Confronting Consumption - Undergraduate Thesis

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Confronting Consumption: Drivers of Undergraduate Consumption Habits at Western Washington University

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Tera Ziemer

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Tera Ziemer

DATE:  _______________________________________________

June 8, 2023
Confronting Consumption:

Drivers of Undergraduate Consumption Habits at Western Washington University

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June 4, 2023
Abstract

This undergraduate thesis examines the factors driving personal consumption among students at Western Washington University and how their positioning within a larger community context influences thoughts, behaviors and feelings surrounding consumption. The research employs qualitative methods to tap into the subtleties and nuances of consumption as a personal act informed by one’s social context. Fifteen interviews were conducted with students at WWU in Spring 2023 to explore the relationship between values, action, and consumption patterns within the community. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: the Values Actions Gap, Conspicuous Sustainability, and Consuming Green to Consume Less. Despite expressing a strong desire to be sustainable, students often prioritize convenience and affordability over sustainability. The culture of environmentalism at WWU leads students to feel the need to appear outwardly sustainable, resulting in performative behaviors. Outdoor recreation, a significant part of campus culture, contributes to unsustainable consumption patterns, as students prioritize outdoor gear and transportation for activities, at the expense of sustainability. This thesis highlights the emphasis on individual action as a solution to climate change which promotes the belief that student’s purchasing power is the key to being sustainable. This individualization of responsibility overlooks the structural forces that drive unsustainable practices within a capitalist society. By focusing on consumption patterns at a university level, this research offers insights into the complexities of personal consumption and its connections to broader social and environmental issues. It suggests the need to move beyond individual actions and address the systemic factors to effectively tackle overconsumption and promote sustainable behaviors.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 2

Acknowledgement ........................................................................................................ 3

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 5

Background ................................................................................................................... 8

Methodology ................................................................................................................ 10

Limitations ................................................................................................................... 12

Figure 1 ....................................................................................................................... 13

Results ......................................................................................................................... 14

Impulsive Consumption ............................................................................................... 14

Sustainable Consumption in the Future ....................................................................... 16

Money .......................................................................................................................... 17

WWU Culture ................................................................................................................. 18

Knowledge as Limiting Factor .................................................................................. 21

Prioritizing Convenience ............................................................................................ 22

The Paradox of Outdoor Recreation .......................................................................... 23

Discussion .................................................................................................................... 25

Values Actions Gap ..................................................................................................... 25

Conspicuous Sustainability ......................................................................................... 27

Consuming Green to Consume Less .......................................................................... 29

Conclusion ................................................................................................................... 30

Works Cited ................................................................................................................ 33

Appendix ...................................................................................................................... 38
Introduction

“If consumption is self-evidently a major driver of environmental change, consumption itself is not self-evident” (Conca, Maniates, Princen, 2002, p. ix).

Following the Industrial revolution in the late 1700s, resource consumption among the world’s wealthiest countries has grown exponentially causing far reaching social and environmental consequences, including climate change driven by carbon emissions. As profligate consumers, Americans emit the "equivalent to those of four Chinese, 20 Indians, or 250 Ethiopians” (Pearce, 2015). According to Wikipedia, consumption is defined as “the act of using resources to satisfy current wants and needs” (Bannock & Baxter, 2003). While it may be easy to distinguish between wants and needs broadly, this statistic suggests that people in different countries may have incompatible definitions of needs. Historically, population is often cited as the main driver of environmental problems, yet 80 percent of the world’s natural resources are used by 20 percent of the population (Impact Investor, n.d.). Unfortunately, it is often those who consume the least that are most affected by the impacts of consumption (Dorniger et al, 2021). While the problem of consumption has become more mainstream in the last decade, calls for green products and more recycling have become the most cited solution (Princen, Maniates, and Konca, 2002). When such a small percentage of the population consumes majority of Earth’s resources, it becomes clear that more recycling will not solve the problem. Tacking an issue like overconsumption may seem both daunting and impossible when addressed broadly therefore I have chosen to explore consumption on a smaller scale, within Western Washington University (WWU).
My research started with a simple question: What factors drive personal consumption (both sustainable and overconsumption) amongst students at WWU and how does one’s positioning within the larger context of community influence behaviors, thoughts and feelings surrounding consumption?

Previous literature on personal consumption has generally used quantitative methods (Capiene et al, 2022; Manetti et al, 2004) seeking to generalize behaviors (Butler et al, 2016) across larger populations (Newton and Meyer, 2013). While this method can be useful to make stable yet broad sweeping statements, it can fail to address latent factors that influence consumption at a smaller scale. Because consumption is both a personal act and informed by one’s social context, qualitative methods are best positioned to tap into the subtleties and nuances it produces.

In Spring 2023, I interviewed fifteen students at WWU in order to examine the relationship between values, actions and consumption patterns within the context of community. The results of these interviews provide valuable insights into the factors influencing student consumption patterns highlighting the importance of price, campus culture, convenience, and knowledge. After noting connections between previous literature and broader abstract concepts, three major themes emerged, (1) Values-Actions Gap (2) Conspicuous Sustainability (3) Consuming Green to Consume Less. While students express a strong desire to be sustainable, their actions often prioritize convenience and affordability over sustainability. Additionally, because of a culture of environmentalism at WWU, students feel to appear outwardly sustainable leading to performative behaviors. Outdoor recreation, a significant part of the culture at WWU, also contributes to unsustainable consumption patterns, as students prioritize outdoor gear and
transport to places to recreate, even at the expense of sustainability. Ultimately, the emphasis on individual action as a solution to climate change leads students to believe that green consumption is the key to being sustainable. The capitalist society in which we live promotes an individualization of responsibility that overlooks the issue of overconsumption and the structural forces that drive unsustainable practices.

The subsequent sections of this thesis explore the literature, methods, results and discussions in detail.
Background

The importance of understanding drivers of consumption amongst young people is immense (Kadic-Maglajlic et al, 2019; Shaver and Yan, 2022; Young et al, 2010). Environmental and social issues relating to climate change and degradation have become increasingly salient for young people as they will inherit the world along with “the potential deterioration of the social and ecological environments being handed down to them by future generations” (Kadic-Maglajlic et al, 2019, p. 644). While consumption amongst the world richest countries has finally been recognized as being responsible for environmental change and degradation, many of the proposed solutions such as funding new technology and “green consumption” fail to address the root of the problem (Princen, Maniates, and Conca, 2002). While large scale changes are needed to impact future outcomes, I have chosen to center my focus on the drivers of student consumption within the context of WWU.

Despite the existence of a large body of knowledge focused on consumption from an environmental perspective, I have noticed a lack of research that is 1) qualitative, 2) centered on young adults, and 3) informed by the influence of community and place. Centering my research on these three details will introduce a case study that is theoretically informed by previous scholarship yet also grounded in the specific contexts and experiences of WWU students.

Existing research on consumption is primarily informed by quantitative methods (Capiene et al, 2022; Manetti et al, 2004) across large populations (Newton and Meyer, 2013) seeking to generalize behavioral choices (Butler et al, 2016). This methodology can be useful when trying to make reliable statements across a larger population however, this approach overlooks the advantages of qualitative methods in which the interviewer can explore latent factors influencing consumption that may otherwise be missed by Likert-style surveying.
methods. While there have been studies that sample college students (Emanuel and Adams, 2011) and young people (Kymalainen et al, 2021), they have both focused exclusively on sustainable consumption and neglected to address the factors influencing overconsumption. Additionally, previous studies have generally centered on the influences of global networks (Shaver & Yan, 2022). To address this gap in the research, I will concentrate on localized experiences and build off the existing research on the role of community engagement in personal consumption (Kadic-Maglajic et al, 2019).

Ultimately guided by previous research as well as my own personal positioning as a student at WWU, I set out to better understand the variety of factors driving personal consumption and ultimately, how these factors compare from person to person within the broader context of community at Western Washington University.
Methodology

This thesis is centered on the responses of fifteen semi-structured student interviews conducted during Winter term 2023. Students from a range of majors were offered a cash incentive to complete a 20-minute interview regarding their own personal consumption habits and explanations for those habits. These interviews were conducted over the course of two months and were guided by the same set of interview questions to allow for comparison. Despite this, the semi-structured approach of each interview allowed for flexibility and resulted in genuine and in-depth conversations with each of the students. The interview guide was informed by both quantitative and qualitative studies in the existing literature (Young et al, 2010; Shaver and Yan, 2022; Newton and Meyer, 2013; Kadic-Maglajlic et al, 2019; Kymalainen et al, 2021). In the case of quantitative studies, I developed interview questions out of Likert-style surveys and for qualitative studies, I reworked the wording of certain questions to encourage open ended conversations. When choosing the flow of the interview, I designed the order to insure that students would not be prompted about sustainability or ethics until after they had talked about personal consumption habits, unless they mentioned it on their own.

The interviews were split into three main sections: (1) Consumption (2) Environmental Attitudes and Values and (3) Outside Influences. In the consumption section, students were initially asked to describe in detail a recent purchase that was outside of their normal daily purchases (Young et al, 2010). They were then asked about more general consumption habits in categories of food, water, transportation, clothing, and at home use. In the Environmental Attitudes and Values section, students were asked questions about their awareness of climate change as well as sustainability in general. Lastly, students were prompted to discuss outside influences within their community at WWU that impacted personal consumption.
After researching existing studies on personal consumption from an environmental perspective, I decided that a qualitative design involving “understanding people from their own frames of reference” was best suited to my research objectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Given my positioning as a student in the same context as my interviewees and knowing that this study would not be generalizable nor representative, I chose to approach the process as an exploration rather than attempting to find a generalizable answer. Leaning on the concept that research can never truly be free of values (Gouldner 1971), I utilized my proximity to interviewees to facilitate genuine and honest conversations. It is important to note that students were not given any definitions of sustainability, climate change, or parameters of an environmentally friendly lifestyle. Instead, each student answered the questions based on their own working definition of these terms.

After compiling a transcription of each of the fifteen interviews using online software, I read and re-read the responses multiple times to draw out any patterns by noting sections of the text relating to previous literature as well as other respondents. I began organizing the responses by tagging them into codes generated by using phrases from the respondents. This process involved re-reading and organizing the text as I developed new codes and continued to find connections to previous literature. After revisiting the coded passages to look for similarities and abstract themes across the responses, I expanded and grouped the more detailed codes into higher-order analytical categories (Saldana, 2009). The whole process of analysis outside of transcription was done by hand, without the use of software.
Limitations

When choosing students to interview, I attempted to work across a diverse range of students and avoid any overlap in majors. While I was able to interview students from 15 different majors (Figure 1), there were limitations in choosing a diverse range of students therefore majority of the students I interviewed were upperclassmen who lived off campus. Additionally, time constraints for completing this thesis impacted the diversity of my sample group. Many of my decisions regarding who to interview were based on practicality therefore majority of interviewees were close friends or acquaintances. Despite this limitation, I believe that the use of qualitative methodology lends itself to in depth interviews therefore my pre-existing comfortability with interviewees allowed for nuanced and honest conversations. Ultimately, there is an opportunity project to extend the research using the framework established.

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*Figure 1: Age and Major of Student Interviewees*
Results

In this section, I have thematically classified comments from 15 semi-structured interviews completed with WWU Students. The comments deal with factors and influences surrounding consumption, on a smaller scale of student’s daily lives, and describe campus culture. I have broken down comments from each of the interviews into first order categorical themes each delineated by a representative quote in bold. The themes are also numbered with a shorthand name in brackets to facilitate discussion in the following sections.

(1) Impulsive consumption

“I feel like because we aren’t paying for it, we consume more because it doesn’t really affect us.”

One of the main focuses of every interview I completed with students was money. When asked about their general consumption in the categories of food, clothing, transportation, and residential use, a majority of interviewees were concerned with price and expense. Interestingly, when the price or expense of something was small or non-existent, as in the case of the above comment, interviewees were more likely to consume more and feel less guilty about it. This concept came up multiple times in the categories of clothing and food but was most prominent in the category of residential use as well as transportation. Students who lived in the dorms commented that they consumed at home with little to no thought at all because they weren’t paying for it. Another student whose landlord covered the water bill confessed to being unaware of how much they consumed or spent on water each month.

“We always keep the heater on pretty high, and we take really long showers.”
“We probably consume a lot of water because we don’t pay for it.”

“Gas needs to be $6.50 a gallon, and then you’re walking to Baker [Mt. Baker Ski Area].”

Similarly, when students were asked about their consumption in the category of clothing and other general items, many mentioned putting less thought into smaller or less expensive purchases. Students also commented on the instant gratification mentioning the “adrenaline”, “anticipation” and “satisfaction” that purchasing these items brought as well as a “why not mentality” when it came to cheaper purchases.

“I spoil myself every once in a while. At Shein, they literally have stuff for $3, why would I not?”

“If I like a cute shirt, I’m gonna buy it.”

“The act of buying and the thrill of going through and spending the money is more rewarding than actually getting it sometimes.”

“I’m pretty impulsive, I just kind of buy it.”

Another big factor influencing impulsive consumption amongst students is “wanting” something as opposed to needing something. Students commented on being influenced by trends and were more likely to impulsively consume and put less thought into the purchase when the item was wanted instead of needed.

“It’s not just that I didn’t like my air-pods, but I wanted something else”

“I like to look at what’s trending at the moment.”
To reiterate, when items are smaller, less expensive, or money is not an issue, students are more likely to impulsively consume at a frequency, regardless of the category.

(2) Sustainable Consumption in the Future

“Once I have more control of where I’m living and my job and money that I have, I will try to make it better for the planet.”

While the section above focuses on student consumption when expense is not an issue, this section highlights the role of expense as a limiting factor in sustainable consumption for students. As reiterated above, expense was the most mentioned topic of each of the 15 interviews I conducted. Students expressed guilt about being unable to shop locally for food or take steps at home to decrease energy consumption like installing solar panels or double paned windows. Students commented on structural factors such as an inability to afford an energy efficient home or an electric car as something that in the future could be fixed with more money therefore autonomy in choosing how and what to consume. In other words, students associate wealth with ownership ensuing control over choice.

“If I had money, I would shop local, and use less plastic with the food I buy.”

“I would love to buy all my stuff from the co-op or the farmers market but I honestly think there would be no way I could and not feel like I just spent all my money.”

“A place like Whole Foods, is way more pricey than Fred’s.”

“I hate it, but money is part of it. If we could put solar panels on this house, and double pane windows, but we can’t because we’re renting.”

“My dream is to live off of sustainable energy and have solar panels, but I rent so I can’t do that.”
“I can save up and get an electric car, but that’s not in the near future.”

When asked whether individuals could make a difference in slowing climate change, every interviewee responded with a yes of some kind. This response emphasizes a focus on individual agency and personal choice as affecting the environment and sustainability. This belief in individual agency also explains why students focus largely on their ability to spend money to support environmental causes. For these students, agency refers more to the freedom to spend money than to any specific action or behavioral change. While some students mentioned larger corporations as being the largest consumers and a big part of the problem, they were also quick to emphasize the role of the individual in creating change.

(3) Money

“it’s because of money, not because of anything else.”

While some students expressed expense as being one of the limiting factors affecting their ability to consume sustainably, most students emphasized expense rather than sustainability as influencing decisions surrounding consumption. In the categories of clothing, food and residential use, students reiterated expense as their main influence. In the category of clothing, even when prompted whether sustainability plays a role in purchasing second hand, six students cited expense over anything else.

“I don’t really do it because it’s sustainable, I do it because it’s cheaper.”

“I’m not super inclined to just buy a ton of stuff because I know it’s not great, but I don’t think sustainability is the biggest role in why I purchase clothing.”
“When I’m clothing shopping, I just go off of whatever’s cheapest.”

The same thing was true for food and at home residential consumption; majority of students are more concerned with expense than sustainability especially in the present, despite some students’ goals to consume more sustainably in the future.

“If I’m going to the grocery store, it’s whatever’s cheapest.”

“First, it’s price.”

“The biggest thing is always price.”

“There’s no need to be consuming extra energy because we are the ones who are paying for it.”

“I’ve been really mindful about water and electricity because our house doesn’t insulate well and just more mindful of how expensive it is.”

Ultimately, money is the most important factor for many students I interviewed. This means that even when students are aware of their consumption and attempting to limit any excess, it is most often expense that is driving their behavior.

(4) WWU Culture

“Nothing like a good bit of shaming to really make you step up your game.”

When asked about the role that community plays in influencing consumption at WWU, many students emphasized a general culture of environmentalism on campus. Several responses commented on the pressure and influence that this culture brings about as well as the guilt and
shame of not being visibly sustainable. Many students expressed that shame had been successful in motivating them to be more sustainably as well as a desire to fit into a general trend of sustainable. One student admitted to “being performative at times” while another emphasized the “greenwashing” that was taking place amongst students and on campus.

“Western has a really environmentally friendly culture.”

“It’s trendy to be environmentally friendly.”

“Western is much more environmentally friendly than when I was living in LA where there’s smog and trash everywhere and it’s just dirty.”

“Even though it’s greenwashing essentially, it’s the culture.”

“Fuck you, you’re using a plastic water bottle, like you’re killing the earth, and you’re like oh, I feel bad about myself, I’m gonna go get my fancy water bottle.”

Students also commented on the role of peers in encouraging them to consume less. Students that mentioned a lack of awareness relating to sustainable consumption before attending WWU emphasized how influential witnessing fellow student’s lifestyles had been in encouraging them to be more environmentally friendly.

“Growing up in Palmer, which is a very hick town, we didn’t recycle so I’ve been learning how to be environmentally friendly since moving up here.”

“My family doesn’t recycle and in school and back home it was all thrown in the same place but when I came to Western, I realized how different it was.”

“I see a lot of people live their lives out here and it makes me think about thrifting and eating healthy.”
When asked whether students had been encouraged to consume less in their education, responses were widely spread based on major of study. The single student majoring in Business and Sustainability commented on learning about consumption in many of the classes she had taken however responses from students in other majors were different. Several students mentioned taking a class through the College of the Environment as their only introduction environmentalism or sustainability in general as well as having to “seek out” classes or experiences in this realm. While many of the students did take a class, they commented on a lack of tangible lessons or lifestyle changes they could be doing. Interestingly, a student studying kinesiology emphasized the complete lack of focus on anything environmentally related and instead mentioned that it encourages the opposite or in a lot of ways to consume more.

“The faculty I’ve encountered that have helped or brought awareness of sustainable of ethical practices have all been outside of my major and I’ve had to seek that out.”

“No physics professors really talked about sustainability, but I’ve taken some environmental issues classes that were definitely eye opening on certain issues of consumption.”

“I took a managing environmental commons class and we talked a lot about sustainability in a broader sense but I don’t think I’ve learned a valuable lesson from anyone here specifically.”

“Professors seem very earthy, they aren’t encouraging the opposite I guess.”

In general, all students noted a culture of environmentalism at WWU however responses between the degree to which the community influenced personal consumption varied. Some students were highly influenced to consume less however others noted greenwashing, or performative behavior.
(5) Knowledge as Limiting Factor

“Very aware. I'm not as knowledgeable as I know many people are. But it's something I'm conscious about.”

When asked about their current awareness or focus on climate change, majority of students had a similar answer to the one above. Students are very aware of climate change and the seriousness of the situation, yet many students emphasized a lack of knowledge or nuanced understanding of the situation. Similarly, many students commented on struggling to know what changes they could be making to limit their consumption that would also fit into their lifestyle. Several students mentioned feeling overwhelmed and jaded by all the “green” options at the store while others mentioned not knowing which companies to trust.

“I would say my current awareness is more based locally than it is internationally. I feel like I will read like local news or just hear things in the outdoor community about like river health.”

“Very aware, and I do think about it with the things I do and other people do.”

“I don’t have full knowledge of what I could be doing that would actually fit in my lifestyle.”

“Just knowing resources, like a more easily digestible list of things you could do to make your life more sustainable and ethical.”

“I often go to the grocery store and everything says its green and good for the government but I don’t really know what actually is because obviously everything’s not actually good.”

“Lack of resources like knowing which companies and businesses to trust, I don’t have a good list of companies that are ethical and sustainable.”
While all students are highly aware of climate change, a select few mentioned knowledge as a limiting factor. In other words, students may be highly knowledgeable of the problem of overconsumption and climate change yet lack knowledge of possible solutions or actions.

**(6) Prioritizing Convenience**

“I think my largest focus on climate change is with my vote, I don’t think about it much day to day.”

While all fifteen students who were interviewed said they were very aware of climate change, several students admitted that it was not on their mind on a daily basis. In other words, they were aware of the seriousness of climate change on a large scale but in their daily lives, they did not often think about it.

“I don't like seek out every, like, changing facet of how climate change is evolving on a regular basis, but it usually will just come to me in the form of like, you know, articles that are recommended on Twitter or stuff that my mom sends me stuff like that.

“I’m not gonna throw trash on the floor, you know or stuff like that. Like I think I do my part, I just don’t go out of my way.”

Similarly, several students mentioned prioritizing ease instead of sustainability when it comes to their own personal consumption. Alongside this, students also admitted that they were often “lazy” and more likely to choose the convenient option whenever possible. Some attributed this to their busy lives but other cited privilege as the reason for not having to think about climate change or overconsumption daily.
“More convenient to drive so I’ll probably do that to the grocery store.”

“It’s hard to think about sustainability with consumption just because grocery stores are so convenient.”

“I feel like I get pretty lazy, and so I’m just like, this is available so I’m just gonna use this.”

“The easy way out is like a little worse for the environment but cheaper.”

“Laziness but also privilege of not having to think about the things that don’t affect me very much.”

Despite a few students mentioning knowledge as being a limiting factor in consuming more sustainably, a large number mentioned prioritizing ease and convenience over anything else.

(7) The Paradox of Outdoor Recreation

“I think there’s definitely a lot of outdoor activities we do that can have a lot of negative impacts on the environment. They can breed positive outlooks and encourage you to help the environment but at the same time, that can be detrimental to it as well.”

Many of the students interviewed cited outdoor recreation as being one of their main sources of consumption. The community at WWU has a culture of outdoor recreation because of its proximity to a wide variety of places to recreate. Many students choose to attend WWU for this reason therefore, it influences many of the decisions that students make and is related to consumption. Eight of the fifteen students I interviewed, each from different majors, mentioned outdoor gear in some manner. Outside of gear, students also commented on it being their main reason for driving therefore gas consumption. Three students also admitted that if they had the means, they would most likely purchase more gear than they currently need to participate.
“I enjoy going skiing and that requires me to drive 100 miles three times a week.”

“We need to get paddle boards so we can do something other than running and hiking around together this summer.”

“I think if I had the means to buy some of the newer outdoor gear, I think I would.”

“Wanting to do winter recreation and needing better gear to do it.”

“What to do in the outdoor recreation sphere because I think that’s definitely where I spend the most money”

“It’s a passion thing, like I wouldn’t spend that much money on something unless I was really into it and really passionate about it.”

While none of the students I interviewed mentioned making any changes to their current consumption in outdoor recreation, they did comment on feeling guilty about it.

“Unfortunately, a lot of the things I like doing requires a lot of driving and I feel bad about that, I still do it but I feel bad”

I think my gas consumption is one thing that I actually feel pretty guilty about,”

“Guilty because I know what it could be, I’m pretty conscious that I’m not where I should be.”

For several students, their main source of consumption is driven by outdoor recreation and yet also, in many cases, offers connection and drives them to protect the environment. This dichotomy is the source of guilt for many students however, they are unlikely to make any behavioral changes.
Discussion

The following section discusses the results of the interviews as well as connections to pre-existing literature. The seven first-order themes introduced above have been grouped into three larger abstract categories. I will use the number as well as the shorthand names from the results to call on each of the previous categories.

Values - Actions Gap

Drawing on sections (5) Knowledge as a Limiting Factor and (6) Prioritizing Convenience, I investigate the discrepancy between awareness and behavior amongst students at WWU.

While Mannetti et al (2004) found a significant connection between personal identity and behavior in terms of recycling, student responses indicate the link between intent and action may be more ambiguous. As noted in sections (5) and (6), when asked about their current awareness or focus on climate change, each student adamantly responded that they were both focused and aware. Despite this awareness, students also admitted to regularly over-consuming without sustainability in mind. While students noted specific examples such as recycling or finding brands that align with their values, the general trend of students’ responses involved convenience, knowledge, and expense as being the main influences on their consumption habits. Referencing Newton and Meyer (2013), the gap between values and action can be attributed to “a set of barriers, constraints or situations” that can be psychological, social, or structural. (Newton and Meyer, 2013, p. 1217). Newton and Meyer (2013) identified similar constraints, (1) information shortage/access, (2) time constraints (level of priority) (3) financial (4) organizational challenges which each affected constituents’ actions despite any existing intent. In
the case of my research, expense represents a structural barrier that limits students’ perceived ability to consume sustainably. Additionally, a lack of knowledge may be structural in nature yet varied responses paint a more complicated picture.

Students’ responses surrounding awareness, knowledge and sustainability typically fall into one of two camps: either citing knowledge as a limiting factor or prioritizing ease and convenience over sustainability. While both camps indicate a value - actions gap, the perceived barriers or constraints are very different. In the cases where students cite knowledge as a barrier to consuming sustainably, they reported feeling overwhelmed by too many choices as well as being unsure of tangible changes they could be making in their lifestyle. This situation indicates an attempt to change their behavior yet feeling unsure of exactly how to make changes. Interestingly, studies have found that detailed technical knowledge of environmental issues does not always correspond to pro-environmental behavior (Diekmann & Preisendoerfer 1992, Fliegenschnee & Schelakovsky 1998). Comparatively, students who prioritize ease over sustainability admitted to knowing the behavioral changes they could be making but choose not to. Using concepts in Kolmuss & Aygeman (2010), awareness of climate change and a desire to consume sustainably are primary motives which are often overshadowed by selective motives which influence one specific action, in this case, prioritizing ease (Kolmuss & Aygeman, 2010). Student’s responses citing laziness, lack of time, convenience all represent selective motives and are connected to one’s needs (saving money and time, comfort) therefore are more influential in the short term. Additionally, rationalizing overconsumption is often impacted by the idea that costs accrue later and are often realized elsewhere whereas benefits are realized locally and immediately. In other words students typically benefit from overconsumption immediately
whereas the ethical and environmental cost of these choices are felt elsewhere and are often not even realized.

**Conspicuous Sustainability**

Drawing on sections (1) Impulsive Consumption (3) Money (4) WWU Culture and (7) The Paradox of Outdoor Recreation, I investigate the impact of community engagement at WWU on personal consumption amongst students.

Existing studies on personal consumption generally seek to understand the influence of global networks across large populations. In comparison, I wanted to better understand the role of community engagement in influencing everyday consumption within a localized network. Due to its size and location as relatively isolated in Northwest Washington, there is a distinct community within WWU which is influenced by the city of Bellingham. In order to better tap into the role of community, students were prompted to discuss any outside influences within their community at WWU that affect consumption patterns. This section of interview was particularly robust as each of the students was uniquely tapped into the community in different ways yet also reported many of the same feelings and opinions.

Majority of the students commented on the existence of a unique culture of environmentalism at WWU. While some of the students originally from larger urban areas cited similar cultures in other cities, many students emphasized the uniqueness of WWU in the context of sustainability and the environment. While this may not be surprising given the existence of the College of the Environment at WWU as well as its proximity to water, mountains, and forest, I was surprised to learn that many students found this culture to be performative. Students commented on feeling pressured to appear sustainable in the fear of being shamed. While the culture at WWU may appear to be sustainable, many students admitted to not consuming
sustainably (by their own definitions). Alongside this, students are often aware that their consumption was unsustainable yet to fit in and avoid shame, they prioritize appearing sustainable. As noted in the sections (1) and (3), expense is the most influential driver of consumption yet due to outside pressures within the community and their peers, students attempt to maintain an outside appearance of greenness. Students consistently consumed more impulsively and at a higher rate when cost was lower yet when asked whether their lifestyle was environmentally friendly, many answered yes.

Another unique influence on WWU’s culture is outdoor recreation. As mentioned above, its relative proximity to world class mountain biking, snowboarding, and skiing, hiking, backpacking, swimming, and paddling makes it a popular destination for students who have a passion for recreating outdoors. Outdoor recreation and environmentalism often go hand in hand. Many initiatives to protect or preserve natural spaces are often championed by recreationalists who prioritize future access to these spaces. For example, in 2022, outdoor brand Patagonia’s owner Yvon Chouinard gave his $3 billion dollar company to a specially designed trust and nonprofit organization to help slow climate change (Gelles, 2022). Despite a desire to protect or preserve the outdoors, recreationalists are caught in a paradox where the very gear and garments they consume “destroys the very nature they are dependent on for their experiences” (Johansson, 2015). Additionally, the act of accessing outdoor spaces, especially nature far away, is dependent on transit. Often, because spaces far away are coveted, sought after, and more “wild”, the consumption cost of transit is higher for these experiences.

I discovered a similar ethos among students I interviewed; though they were very aware of climate change and even prioritized sustainable consumption in other aspects of their life, outdoor recreation was their main driver of consumption. Even in situations when students were
wary of spending money, they were often more lenient or impulsive when it came to outdoor gear. Interestingly, several students noted the environmental impacts of gas consumption to access outdoor spaces but failed to address consumption in terms of outdoor gear. Students also mentioned desires to “upgrade their gear” as well as using passion to justify their consumption. It is also important to note that several students mentioned feeling guilty about their consumption yet admitted that they would not change their behavior. Students were able to rationalize their behavior, largely because of a perceived connection between outdoor recreation and the preservation of the environment.

Ultimately, due to WWU reputation and culture of being environmentally friendly, students feel pressure to appear sustainable in order to fit in. This culture is also perpetuated by a high concentration of outdoor recreationalists who champion environmental protection yet consume large amounts to access outdoor spaces as well as gear needed to participate.

**Consuming Green to Consume Less?**

Drawing on section (2) Sustainable Consumption in the Future as well as more general student responses regarding sustainable consumption, I investigate the emphasis on individual action as a solution to climate change.

As noted in section (2) when asked whether an individual can make a difference in slowing the effects of climate change, every individual responded with a yes of some kind. While the responses were varied in the degree to which an individual can make a change, every student emphasized the importance of individual action. In the same vein, many students cited expense as a limiting factor for consuming sustainability. Living in a neo-liberal capitalist society which promotes and thrives on consumption, green consumption is often pushed as a
solution for climate change (Anantharaman, 2022). This concept is further perpetuated when environmental action is individualized, and people associate their ability to be sustainable with their purchasing power. As Saul Alinsky writes “most people are eagerly groping for some medium, some way in which they can bridge the gap between their morals and their practices” (Alinksy, 1969, p. 94). In a capitalist society where individual action is emphasized, money is the medium by which people can bridge the gap. This explains why students dreamed of being sustainable in the future when money was no longer an issue and they could purchase “solar panels”, an “electric car”, and “shop locally at the co-op”. This “individualization of responsibility” detracts from the issue of overconsumption and as well as the structural forces that benefit corporations and incentivize mass resource extraction. It also encourages and embraces the notion that individual action can resolve the knotty issues of “consumption, consumerism, power and responsibility” in a neat and clean manner (Mainates, 2002, p. 46).

Unfortunately, this concept has far reaching effects on attitudes towards consumption. As Anantharaman (2022) notes, when environmental action is individualized and people are encouraged to flex their environmental attitudes and values through green consumption, those who belong to a different social class or cannot afford to do the same are “denied ecological legitimacy” (p. 26). Many of the students I interviewed believed that their lifestyle was not environmentally friendly solely because they could not afford to consume green products when, it was their lack of money that was keeping them from consuming more.
Conclusion

Addressing overconsumption is no simple task with one direction forward. The processes that drive consumption are deeply embedded in the routine of our daily lives, often so much so that we are blind to them in the first place. Despite a blindness to the routinized rigmarole of everyday consumption, there is a dialectical sense of dread and consciousness relating to the climate crisis. Throughout my interviews with students, I have noticed an overwhelming sentiment of awareness that young people possess. Students scroll through social media and walk through campus where they are constantly bombarded with an onslaught of information about waste, environmental degradation, carbon emissions, and fast-moving climate change. They carry shame and guilt that influences them to appear sustainable to their peers, yet they over-consume with the knowledge that it’s detrimental to the state of the Earth.

Addressing this gap between values and actions is difficult. There are both structural, psychological, and social barriers that prevent students from consuming sustainably (Newton and Meyer, 2013). While students express a strong intent to be sustainable, their actions often prioritize convenience and affordability over sustainability. This value-action gap can be attributed to various barriers, such as a lack of knowledge, overwhelming choices, time constraints, financial limitations, and organizational challenges. In the case of convenience, students may be hyper aware of climate change, over-consumption, and behavior changes they “should” be making yet, they prioritize their own immediate personal wants and needs. When choosing to prioritize convenience, benefits are realized immediately and locally whereas costs accrue elsewhere and later. This concept makes consuming easy to brush off because costs are not personally felt in the moment.
When describing campus culture at WWU, outdoor recreation is another tenet that goes hand in hand with sustainability and environmentalism. Despite the perceived connection between outdoor recreationalists and sustainability, students reported outdoor recreation as being one of the main drivers of consumption in their daily lives. In many cases, students were able to rationalize their consumption of both the outdoor gear that necessitates recreating as well as the transit to access outdoor spaces by citing passion.

The emphasis on individual action as a solution to climate change leads students to believe that their purchasing power is the key to being sustainable. Students cited expense as a limiting factor to being sustainable because the capitalist society in which we live promotes green consumption as the primary solution for climate change and over-consumption. This concept is perpetuated by an individualization of responsibility which overlooks the issue of overconsumption and structural forces that drive unsustainable practices. It also creates a sense of ecological legitimacy for those who can afford to consume sustainably, while marginalizing those who cannot.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that while students at WWU express a desire to be sustainable, their actual consumption patterns are often influenced by convenience, affordability, and societal pressures. To bridge the gap between values and actions, it is essential to address the barriers and constraints that hinder sustainable consumption, provide accessible knowledge and resources, challenge the performative aspects of sustainability, and promote systemic change that go beyond individual actions.
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Appendix I: Interview Guide

This appendix contains the interview guide that was used in the fifteen student interviews. Refer to the Results section to read student responses to these questions.

CONSUMPTION

1. Can you provide an example of a recent purchase? (Young et al, 2010)
2. Can you describe to me in detail your purchase decision including
   a. Purchase process (from inclination – to research – to post purchase reflections)
   b. Lifestyle context that has influenced you to purchase this product
3. Can you tell me a little bit more about your general purchasing habits?
4. For example, clothing?
   a. What factors influence your consumption habits when it comes to buying clothes?
   b. Based on their answer, ask how sustainability factors into their decision?
5. What are the things you keep in mind when consuming food in general (while grocery shopping, at home and in other situations)? (Newton and Meyer, 2013)
6. Would you say that your food consumption habits are ecological and sustainable?
   a. How does this manifest in your normal food consumption behavior?
7. What are the obstacles that can hinder your food consumption to change towards more ecologically sustainable?
8. In terms of other consumption habits such as where you live, can you tell me a little but about your energy consumption?
9. Do you find yourself taking any steps to reduce your consumption at home? (adapted from Newton and Meyer, 2013)
10. How do you see your current living situation affecting your consumption habits? (Newton and Meyer, 2018)

ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES/VALUES

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your current awareness/ focus on climate change?
2. Would you consider yourself to be someone who has an environmentally friendly lifestyle? (Kadic-Maglajlic et al, 2019)
   a. Can you tell me a little bit more about this?
3. Do you think that an individual can make a difference in the ecological sustainability of the environment? (Kymalainen et al, 2021)
4. What factors do you think may be affecting your ability to live a more environmentally friendly lifestyle?

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES (adapted from Kadic – Maglajlic et al, 2019, mentioned a lack of focus on role of community engagement)
1. Can you describe to me any outside influences within your community at Western that affect your consumption patterns?
2. Does social media or your peers have any effect on the ways in which you consume?
3. As a student at Western, can you think of any ways that you are encouraged to consume less in your education, whether that be through peers, faculty, professors etc?
   a. Does your major affect this in any way?