food security" (10 April 2010)

[17_2010] "Dessert bloom" (10 April 2010)

[18_2010] "In search of perfect traceability" (1 May 2010)

[19_2020] "Not so soft sell" (1 May 2010)

[20_2010] "Letter of the week" (15 May 2010)

[21_2010] "Banana wars" (29 May 2010)

[22_2010] "Letter of the week Nestlé is committed to playing a valuable role" (5 June 2010)

[23_2010] "Dedication is what you need" (5 June 2010)

[24_2010] "A three pronged attack on the world" (5 June 2010)

[25_2010] "Tesco is again favourite with shoppers, but it's a close call" (19 June 2010)

[26_2010] "Sustainability must be top of the agenda, says Leahy" (3 July 2010)

[27_2010] "Birds Eye unveils plan to drive sustainability" (10 July 2010)

[28_2010] "Why the fellas at Northern Food don't feel too good" (24 July 2010)

[29_2010] "Second opinion? They need to look before lopping" (31 July 2010)
[30_2010] "The organic dilemma" (31 July 2010)
[31_2010] "Animal eating animal: is the consumer ready to move on?" (18 September 2010)
[32_2010] "This is the future, Are you ready?" (25 September 2010)
[33_2010] "Second opinion CSR will mean a wider skill gap" (23 October 2010)
[34_2010] "The Saturday essay Five year plan for environmental salvation" (6 November 2010)
[35_2010] "Letter of the week" (13 November 2010)
[36_2010] "MSC reaches 7,000+ products landmark" (20 November 2010)
[37_2010] "The Human Angle" (27 November 2010)
[38_2010] "Paper Products" (18 December 2010)
[1_2015] "Focus On: Fairtrade" (7 February 2015)
[2_2015] "What now, Tescopoly?" (28 February 2015)
[3_2015] "Mars to open Pune plant, Walmart unveils 'Women Owned label'" (14 March 2015)
[4_2015] "Will illegal deforestation leave corned beef chains exposed?" (21 March 2015)
[5_2015] "Coca-Cola's commitment to choice in health debate" (21 March 2015)
[6_2015] "Is halal meat getting fit for the future? Q&A with The Grocer" (25 April 2015)
[7_2015] "Fairtrade and organic fakes 'could be next fraud scandal'" (2 May 2015)
[8_2015] "Meat Free Category Report 2015" (16 May 2015)
[9_2015] "Grocery needs new strategies for risky food commodities" (16 May 2015)
[10_2015] "Marks & Spencer flags up achievements under Plan A" (6 June 2015)
[11_2015] "More frozen food will boost UK food security" (13 June 2015)
[12_2015] "Britain's Favourite Supermarket: Tesco" (13 June 2015)
[13_2015] "Salmon sales leap as shoppers are tempted by promotions" (27 June 2015)
[14_2015] "Opinion: Welfare needs commitment across the entire supply chain" (18 July 2015)
[15_2015] "Animal welfare top of food & drink ethical concerns" (25 July 2015)
[16_2015] "Frederic Landtmeters of Milson Coors UK: the Big Interview" (8 August 2015)
[17_2015] "Trust is vital for the future of the food and drink industry" (22 August 2015)
[18_2015] "Does business need a purpose?" (5 September 2015)
[19_2015] "Fairtrade backs UNSustainable Development Goals" (26 September 2015)
[20_2015] "Sustainability: how fmcg can help save the world in 17 steps" (26 September 2015)
[21_2015] "How fish fingers can sustain for 60 more years" (26 September 2015)
[22_2015] "John West profits leap as tuna sustainability faces scrutiny" (10 October 2015)
[23_2015] "Chiquita calls a cab, warm dips" (17 October 2015)
[24_2015] "Soup Category Report 2015" (24 October 2015)
[25_2015] "Growing demand for MSC-certified seafood" (31 October 2015)
[26_2015] "Click & collect: as Asda slows development, what now?" (31 October 2015)

Appendix II: Interview guide

1 Sustainability and Contentions

- What is the background and origin of [your organisation] in relation to food sustainability?
- How and when did food sustainability issues first emerge in [your organisation]?
 - What is the role of [your organisation] in relation to the sustainability agenda?
 - What are the most significant actions that [your organisation] has taken?
 - In what ways has your organisation furthered food sustainability more/different than the others?
 - Is there influence from or engagement with other organisations/stakeholders?

- Thinking about the topic of sustainable food and how it has been dealt with in general: How do you think debates on it developed and changed over time? What were people talking about when talking about sustainable food in the early 2000s and what do we talk about now?
 - What are the themes and issues that emerged for food sustainability over the past 10-15 years? What topics emerged and disappeared (Carbon, Fairtrade, Local, etc.)?
 - Did the focus change over time? In which way?
 - What is considered possible and desirable?
 - Have there been confusions or contradictions in the debates on sustainable food?
 - When we look at where we are at now with the agenda: What are the strengths of the current approach? What is desirable to keep?
 - What progress has been made concerning the sustainability of food?

2 Sustainability and Strategies

- What are the main approaches that evolved on sustainable food?
- Who are the stakeholders that are most prominent/influential in that context, in your opinion? What are their views? Has the situation changed over time?
- What are, in your opinion, the key documents that have been published in that context? Have there been any events that strongly influenced the agenda around sustainable food issues (conferences, political changes) or gave it a different direction?
- Has there been pressure coming from the public/from opinion groups?
 - What was/is the response to that?
 - Has that been different in the past?

3 Sustainability and the Consumer

- What is the role of consumption in sustainable development? (How) has that changed over time?
 - What are the strategies to shift consumption towards more sustainable consumption? (How) has that changed over time?
 - Is there a reputational necessity for businesses to focus on sustainability issues today? (How) has that changed over time?
- What are the responsibilities of the consumer in relation to food consumption? (How) has that changed over time?
 - Do consumers care? Do they care more than they used to 10-15 years ago?
 - Who consumes sustainable food?
 - What are the barriers for consumers to consume sustainable products?
 - How much responsibility should be placed on the consumer?
 - What responsibilities are consumers ready to take and what do they expect from other stakeholders?

- What role do consumer habits and choice play in sustainable consumption? (How) has that changed over time?

4 Sustainability and interrelation with other issues/trends

- How, in your opinion, do issues of health relate to sustainable food consumption?
- How, in your opinion, do issues of trust and transparency relate to sustainable food consumption?
- How, in your opinion, do issues of quality relate to sustainable food consumption?

5 Future of sustainable food consumption

- What are the questions for the future? Where will we need to go? What does [your organisation] plan in relation to that?
- What shape will sustainable food take in the future?
- Is sustainable food production the norm today?/ Is sustainable food consumption mainstream?

6 Conclusion

Is there anything that you would like to add that maybe pertinent to my research or anything you would like to clarify/add?

*** key recommendations of important/good/useful policy reports

***recommendations/contacts to potential interview partners

Appendix III: Analysed policy documents

CO (2008): Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century. Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office, London.

DEFRA (2010): Food 2030, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, London.

FEC (2013): Beyond Business as Usual: Towards a Sustainable Food System. Food Ethics Council, Brighton.

FftF (2007): Retail Futures 2022: Scenarios for the Future of UK Retail and Sustainable Development. Forum for the Future, London.

M&S (2007): How We Do Business: 2007 Report. Marks and Spencer, London.

M&S (2017): Plan A 2025. Plan A 2025 Commitments. Marks and Spencer, London.

MacMillan, T. and Durrant, R. (2009): Livestock consumption and climate change: a framework for dialogue. Food Ethics Council & WWF-UK, Brighton.

Public Health England (2016): From Plate to Guide: What, why and how for the eatwell model. Public Health England, Wellington House, London.

Public Health England (2018): The Eatwell Guide. Helping you eat a healthy, balanced diet. Public Health England, Wellington House, London.

SDC (2006): I will if you will. National Consumer Council and Sustainable Development Commission, London.

The Carbon Trust (2016): The Eatwell Guide: A More Sustainable Diet. The Carbon Trust, London.

WRAP (2006): Grocery Futures. The Future of UK Grocery Retail. Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), Banbury.

WRAP (2009): Household Food and Drink Waste in the UK. Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), Banbury.

WRAP (2015): Food Futures: from business as usual to business unusual. Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), Banbury.

WWF (2009): One Planet Food Strategy 2009-2012. WWF UK, Surrey.