

**IMPACTS OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION CHOICES ON
QUALITY OF LIFE:
THE SLOW FOOD EXAMPLE**

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Abstract

Though increasingly understood that sustainable consumption is a key component for sustainable development, establishing its viability remains a crucial task. Moving towards sustainable consumption will realistically require significant changes in consumption patterns, as well as rethinking the connection between increased consumption and well-being. However, an identified knowledge gap exists in understanding *how* sustainable consumption choices impact lifestyle and quality of life. As a starting point, this paper explores the relationship through food, one of the four priority areas for sustainable consumption. By examining Slow Food, the paper highlights a consumer movement embracing principles of responsible consumption and finds a positive impact for more sustainable consumption patterns and quality of life. It is hoped that this fosters further dialogue for action and implementation of sustainable consumption.

Keywords: Sustainable consumption; responsible consumption; consumer behaviour; sustainability; quality of life; slow food

Subject Terms: Sustainable consumption; Consumption (Economics) -- Environmental Aspects; Sustainable development; Consumption (Economics) -- Moral and ethical aspects; Slow food movement

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	vi
List of Tables.....	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION.....	4
<i>What is sustainable consumption?.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>The difficulty of implementing sustainable consumption.....</i>	<i>7</i>
SLOW FOOD AS A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION.....	12
<i>Slow Food background.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Slow Food as a form of responsible consumption.....</i>	<i>14</i>
METHODOLOGY: SURVEYING SLOW FOOD MEMBERS.....	16
<i>Slow Food members' attitudes towards consumption.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Slow Food's impact on lifestyle and quality of life.....</i>	<i>20</i>
1) <i>Slow Food has a positive impact on social capital.....</i>	<i>20</i>
2) <i>Slow Food has potential to promote increased well-being.....</i>	<i>21</i>
3) <i>Sustainable consumption is not just for the wealthy.....</i>	<i>23</i>
4) <i>"Slow" captivates and has potential to expand.....</i>	<i>24</i>
LIMITATIONS.....	26
CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	28
REFERENCE LIST.....	30
APPENDIX.....	35
<i>Appendix A: Slow Food Member Survey.....</i>	<i>35</i>

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Interactions in Sustainable Development.....	5
Figure 2: Respondents by country	16
Figure 3: Length of Slow Food membership.....	17
Figure 4: Respondents by age.....	17
Figure 5: Household income (in US\$).....	17
Figure 6: Attitudes since joining Slow Food.....	21
Figure 7: Reported happiness.....	22
Figure 8: Other consumption areas where Slow Food principles are applied.....	24

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Social and Economic Manifestations of
Slow Food Initiatives (Pietrykowski, 2004) 14

INTRODUCTION

These are the best of times—yet potentially the worst of times—for consumers. Consumption may be a sensitive topic, but it is a timely one. With climate change now commanding global attention, the world is becoming ever more cognizant of man’s environmental influence and impact vis-à-vis consumption. And never before has the world seen so much wealth, yet its distribution remains grossly inequitable; a widening gulf is being created between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots,’ within and across nations (Worldwatch Institute, 2004). The situation is compounded by an ever-increasing global population, with an estimated nine billion earthly inhabitants by 2050 rightfully aspiring to a comfortable life and high standard of living (United Nations Population Division, 2006).

It is a predicament that is leading experts to proclaim that the world has “serious consumption problems” (Diamond, 2008). These problems stem from the fact that 12% of the world’s population—those living in North America and Western Europe—account for 60% of the world’s private consumption (Worldwatch Institute, 2004). For China’s citizens to consume on a level equal to those living in the United States would require a doubling of the world’s resources. Unfortunately, at *present rates* global consumption already requires the bio-carrying capacity of 1.39 Earths (Venetoulis & Talberth, 2005). In a world of finite resources, to envision an equitable global distribution of goods and services at current consumption levels makes this pattern unsustainable. Indeed it is understood that questions of sustainability *are* questions of consumption (Stern, 2000).

As a result, the idea of sustainable or responsible consumption has been receiving significant attention. In the face of *overconsumption*, it offers an optimistic approach to developing more just and equitable consumption patterns. But though the importance of sustainable consumption is increasingly understood, establishing its viability remains a crucial task. Today's predominant thought holds that increased wealth begets increased consumption, which ultimately leads to increased welfare. Related, there is the not so subtle "prevailing perception by many governments that reducing consumption levels challenges the goals of economic growth, technological innovation and international competitiveness" (Mont & Plepys, 2007, p. 534). However, it is reasonable and—in light of the current global situation—warranted to question this logic, much as it is fair to question the effectiveness of current consumption patterns. More wealth and more material goods do not necessarily equate to increased welfare, as an increasing amount of research is illustrating, and GDP-alternative measurements are highlighting. Indicators of well-being and happiness point to a complex relationship between income, consumption, and overall life satisfaction, leading to conclusions that "Well-being does not rely on high levels of consuming;" and "It is possible to live long, happy lives with a much smaller environmental impact" (Marks, Abdallah, Simms & Thompson, 2006, pp. 3, 4). But how then, does consuming sustainably impact well-being?

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on consumer behaviour as it relates to models of sustainability. In particular, it addresses the knowledge gap of the impact of responsible consumption choices on well-being and quality of life (KNesCo, 2005). The paper explores this relationship by examining members of Slow Food, a voluntary,

members-based international organization that follows principles aligned with sustainable consumption. In essence, it literally and figuratively examines the “strict diet” some call for on the part of the developed world’s consumption levels (Gesualdi, 2005, p.92). It is hopefully, therefore, an attempt to make this diet as painless as possible, by showing that following more responsible, sustainable consumption can in fact have a positive impact on lifestyle and quality of life.

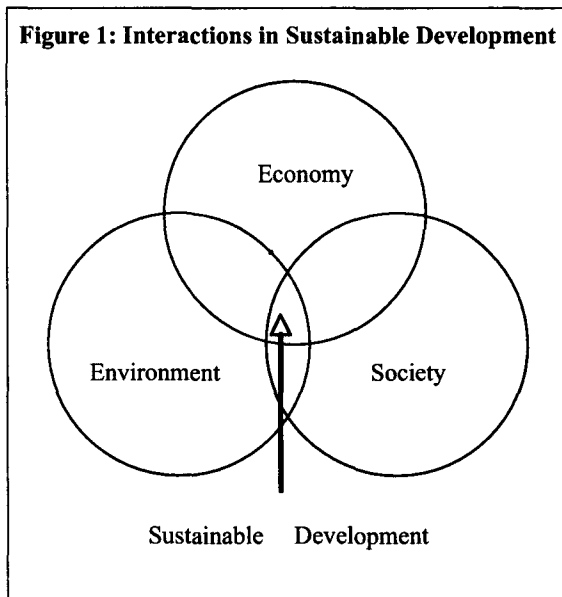
UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

What is sustainable consumption?

A main problem continues to be a lack of consensus around a definition for sustainable consumption (Mont & Plepys, 2007). The notion of sustainability has quickly become top of mind in the developed world, a result of the popularization of climate change and growing concern that humans are responsible for unprecedented environmental damage and are impacting the earth's bio-carrying capacity. Sustainability has also caught the attention of political leaders in emerging countries, who struggle with environmental degradation and social strife amidst their nation's quest to accrue wealth. The term itself was formalized under the umbrella concept of sustainable development, which the Brundtland Report of 1987 widely defined and popularized as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Our Common Future, 1987, p. 43). Subsequent efforts to unpack the concept were based on offering sustainable development as an alternative to pure, straight-ahead economic growth theory; sustainability generally speaks of development in three spheres: economic, environmental, and societal (Giddings, Hopwood, & O'Brien, 2003; Jacobs, 1999). For sustainable development, it is necessary to consider the interaction of all three, taking into account the requirement of both the environment and society to support and enable economic growth (*Figure 1*).

Within this general context, at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio consensus was established for an action plan for sustainability that addressed *sustainable*

consumption and production (UNCED, 1992). Specifically, Chapter 4 of *Agenda 21* stated clearly: “In many cases, this sustainable development will require reorientation of



existing production and consumption patterns that have developed in industrial societies and are in turn emulated in much of the world” (Ibid). As has been pointed out without irony, this chapter was presciently brief given the conflicting stance that consumption patterns of developed nations were unsustainable (Zaccaï, 2007). In

November 1994, the Norwegian Ministry

for the Environment followed with the Symposium on Sustainable Consumption, commonly referred to as “The Oslo Symposium”, which narrowed the focus to sustainable consumption and subsequently created the definition which has to date been most widely used, establishing sustainable consumption as “...the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of further generations” (Ministry of the Environment [Norway], 1994). As it is based on the 1987 Brundtland Report’s definition of sustainable development, this definition has similarly been subject to much critique related to its lack of

“intergenerational ethics” for not being able to define what are “needs of future generations” (World Bank, 2003, p. 14).

Following this ambitious, yet ambiguous, start, upon the 10-year anniversary of the 1992 Earth Summit (and amidst concern that little work had been accomplished on sustainable production and consumption) the United Nations called for a 10-Year Framework on Sustainable Development in 2002, including programmes to “accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production” (UNDESA, 2002, p.7). This initiative contained the *The Marrakech Process*, a specific 10-Year Framework on Sustainable Consumption (Ibid). However, further lack of action prompted a prominent group of 250 sustainability researchers and scientists in 2005 to create *The Oslo Declaration*, calling for a plan of action to set a research agenda for sustainable consumption that would lead to specific ideas for implementation (KNesCo, 2005). This research agenda has helped identify the knowledge gaps for sustainable consumption, spurring on academic research in this area, and notably led to the creation of the European Commission-funded Sustainable Consumption Research Exchanges (SCORE!) project, which supports the UN’s 10-Year Framework. Upon conclusion of SCORE!’s final conference in March 2008, the network launched an official “Framework of Action on Sustainable Consumption” for the consideration of global policy makers, which is intended to be integrated into the formal 10-Year Framework (Personal conference notes).

Overall, it seems best to heed the advice of Jackson and Michaelis (2003, p.20), who caution “It may actually prove impossible to agree on a precise definition of sustainable consumption.” Better instead to focus on action, for though there remains

inconclusiveness in defining sustainable consumption, there has been widespread agreement in identifying four priority areas for sustainable consumption—mobility, energy, shelter, and food—which together account for 70–80% of society’s environmental impacts (Tukker et al., 2007). Furthermore, the research agenda has identified key areas that must be addressed in order to seriously engage in the real task: implementation of sustainable consumption.

The difficulty of implementing sustainable consumption

The difficulty of sustainable consumption to garner a formalized definition, let alone traction, is telling—and understandable. The majority of academic and industry research, along with the political spotlight, has concentrated on the sustainable production side of the sustainability equation. It is easier to understand and measure items directly involved with the management of natural resources, pollution, and industrial waste. Now that there is general agreement on climate change and carbon has been identified as the poster child for greenhouse gas emissions, the world can get on to the business of quantifying, verifying, and mitigating. On the consumption side, it is acknowledged that neoclassical economics typically avoids analyzing “the roots of consumption behaviour” (Pietrykowski, 2004, p.308); unfortunately, consumers—for all their ‘rational’ action, driven by wants, need, passions, interests, and status—are harder to measure. More importantly, there is the widespread, underlying assumption for much of modern society that consumers, through their consumption, are the engines driving economic growth. As a result there has been little political will to alter consumption patterns, particularly to reduce consumption. Indeed it is admitted that “Resistance to the

idea of sustainable consumption might come from a perception that somehow institutions and organizations that transcend individuals would be imposing a universal system of values to individuals” (Comin et al., 2007, p.497). In a world where the customer is king, consumer sovereignty has significance. And in a world where the profit motive is largely dictated by buying more, bigger and better are the orders of the day.

Unfortunately, the world cannot simply produce its way to sustainability. Even as technology improves and allows for more efficient and environmentally friendly consumption, without fundamentally changing consumption patterns these efficiencies will more than likely lead to a ‘rebound effect’ of total growth in consumption volumes (Fuchs and Lorek, 2005). This also does not account for the majority of burgeoning consumers in developing nations aspiring to Western lifestyles. As but one estimate, it is believed that a 36-fold increase in ecological efficiency would be necessary for the entire world to achieve per capita consumption equal to that in the U.S. (Daly, 1996). And that is holding U.S. figures constant! Without changing underlying assumptions about consumption and welfare, sustainable development will be unachievable.

Thus the difficulty with advancing the conversation of sustainable consumption is systemic, though syntax has arguably not helped. Cynics often point out the apparent oxymoronic quality of the term “sustainable consumption” and its inherent contradictions (Zaccaï, 2007). A more helpful phrase, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore, may indeed be “responsible consumption.” In fact the notion of responsible consumption predates sustainable consumption; in 1973, George Fisk set out his *Criteria for a Theory of Responsible Consumption* in which he wrote “‘Responsible consumption’

refers to rational and efficient use of resources with respect to the global human population. It is not possible to consider the consumption question exclusively from the standpoint of any single nation, because the consumption of depletable resources in one nation necessarily affects the reservoir of resources elsewhere. Since the problem is global, its analysis must also be global” (Fisk, 1973, p. 24). The theory was further expanded to highlight that in order to realize responsible consumption two things were required (p. 25): “a new attitude toward the meaning of consumption and a social organization to implement such an attitude” (Ibid). Much like the mainstreaming of responsible investment, a process that saw the concept evolve and drop its ethical and socially-responsible limitations, sustainable consumption may shrug off some of its political baggage by considering a name change.

However, the more serious matter is the systemic bias against sustainable consumption. The current political and economic systems are in many ways not constructed to support policies promoting sustainable consumption. Under today’s rubric, any policymaker looking to limit consumption will not stay in power for long. However, just as carbon taxes and cap-and-trade systems are coming into effect to account for deficiencies in costing externalities in our existing economic frameworks, more appropriate metrics for determining economic and social well-being are gaining recognition. The limitations of gross domestic product (GDP) as an overall barometer for economic health and welfare, for example, have been highlighted by alternative-GDP measurements. More wealth and more material goods do not necessarily equate to increased welfare, as explained by Max-Neef (1995, p. 117): “For every society there

seems to be a period in which economic growth brings about an improvement in the quality of life, but only up to a point—the threshold point—beyond which, if there is more economic growth, quality of life may begin to deteriorate.” This is highlighted by the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), a widely recognized alternative measurement, which finds that collective welfare, or well-being, in the United States has been stagnant since the 1970s (Talberth, Cobb & Slattery, 2006). The creator of the GDP himself, Simon Kuznets, expressed as much in his 1934 report to the U.S. Congress when he cautioned that “the welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income” (Kuznets, 1934).

Indicators of well-being and happiness point to a complex relationship between income, consumption, and overall life satisfaction. Another example, the new economic foundation’s Happy Planet Index (HPI), offers a bold portrayal of national well-being that runs counter to conventional economic-growth biased measurements. The most recent HPI—determined by multiplying a country’s life expectancy by reported life satisfaction, and dividing the resulting sum by per capita ecological footprint—finds that G8 countries generally score poorly in HPI, with Canada 111th overall and the United States 150th (Marks et al., 2006). Similarly, the importance of social capital and natural capital, and their interaction with economic capital, are now more universally recognized (Giddings et al., 2002). The conclusions are significant: “Well-being does not rely on high levels of consuming;” and “It is possible to live long, happy lives with a much smaller environmental impact” (Marks et al., 2006, p. 3, 4). Simply put, while rising incomes bring a higher quality of life, beyond a threshold point increased wealth does not equal

increased happiness. As well, and perhaps related, wealthy nations are extremely inefficient in their consumption.

That said, pragmatically-speaking given current systems—barring significant environmental or economic disaster—there is likely to be little motivation to address consumption issues until stakeholders are adequately engaged. Indeed, the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection identifies that “Responsibility for sustainable consumption is shared by all members and organizations of society, with informed consumers, Government, business, labor organizations, and consumer and environmental organizations playing particularly important roles” (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999 Guideline 43). Attempting to identify these roles, *I will if you will*, a recent study by the UK’s Sustainable Development Commission, examined the “triangle of actors” and their actions required for working towards more sustainable lifestyles (UK Sustainable Development Commission, 2006). The three actors—business, people, and government—are joined by a fourth group responsible for engaging in the sustainable consumption agenda, that of non-governmental organizations (Mont & Plepys, 2007). But the chasm between identifying roles and implementing sustainable consumption remains wide.

Ultimately, to further the sustainable consumption agenda requires a concerted effort to highlight solutions to the current paradigm of *over-* and *mis-consumption*. Alternatives to current consumption patterns are required, ideally alternatives that show sustainable, responsible consumption choices can have a positive impact on well-being and lifestyle on individual, local community, national, and global levels.

SLOW FOOD AS A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Within the current informal framework for sustainable consumption, voluntary consumer initiatives have emerged to offer alternatives to mainstream consumption patterns. One of the more recognized and successful examples is Slow Food, a global movement with the mission to “...defend biodiversity in our food supply, spread taste education and connect producers of excellent foods with co-producers through events and initiatives” (Slow Food, 2006). Indeed, if “The destiny of nations depends upon the manner in which they feed themselves,” as acclaimed French gastronomic philosopher Brillat-Savarin postulated in the early 19th century (Brillat-Savarin, 1949 [1825], p. 1), and considering the priority consumption areas, Slow Food offers an opportune example to examine the role of sustainable consumption.

Slow Food background

Slow Food is an international non-profit, member-supported organization founded by Italian journalist Carlo Petrini in 1989. As the name suggests, the organization was born to critique the likes of McDonald’s “and other purveyors of quick, cheap comestibles” (Pietrykowski, 2004, p. 310). In fact, the planned opening of a McDonald’s restaurant in Rome’s historic district incited an opposition movement that gave rise to the counter “slow food” movement (Petrini, 2001). From the endorsement of its manifesto in December 1989, Slow Food has worked to “counteract fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and peoples dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world” (Slow

Food, 2006). It is a message that has carried increasing favour amongst consumers around the world, and since its inception Slow Food has grown to include more than 80,000 members living in over 100 countries (Ibid).

Slow Food maintains a central headquarters in Bra, northern Italy, which is headed by the International Executive Committee, a four-year elected office comprised of the President's Committee and International Council, and containing representatives from countries with at least 500 Slow Food members. Slow Food International coordinates global campaigns and oversees three main projects: 1) *The Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity*, which aims to support "agricultural biodiversity" and "gastronomic traditions," notably through the Ark of Taste traditional foodstuffs and agricultural product cataloguing system; 2) *The Terra Madre Foundation*, responsible for organizing Terra Madre, the biennial "world meeting of food communities" that brings together food producers, distributors, cooks, and academics working for responsible and sustainable food production; and 3) *The University of Gastronomic Sciences*, based in Piedmont, Italy, and established to further research and innovation in a "multidisciplinary academic program in the science and culture of food" (Slow Food, 2006b).

However the organization is largely decentralized, with members belonging directly to one of approximately 850 *convivia*, or local chapters, so-called "because it is through these local groups that our philosophy of conviviality is best expressed" (Ibid). These groups organize local events and initiatives while maintaining communication with the central office. The *convivia* vary greatly in size and scope, with activity largely a function of the motivation of local leadership, themselves volunteers. *Convivia* can

actively be begun by any individual registering interest with the central Slow Food headquarters.

Slow Food as a form of responsible consumption

From its inception, Slow Food has embraced tenets of responsible consumption, formalized through its mission and manifesto. This is posited in the organization’s credo of “eco-gastronomy,” which states that “Slow Food is **good, clean and fair** food. We believe that the food we eat should taste good; that it should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; and that food producers should receive fair compensation for their work” (Slow Food, 2006c). Slow Food does not even refer to the general populace as consumers, instead recognizing individual’s part in the supply chain as “co-producers” (Ibid).

Slow Food’s philosophy and activities are structured along a sustainable capital framework, as shown by Pietrykowski’s study (2004, p. 317) of the movement’s social economy, reproduced in *Table 1*. Importantly, Slow Food “is able to transform cultural capital—a taste for food and wine usually associated with class, status, and conspicuous consumption—into social capital” (Ibid, p. 318).

<i>Form of Asset</i>	<i>Institutional Context</i>	<i>Slow Food Initiative</i>
Human Capital	University of Gastronomic Sciences	Taste Education
Cultural Capital	Convivia, Restaurants, Farm Markets	Conviviality, Hospitality, Taste Education
Social Capital	Presidia, Ark of Taste	Sustainable Agriculture, Consumption Districts

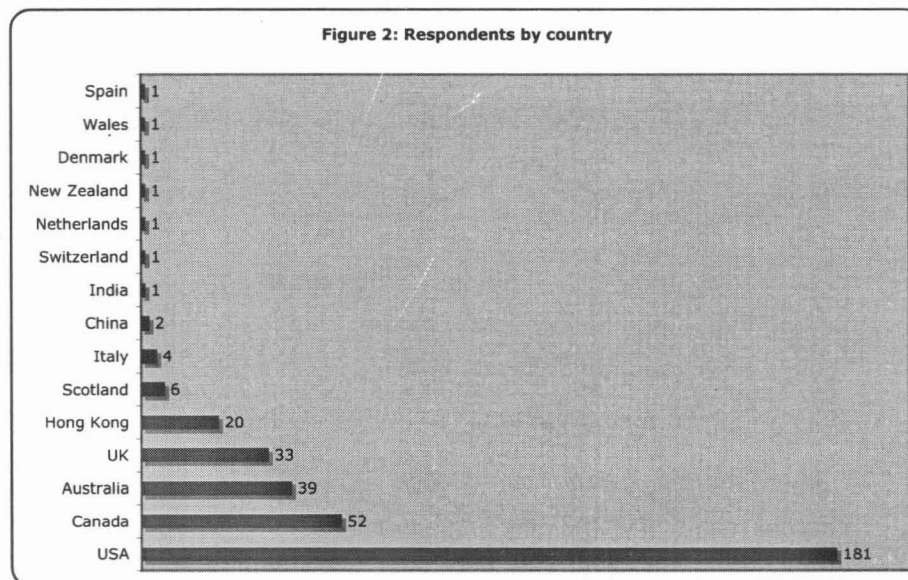
Table 1: Social and Economic Manifestations of Slow Food Initiatives (Pietrykowski, 2004)

Further case studies suggest that “the Slow Food Movement” interprets the emerging need of food consumers, linked to the ethical and the social dimensions of eating habits...” (Nosi and Zanni, 2004, p. 783). As well, Slow Food has been found to be a model for integrating more ethical, sustainable consumption into material culture (Pietrykowski, 2004).

Thus Slow Food’s proactive stance towards encouraging fair trade and harnessing social capital, working within production and consumption systems that eschew negative environmental impacts, aligns well with ideals of sustainable consumption. As Pietrykowski concluded (2004, p. 319), “by attending to the complex social and cultural relations within which consumption takes place, social economics helps us to identify those spaces of consumption that can promote diverse, human-scale, and environmentally sustainable forms of economic life.” However, the key question remains: how does participation in the sustainable Slow Food model impact a member’s (or co-producer’s) lifestyle, quality of life, and attitude towards sustainable consumption?

METHODOLOGY: SURVEYING SLOW FOOD MEMBERS

To address this question and begin exploring the impact on sustainable consumption choices and quality of life, Slow Food members were contacted via an anonymous, web-based survey.¹ In total, 309 Slow Food members from 15 countries completed the survey, which was conducted over a two-week period² (*Figure 2*).

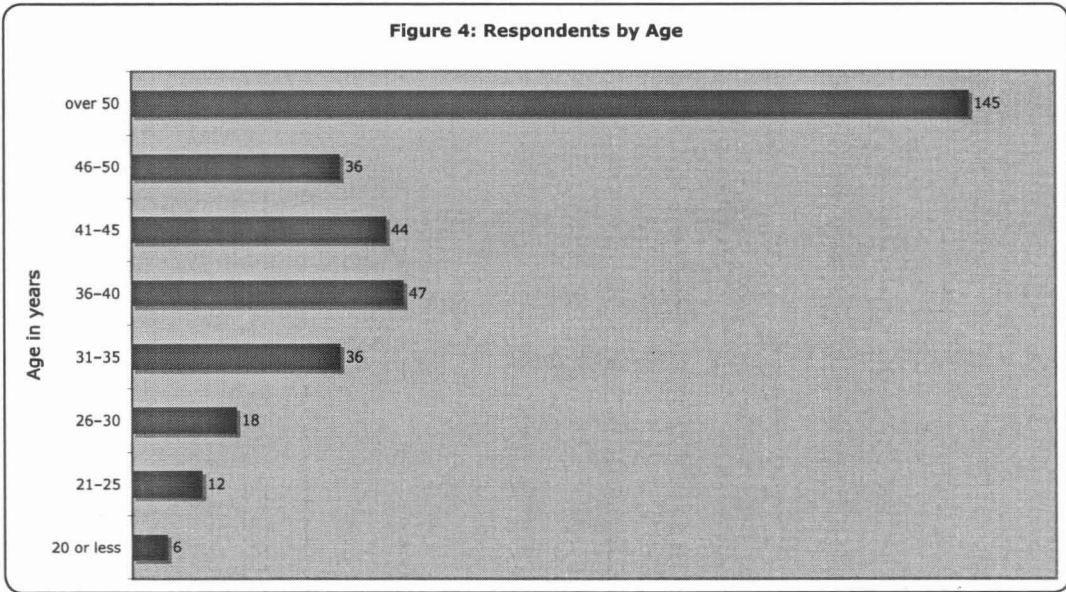
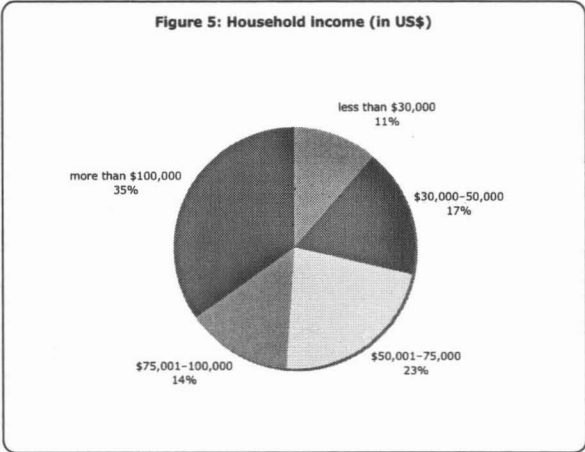
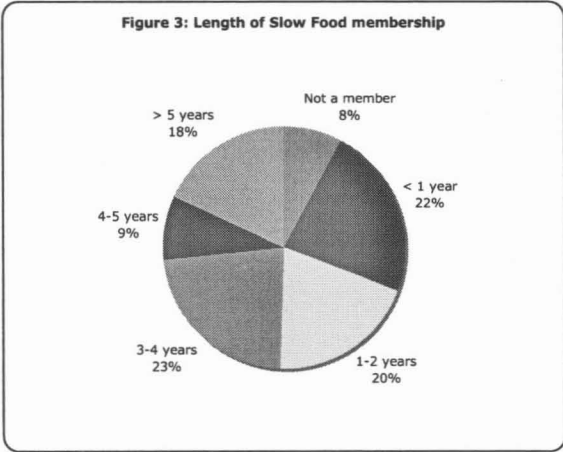


Members were contacted through their respective convivia leadership, whose email addresses were sourced from the International Slow Food website. From email correspondence with a number of convivia leaders and Slow Food members, it is understood that email was the primary form of communication used to relay the survey request to their membership. As shown in *Figures 3–5*, the members represent broad tenure with Slow Food, though the age of respondents skewed towards an older audience.

¹ The survey was carried out through third-party, online software provider SurveyMonkey.com (www.surveymonkey.com).

² Over the two weeks March 1–14, 2008, 344 participants responded, but not all completed the survey.

There was also widespread distribution in household income—an optional-answer question, with the trend towards higher income not surprising given the higher average age of respondents and the country of residence.³



There are reasonable limitations to the survey. While online surveys offer an unprecedented, cost-effective means of reaching a geographically-dispersed audience, the method implies a level of technological sophistication and access that may not be

³ For the complete survey, see Appendix 1.

available to the entire intended population (Griffis, Goldsby & Cooper, 2003).

Furthermore, the survey was only available in English, as a result it was directed to English-speaking countries. Finally, the survey was designed to be brief and unobtrusive, with most members able to complete the questionnaire in approximately ten minutes.

Acknowledging these limitations, ideally this survey serves as a starting point to subsequently develop a more robust, in-depth understanding of Slow Food membership's impact on lifestyle and quality of life through formal interviews or focus groups.

Slow Food members' attitudes towards consumption

Generally-speaking, Slow Food members have strong existing attitudes towards what can be considered irresponsible consumption. Fully 96% of respondents agreed that society over-consumes, with 76% in *strong agreement* to the statement. The same proportion (96%) either agreed or strongly agreed that "In general, we need to reduce our level of consumption," while 58% of surveyed members agreed that globalization leads to over-consumption. This contrasts with numerous studies, as well as general perception, that global society has entered into a phase of consumer culture where "The 'conspicuous consumption' of those at the top has been sanctioned by a greater social tolerance of materialistic expressions and an unwillingness to criticise display" (Hamilton, 2003, p.3).

Active engagement regarding consumption also shows itself in members' answers to an open-ended question to define sustainable consumption. Eighty-five percent of respondents elected to answer this question, providing definitions that often aligned with more formal definitions outlined, for example, in *The Oslo Declaration*. These ranged

from “Sustainable consumption is driven by an understanding of how we are connected to others (including other countries and our environment) through our consumption practices” to “Consumption that does not limit the options of future generations.” Many respondents linked sustainable consumption directly to food, and there was a strong underlying current of connecting the act of consuming with both environmental and social impacts. A few respondents also took opportunity to point out their concern with the concept in general, for example “This is not a term that I would use. I think it could be easily used in greenwashing or defending capitalist globalist objectives.” In general, this high-level of engagement is not surprising considering the motivation required to join a voluntary organization such as Slow Food. In effect, members represent a self-selected group of responsible consumers.

Members see a positive correlation between Slow Food and sustainable consumption. Survey respondents overwhelmingly felt that Slow Food promotes sustainable consumption, but more importantly there was agreement that Slow Food creates transparency of the food supply chain and permits relationship building with suppliers. This, in turn, was seen to promote a healthier lifestyle that allowed members to feel like part of a community. The “co-producer” label espoused by Slow Food’s philosophy is apt. Members are unlikely to see themselves as passive consumers, opting for more active participation in the consumption process, and strongly identify themselves as *more aware* consumers since joining Slow Food (70%). This concept of consumer citizen or *consum’actor* has been explored in the sustainable consumption literature (Latouche, 2007), and is arguably a critical part of the responsible consumption

agenda. Consumers, unlike citizens, typically have no obligations or responsibilities—creating a dangerous disconnect. However, a critical component for creating a climate of sustainable consumption is to instead create a connection that one is the same: “The citizen is also a consumer. Consequently, the consumer is a citizen” (Ibid, p. 179).

Slow Food’s impact on lifestyle and quality of life

1) Slow Food has a positive impact on social capital

This potential was first outlined by Pietrykowski (2004), who found that Slow Food transformed cultural capital to social capital. Similarly, the survey found that three of the most often cited reasons for becoming a member of Slow Food were “to preserve culture,” “to rediscover regional foods and tastes,” and “to be a part of a community.”⁴ An increased focus on social capital is a cornerstone of sustainable development, and Slow Food members clearly seem interested in assimilating the social economy into their consumption decisions. This also follows a new form of consumer ethics, an “intentional duty” where “‘Responsible’ consumers are thus characterized by the awareness of their power to act and the need to regulate it politically and/or to give it a social meaning” (Ruwet, 2007, p. 144).

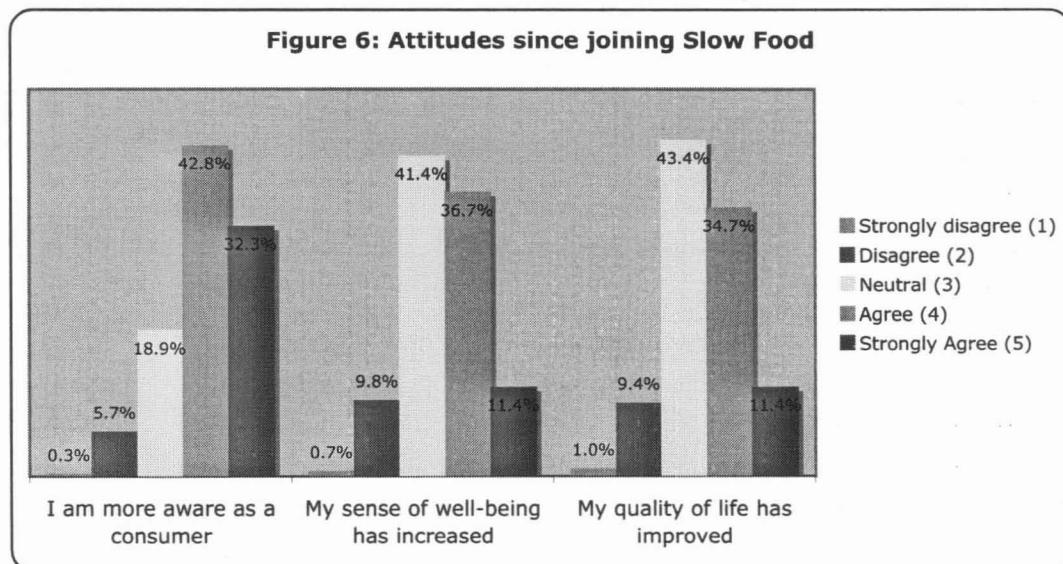
This should provide optimism for proponents of advancing sustainable consumption, indeed “the omnipresence of the social element in consumption gives strong support to the argument that it would be possible to consume less without a loss of

⁴ The third most recorded reason overall was “to make a statement against ‘fast food’.”

welfare” (Lintott, 2007, p. 52). Any attempt to have citizens consume less (barring heavy-handed regulation) will realistically rely on decoupling welfare from materialism.

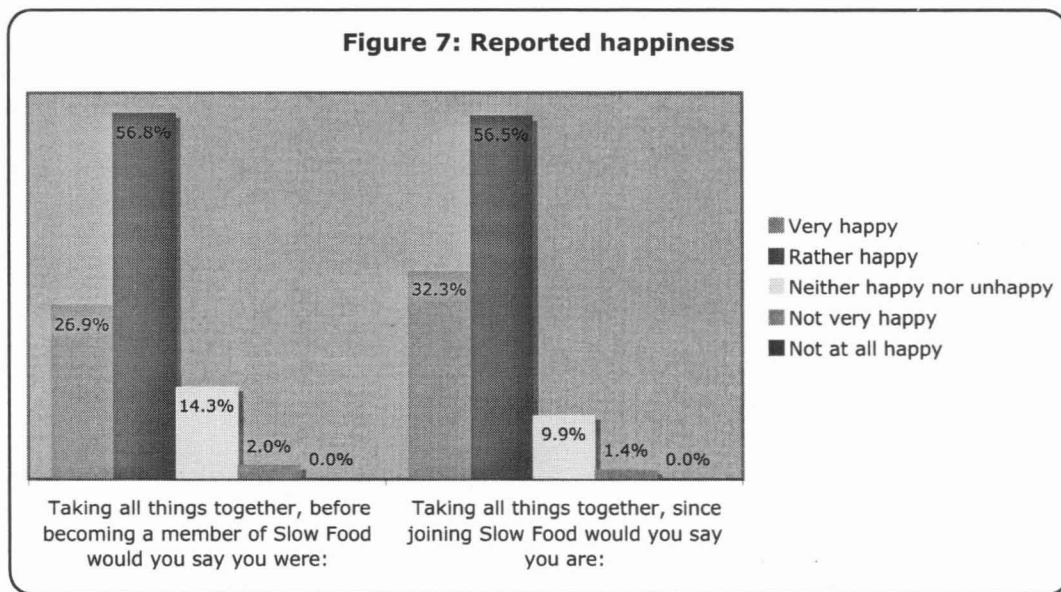
2) *Slow Food has potential to promote increased well-being*

It is a tricky thing to measure happiness, though significant recent research on the topic continues to provide stimulating insight (see, for example Layard, 2005). Though the survey made a cursory foray into happiness, it is beyond the scope of this study to attempt a direct relationship between Slow Food membership and happiness, nor is it particularly advisable, as aptly captured from the following respondent comment: “I would have to say that my happiness has increased since joining slow food, but not necessarily because of Slow Food. Joining SF for me was searching for answers. I have found them in other places. Starting my own convivium has had much more influence on me.” However, overall Slow Food does seem to have a positive impact on members’ well-being, as highlighted in *Figure 6*.



When asked for their agreement on the statement “Since joining Slow Food, my sense of well-being has increased,” 37% of respondents agreed and 11% strongly agreed.

Similarly, 46% agreed or strongly agreed that since joining Slow Food their quality of life had improved. In another question related to happiness and sense of well-being—this time based on the World Happiness Survey model—the survey found a slight increase in reported happiness related to Slow Food membership. Specifically, when asked to report their overall level of happiness pre- and post- joining Slow Food, the response of “rather happy” remained almost constant (57%) while those responding “very happy” increased approximately 5% (*Figure 7*).



What is perhaps more notable, however, are the positive associations Slow Food members displayed with indicators that relate to higher levels of life-satisfaction. A full 80% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that “Slow Food promotes a healthier lifestyle.” As well, 74% of members surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that

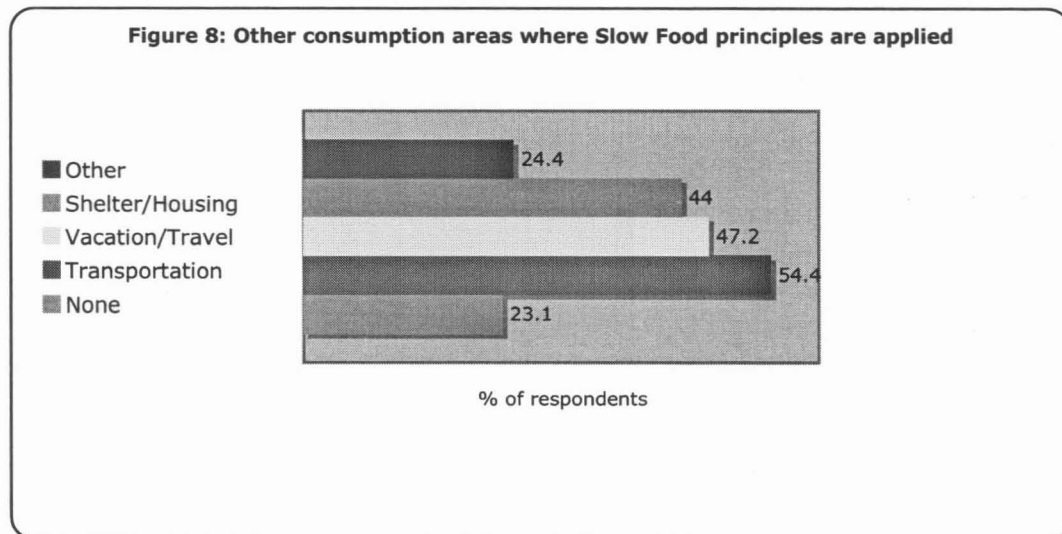
“Slow Food makes me feel like part of a community.” This is encouraging for sustainable consumption overall, as the ability to address the “ultimate question” in today’s industrialized consumer societies, “whether consumerism actually contributes to human welfare and happiness” (Mont & Plepy, 2007, p. 536), will realistically require a two-pronged response. This would be: No, *however* sustainable consumption can contribute to increased well-being, and subsequently be able to follow-up with examples.

3) Sustainable consumption is not just for the wealthy

It has been suggested that sustainable consumption is a guilt reflex of the rich, that only the wealthy can pay heed to such idealistic notions. The Simpsons, perhaps the ultimate barometer for public thought, captured sentiment best when Marge Simpson espoused “We can’t afford to shop at any store that has a philosophy” (The Simpsons, 1996). While working towards sustainable consumption will unquestionably require varying strategies for the developed consumer cultures of industrialized nations and the aspiring consumer classes of developing countries, income level is not criteria for embracing more responsible consumption. Slow Food members come from across the income spectrum. Furthermore, consumers in general seem increasingly willing to spend more for food products from companies that address their concerns about health and the environment (Bonini et al., 2008). Further work to decouple income from well-being will help assuage the attitude that only the wealthy can afford to consume sustainably, as will the mainstreaming of more sustainable practices at popular retailers such as Wal-Mart (Gunther, 2006).

4) “Slow” captivates and has potential to expand

A significant number of Slow Food members have expanded the concept of “slow” beyond food, incorporating the prevailing ethos into other areas of their consumption (Figure 8). Only 23% of those surveyed have not used a similar approach in other areas of their consumption, while 54% try to incorporate “slow” principles into their transportation, 47% in their travel and vacation, and 44% in their housing. A few respondents also included “energy” into their “slow” agenda, and the overarching



sentiment is summed nicely by the following sincere response: “We are working on having a more 'slow' lifestyle in general but food has been the starting place for real change in our lives. We have become more aware of personal products, cleaning products, clothing industry, travel etc. We want to move to a more sustainable approach to consumption in all these areas but have found food the easiest thing to start with.” This is significant for the other accepted priority areas for sustainable consumption—mobility, energy, and housing (Tukker, 2007). It also aligns with the growing interest in a general

“slow” movement, as witnessed through the proliferation of Slow: Slow Design, Slow Homes, Slow Cities (Green, 2008) and first popularized in Honoré’s (2004) international best-selling book *In Praise of Slow*.

The popularity of everything “slow” is not without significance, and offers an interesting example for those working to increase interest in sustainable consumption. This interest holds for all stakeholders: it represents change consumers can grasp; it permits room for business to operate and innovate to meet these evolving consumer demands, and facilitates government interest in developing both healthy industries and communities. As Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of UNEP, explained in a press release, “So we need to look again at how we enlist the public to reduce pollution and live in ways that cause minimal environmental damage. We need to make sustainable life-styles fashionable and 'cool' as young people might say. We also need to make it clear that there are real, personal, benefits to living in harmony with the planet” (UNEP, 2003). This popularized notion for sustainable consumption will no doubt find disagreement with radical proponents of sustainable consumption, but in light of current pervasive consumer culture it is not feasible to dismiss this strategy outright.

LIMITATIONS

Slow Food offers interesting insights into the possibilities of sustainable consumption models; however it is important to also note its potential limitations. First, Slow Food still very much operates as a niche of general society. Its impressive growth is remarkable, however to put things in context the 80,000 members equate to approximately 0.005% of the total global consumer class. So though it is true that “Responsible consumption could, however, achieve much more were it to become more of a mass phenomenon” (Gesualdi, 2005, p. 101), the tipping point is not yet in sight. However, only revolutionaries—or doomsayers—see sustainable consumption as a short-term issue; in fact the recently developed *Framework for policy and action for Sustainable Consumption and Production* clearly envisions short-term, medium-term, and long-term impacts for coordinating a systemic perspective on the sustainable consumption challenge (Tukker et al., 2007, p. 6). Slow Food fits into the short term-impact time horizon, in which citizen consumers can “exercise sustainable choice” and “articulate and encourage sustainable meta-values” (Ibid). What is now required is for government, in conjunction with business and NGOs, to embrace the capacity and environment for sustainable consumption to become a workable model for the future.

Second, assuming a model such as Slow Food could go mainstream and alter global consumer attitudes and patterns, there is the remaining question of just how scalable the related production can be. This would imply a transition from a more product-based material culture to that of service substitution, although it is noted that the “main research gaps seem to be in understanding the environmental impacts of alternative

consumption systems based on product to service substitution (Mont & Plepys, 2007, p. 536). Can the co-producer–producer relationship sustain nine billion people by the year 2050? Interestingly, this idea may be explored by the recent opening of Eatery, a 30,000 square foot supermarket in Torino, Italy supported by Slow Food and showcasing products from more than 900 Italian artisan producers (a smaller Eatery store is planned to open in New York the Spring 2008) (Kummer, 2007). As well, the burgeoning movements in Slow Homes, Slow Travel, and Slow Cities may help show just how scalable the concept of “slow” is for sustainable consumption.

Third, voluntary organizations will not alone achieve sustainable consumption. It is widely understood that policymakers must be involved in the process of change towards more sustainable consumption (Zaccai, 2007). Ideally consumer-driven initiatives such as Slow Food can serve a lesson in showing policymakers that sustainable consumption can have positive impacts on quality of life. Furthermore, it does not hurt that a number of businesses are entering the sustainable consumption conversation, notably Tesco CEO Sir Terry Leahy who claimed that “The green movement must become a mass movement in green consumption” while announcing five-year, £25 million (\$50 million) funding for the new Sustainable Consumption Institute at the University of Manchester (Leahy, 2007). It is not quite discussion of reducing consumption, a pillar of sustainable consumption, but bold nonetheless.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Clearly, there is much work left in moving towards true sustainable consumption and production. A crucial aspect of the implementation agenda relies on “Gathering credible evidence of how consumption and production systems can be organized more efficiently in providing quality of life, [and] showing inspiring examples of alternative ways of doing things” (Tukker et al., 2007, p. 5). Through examining Slow Food, this paper highlights one such existing example, in order to advance knowledge on the impacts of sustainable consumption choices on lifestyle and quality of life. The results are encouraging, as there appears to be a positive relationship between more sustainable consumption patterns and increased well-being.

The ramifications are important for all stakeholders. For consumers, this highlights the potential for increasing welfare by becoming active consumers, harnessing social and ecological capital through their stake as consumer citizens. Clearly there is another path to increased welfare than attempting to keep up with the “Joneses.” Governments should similarly see this as a cue that engagement with consumption issues and boldness with sustainable consumption policy is warranted and can have a positive impact with their citizens, as well as taking the opportunity to educate the populace in regards to the benefits of more responsible consumption. Likewise, non-governmental organizations can also arrange their outreach efforts to champion the positive lifestyle associations connected with responsible consumption, as well as exploring potential collaborations with business, for within a sustainable consumption framework innovative

business will find new market opportunities and possibilities for developing alternative service solutions.

While this represents a scenario receptive to sustainable consumption, admittedly the real world situation is significantly different and removed. However, the conversation on *how* a consumer's decision to make sustainable consumption choices impacts their quality of life has begun. This dialogue is critical to continue in order to work towards action and implementation of sustainable consumption.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Slow Food Member Survey

A) DEMOGRAPHIC INFO

1. Are you a member of Slow Food?

Yes No

2. How long have you been a member?

Not a member

<1 year 1-2 years 3-4 years 4-5 years >5 years

3. What Slow Food *convivia* are you a member of? (optional)

Not a member

Text answer

4. What country do you live in?

Text answer

5. What is your age?

<=20 21-25 26-30 31-35 36-40 41-45 46-50 >50

6. What is your household income? (optional)

<\$30,000 \$30-50,000 \$50,001-75,000 \$75,001-\$100,000 >\$100,000

B) GENERAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS CONSUMPTION

7. On a scale of 1-5, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

My society overconsumes:

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

8. On a scale of 1-5, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Globalization leads to overconsumption:

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

9. On a scale of 1-5, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

In general, we need to reduce our level of consumption

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

10. How do you define sustainable consumption? (optional)

Text answer

C) RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SLOW FOOD, SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION,
AND IMPACT ON QUALITY OF LIFE

11. Why did you become a member of Slow Food?

I am not a member (skip to Q24)

Check all that apply:

To eat healthier

To rediscover regional foods and tastes

To preserve culture

To be part of a community

To ensure food producers receive fair compensation

To make a statement against “fast food”

Other, please specify

For questions 12-19, on a scale of 1-5, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

12. Since joining Slow Food, I am more aware as a consumer:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

13. Since joining Slow Food, my sense of well-being has increased:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

14. Since joining Slow Food, my quality of life has improved:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

15. Slow Food promotes sustainable consumption

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

16. Slow Food promotes a healthier lifestyle:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

17. Slow Food creates transparency of the food supply chain:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

18. Slow Food has allowed me to develop relationships with producers:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

19. Slow Food makes me feel like part of a community:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

20. The Slow Food model can be expanded to other areas of our lives:

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

21. I follow Slow Food principles in other aspects of my consumption:

No

Yes, check all that apply:

Transportation

Travel

Housing

Other, please specify

D) CONCLUSION

22. Taking all things together, before becoming a member of Slow Food would you say you were:

Very happy

Rather happy

Neither happier nor unhappier

Not very happy

Not at all happy

23. Taking all things together, since joining Slow Food would you say you are:

Very happy

Rather happy

Neither happier nor unhappier

Not very happy

Not at all happy

24. Please use this space to add any additional comments you may have on the Slow Food movement or sustainable consumption.

Open-ended text

Thank you very much for your contribution to this study!