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A Safeguard to Maintain Sustainable Consumption Patterns**

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**ABSTRACT**

Consumer discipline (i.e., the ability to persist on tasks) is necessary to maintain sustainable consumption patterns and overcome the constraints associated with such self-determined long-term goal pursuits. Little is known, however, about how consumers sustain such patterns over time, despite their importance in people’s lives. Using a qualitative multimethod study of packaging-free product consumption as a Zero Waste sustainable consumption pattern, this research explores the way consumers exercise discipline to accomplish tasks to reach their goal of sustainability in consumption. Beyond a “psychological” ability, discipline implies a “practical” ability, which corresponds to a series of interrelated activities: frame, plan, organize, execute, and measure. By extending the micro-individual focus to a macro-social focus, this research shows the role of external factors (i.e., others, the market, and the situation) in hindering or encouraging discipline. This research provides insights for two consumer research streams: sustainable consumption and consumer control and discipline. First, the research highlights the role of an underinvested individual ability—namely, discipline—in maintaining sustainable consumption patterns. Second, the research proposes a more practical and interactional approach for consumer discipline.

**JEL classification:** M31

**Keywords:** consumer discipline, ability, sustainable consumption, packaging-free products, goal pursuit, control

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The evolution of consumption may help support ecological transitions. Consumers are supposed to be responsible for the outcomes of their consumption (Bevir and Trentmann 2007; Cherrier and Türe 2022), and indeed many are switching to more sustainable consumption patterns (e.g., consuming organic products, eating less meat, purchasing packaging-free products). Such patterns indicate an increased awareness of the impact of consumption decisions on the environment, consumer health, and society (Giesler and Veresiu 2014).

However, consumers do not always manage to maintain sustainable consumption over time (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019). Indeed, shifting to more sustainable consumption patterns requires consumers to overcome barriers and constraints (Gollnhofer, Weijo, and Schouten 2019; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021; Hutter and Hoffmann 2013; Luchs and Kumar 2017). As consumers perceive many sustainable actions as effortful, time-consuming, or difficult to carry out, they may fail to maintain them, despite a motivation to do so. According to Thøgersen (2005), consumers' acceptance of the constraints inherent in these actions is a way to achieve sustainable change, but how they concretely accept these constraints remains unknown.

Previous research has paid more attention to what actually leads consumers to adopt sustainable consumption, such as attitudes and values (e.g., Thompson and Barton 1994), sociodemographic variables (e.g., Brough et al. 2016 ; Yan et al. 2021), social norms and beliefs (e.g., Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008), motivations (e.g., Pieters 1991), and commitment (e.g., Baca-Motes et al. 2013), than to what leads them to maintain this consumption over time and not abandon it. However, knowing this is crucial for anchoring such virtuous behavior in people's lives. The current research argues that individual ability (e.g., Thøgersen 1994), which can help consumers overcome constraints (Stern et al. 1999), can act as safeguards to maintain sustainable consumption patterns.

According to prior research (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999; Laran, Janiszewski, and Salerno 2019), one important aspect in the pursuit of a goal (i.e., maintaining sustainable consumption patterns) is self-control, or individuals' ability to exercise control in their own lives (Gurin, Gurin, and Morrison 1978; Lachman and Weaver 1998). Along with self-control, we are interested in personal discipline (Cronin, McCarthy, and Delaney 2015; Dacyczyn 1992; Fischer, Otnes, and Tunkey 2007), or the ability to persist on tasks (Tian et al. 2018) for as long as needed to complete them and to learn from the results of one's efforts (Rogus 1985). White et al. (2019) argue that sustainable consumption patterns need more self-control than other behaviors because consumers achieve the outcomes of sustainable behaviors across a long-term horizon.

We postulate that the maintenance of sustainable consumption patterns requires consumer discipline, a particular personal ability. Extant literature does not indicate how consumers exercise this discipline. While research knows why consumers do what they do "cognitively" (cf. goal models describing how people actively execute behavior, see Laran, Janiszewski, and Salerno 2019), it lacks understanding of how they "practically" manage to discipline themselves to pursue a focal long-term goal (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999). Thus, in this research we address the following question: How do consumers practically discipline themselves in an environment that is not always supportive and that involves efforts to maintain sustainable consumption pattern, a self-determined long-term goal? By answering this question, we aim to develop a more practical and interactional approach to consumer discipline.

We examine the case of packaging-free product consumption to examine how consumers exercise discipline to maintain sustainable consumption patterns. While increasing worldwide, sustainable consumption is associated with many barriers (Beitzen-Heineke, Balta-Ozkan, and Reefke 2017; Zeiss 2018). For example, even motivated consumers may feel lost and thus give

up on their goal of consuming sustainably (Fuentes, Enarsson, and Kristoffersson 2019). Thus, we explore how consumers exercise discipline to achieve maintenance; doing so involves a self-determined individual responsible action that is far from the standards and implies a long-term horizon.

To understand how consumers practically manage to maintain packaging-free product consumption as a result of discipline, we conducted a multimethod qualitative study. Our data set includes ethnographic fieldwork and observations (i.e., visits to stores, 10 interviews with professionals, 322 photos, and a systematic review of 167 articles from a distribution-focused magazine), introspection, 44 in-depth consumer interviews, photography, netnography, and participant observation. An iterative analysis approach of the micro-level (the consumer) and macro-level (the environment) data gave us a better understanding of what consumer discipline is in a more or less facilitating environment.

Our results enable us to theorize how consumers exercise discipline to pursue a self-determined long-term goal. We find that consumer discipline requires a “practical” ability, beyond a “psychological” ability highlighted in the literature. This ability corresponds to knowing how to frame, plan, organize, execute, and measure the concretization of the goal. Through the adoption of a multi-level perspective, including both a micro-level perspective grounded in consumer psychology and a macro-level perspective, we unpack the boundary conditions of consumer discipline (i.e., external factors).

We extend literature in three ways. First, we add to literature on sustainable consumption patterns by strengthening the understanding of how consumers practically manage to maintain them, beyond their adoption, as a result of discipline. Second, we also enrich the literature on self-control in goal pursuit in general and consumer discipline in particular by offering a

theorization of the way consumers exercise discipline. Third, this research invites discussion on the effortful role of consumers in sustainable actions. We show that consumers' role as stakeholders is not so simple, as it requires specific abilities that not all consumers may necessarily have or can develop.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **Maintaining a Sustainable Consumption Pattern**

Many studies focus on the adoption of sustainable consumption patterns, or behaviors that stem from an increased awareness of the impact of consumption decisions on the environment, consumer health, and society in general (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; White et al. 2019). In addition, studies have uncovered individual factors that promote sustainable behavior. Ölander and Thøgersen (1995) posit that, together, motivation, opportunity, and ability are fundamental in creating behavior change. Ability includes both habit and task knowledge (i.e., knowledge about how to reach a goal; Thøgersen 1994). For example, to recycle, people must know how to sort, recognize the materials, know the rules, and feel capable of implementing them cognitively and physically. Apart from a cognitive dimension, ability thus also integrates consumers' skills, proficiencies, and know-how.

Shifting to a sustainable consumption pattern requires consumer ability (Pieters 1991; Stern et al. 1999) because such a pattern is generally associated with barriers to action; a mere concern for the environment is not sufficient. Engaging in sustainable consumption certainly depends on motivation, but "ability-related" factors also have a major influence (Thøgersen 2005). The efforts associated with a sustainable lifestyle are indeed interconnected with daily

behaviors that are difficult to change, thus requiring consumers to call on specific individual abilities (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021). Thøgersen (2005) investigates how to persuade consumers to act, particularly by removing the “constraints” that may inhibit them. He notes the need to reduce these constraints at the individual level and proposes two levers of action: reduction of “external constraints” (e.g., cultural meanings, norms, or infrastructures; access to environmentally friendly alternatives) and “internal constraints” (i.e., those specific to individuals, such as limited resources in terms of finances, time, and cognitive abilities). We focus on these constraints to fill the research gap on how consumers cope with them.

While the literature has shown the impact of individual abilities on the adoption of sustainable behaviors, to our knowledge, it has not focused on their role in maintaining these behaviors over time. Sustainable behaviors are behaviors that consumers try to prolong, and they involve a long time horizon (White et al. 2019). However, they may have difficulty doing so because of the weight of consumer habits and because the market constantly offers sources of temptation that are difficult to resist. Therefore, we focus on the maintenance, not the adoption, of sustainable consumption patterns and on the role of a specific individual ability in this maintenance (i.e., consumer discipline) that is under consumers’ control.

### Consumer Discipline

Much of consumer behavior is goal-directed, that is, guided by “representations of desired states” (Austin and Vancouver 1996, 338). To achieve a goal, consumers need discipline, “an ethos of disciplined persistence in pursuit of such goals” (Fischer et al. 2007, 431). While discipline generally refers to rules imposed by institutions such as a prison (Foucault 1975) that

intervene as an all-powerful authority framing and monitoring this discipline, it also refers to self-imposed rules. We consider this latter meaning of discipline herein, as consumers impose the achievement of a goal on themselves.

Self-discipline, as a variable associated with effortful perseverance on goal-directed tasks, has received considerable attention in the literature as a subfacet of the conscientiousness personality trait (Poropat 2009) and as a traitlike construct that determines long-term persistence on tasks to attain distal goals (Duckworth et al. 2007). Discipline, which is related to a sense of control, has been widely covered in psychological literature (e.g., persistence to stop smoking or drinking), in health-related literature (e.g., persistence to continue a diet), and in educational literature (e.g., persistence of students or children' work even when facing difficulties). In all these cases, the sense of control encompasses a wide range of psychological responses, including the ability to exert control over, suppress, or inhibit thoughts, emotions, impulses, urges, temptations, and dominant responses; better performance regulation; and breaking habits (Baumeister 2002; Baumeister and Heatherton 1996; Baumeister, Vohs, and Tice 2007; Haws, Davis, and Dholakia 2016; Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998; Vohs and Heatherton 2000). People exercise self-control when they anticipate that obstacles may jeopardize the attainment of a long-term goal (Fishbach, Friedman, and Kruglanski 2003; Rachlin 2000; Trope and Fishbach 2000). Sustainable consumption is especially a question of personal mastery when consumers face constraints that they will need to remove to reach their goal (Thøgersen 2005). Bagozzi and Dholakia (1999) argue that goal pursuit is linked to consumers' sense of control, or their beliefs about their ability to exercise control in their lives (Gurin et al. 1978). People can face difficulties around one of three pillars: having ideals, monitoring (comparing one's state with ideals), and operating (making changes) (Carver and Scheier 1981). We focus herein on the last



aspect of operating, particularly on maintaining changes.

In consumer research, beyond just a sole psychological ability, discipline refers to “the assemblage of practices effected by individuals, with or without the assistance of others, to scrutinize and operate selectively in the marketplace, to purify and mindfully use its offerings and to orientate one’s consuming lifestyle towards a desired outcome” (Cronin et al. 2015, 1917). People have concrete strategies by which they exercise permanent control over what they consume. First, people achieve discipline by reorienting their consuming lifestyles to a more future-focused outlook. Second, they use agents of surveillance to watch over and assist them in the management of their consumption. Third, they cope with the experience of being targeted or under the gaze of an exploitative marketplace that they believe acts opportunistically and is difficult to resist to. Fourth, they purify market offerings that do not align with disciplinary guidelines. This approach of discipline goes beyond the psychological dimension of the concept by highlighting the assemblage of practices and shows that it must be examined in relation to the consumer’s environment. This approach is in line with that of Fischer et al. (2007), who assess the role of cultural dimensions in shaping cognitive elements of goal striving.

Some studies mention “consumer discipline” (Dacyczyn 1992) in relation to sustainable consumption and even “economic asceticism,” which refers to a form of deprivation and rules consumers impose on themselves to attain an ideal in the context of consumption. In other words, economic asceticism refers to a voluntary renunciation, which requires adopting behaviors aimed at the judicious allocation of resources. In this sense, frugal consumers are considered “disciplined,” as they engage in “a wise use of resources” and “short-term sacrifices in buying and using consumer goods to achieve idiosyncratic longer-term goals” (e.g., Lastovicka et al. 1999, 87). Jones (1995) also notes that ethical people adopt strict discipline and

abstinence, opt for a life of self-control, and have a sense of responsibility in the way they live.

Finally, the literature review leads to two main conclusions that set the objectives of this research. First, research on the sense of control and discipline mainly adopts a psychological approach focused on the individual psychological ability of self-control. The literature does not examine how consumers concretely exercise discipline, especially when they want to maintain a sustainable consumption pattern. Most studies focus on the psychological mechanisms that reinforce goal-directed behaviors while remaining silent on practical mechanisms that reinforce efforts and purposive behavior. Thus, we aim to investigate a more “how-to” approach to discipline. Second, as the focus of the concept of discipline is generally the individual with an anchoring in psychological theories, the context (or environment) is not considered despite its potential influence on discipline. According to educational models, interactions between students and their institutional environment influence the decision to drop out of school or persist. Some studies show that considering both educational (i.e., the environment) and motivational dimensions gives a better understanding of the persistence to achieve a goal. In consumer behavior research, Fischer et al. (2007) also indicate that the cultural context is the most revealing element of goal pursuit, and Cronin et al. (2015) posit that environmental external factors should be considered when examining consumer discipline. Following these works, we analyze the impact of external factors on consumer discipline.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

### Zero Waste and Packaging-Free Product Consumption

To address our research question, we examined a specific sustainable consumption pattern:

packaging-free product consumption. This pattern is part of the global Zero Waste popular movement and addresses the elimination of all unnecessary waste in shopping and consumption experiences. It especially entails the elimination of plastics and the purchase of locally sourced products. In the Zero Waste movement, packaging-free product consumption has strengthened in recent years. Réseau Vrac, an association that structures and advises the sector on packaging-free product sales, estimates that turnover for all packaging-free shops will double in Europe by 2023 (Eunomia Research & Consulting 2020).

Marketing literature is only beginning to address this topic, as the dominant model remains the distribution of packaged and overpackaged products (Monnot et al. 2019). Packaging-free product consumption has several advantages, including a decrease in plastic waste (Zeiss 2018), food waste (Beitzen-Heineke et al. 2017; Fuentes et al. 2019; Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021), and transport costs. However, consumers often perceive packaging-free product consumption as inconvenient and demanding (Louis, Lombart, and Durif 2021). They must take more time to shop (Beitzen-Heineke et al. 2017) or effort to travel to specialized stores, which are still few and often distant (Fuentes et al. 2019).

Zero Waste is a long-term goal and even an open-ended goal that is “not limited to an end state but also encompasses experiences, sequences of interconnected happenings, and ongoing processes” (Bagozzi and Dholakia 1999, 19). It is also a self-determined and free-choice goal, as consumers initiate this approach voluntarily for themselves but also for its impact on society and the environment as a whole. Critical to a successful Zero Waste strategy is a change in behavior and lifestyle as well as a shift in attitudes to reduce overall consumption (Lehmann 2011; Cherrier and Türe 2022). Therefore, Zero Waste constitutes an important case to reveal how consumers discipline themselves to pursue their goal (i.e., to consume sustainably over time).

According to White et al. (2019, 33), “sustainable behaviors require even more self-control than other self-control behaviors.”

## MULTIMETHOD QUALITATIVE STUDY

We conducted a multimethod qualitative study to understand how consumers exercise discipline to persist and maintain a Zero Waste sustainable consumption pattern, a self-determined long-term goal. Our data set includes consumer in-depth interviews, photograph, netnography, introspections, and participant observation as well as ethnographic fieldwork with in-store observations, photos, expert interviews, and press review. Data collection, conducted in France, lasted almost two years and took place between September 2019 and July 2021 (see table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
SUMMARY OF DATA SOURCES

Description	Sources	Data Set
In-depth consumer interviews	Interviews in person or on the phone (February to October 2020)	44 interviews, 1033 single-spaced pages
Photography	Photographs taken by consumers after interviews	106 photographs
Netnography	Instagram posts using #bulk in February 2020 and in April 2020	1386 Instagram posts (photographs, texts, and reactions)
Researcher introspection – retrospection	Own experiences of packaging-free product consumption	Researcher notes
Participant observation	Six-month immersion of one researcher in a Zero Waste city program from January to June 2021 (30 families accompanied by the Zero Waste association and the city to reduce waste over the	Researcher notes

Fieldwork and observations	program period) Visits to 30 stores over four months	Field notes
Photos	Photographs taken during observations	322 photographs
Interviews with professionals from packaging-free product stores	In-store interviews of store managers and packaging-free product department managers, ranging from 1 h 15 min to 3 h 20 min	10 interviews, 20 h 40min of audio files
Media coverage	Media articles from the leading French distribution-focused and weekly magazine <i>LSA</i> (between April 2016 and April 2020)	167 articles on the packaging-free product phenomenon

### Consumer Interviews and Netnography

We conducted consumer in-depth interviews in person or on the phone as we conducted some on these interviews during the first COVID-19 lockdown between March and May 2020. We sent calls for interest in our research topic to our respective networks and placed posters in stores from the distribution network with which we collaborated for this research.

We purposely sampled respondents across various levels of persistence to achieve the goal associated with the Zero Waste sustainable consumption pattern. These levels mainly depended on the frequency and durability of packaging-free product purchases and respondents' attitudes toward this consumption pattern. First, the respondents self-declared themselves as belonging to one category or the other: less or highly persistent. Second, we validated this self-categorization in analysis of the discourses. The highly persistent consumers, who manage to maintain a sustainable consumption pattern, reported a willingness to achieve the stated goal at the motivational level and, at the behavioral level, exhibited relatively long persistence, including increased activity to accelerate the consumption pattern (e.g., increased loyalty to packaging-free stores, increased packaging-free consumption). In 2022, we contacted some of these persistent

respondents again to verify that they had maintained the consumption pattern; none had dropped out. The less persistent consumers, who did not manage to maintain the consumption pattern, explained the reasons in their discourse. Respondents' motivation included ecology, health, the economy, or a sustainable trend in general.

In total, we interviewed 44 consumers (38 woman and 6 men, ranging in age from 20 to 66 years, with various types of jobs and different living conditions, and with and without children). Table 2 provides a descriptive summary of each informant. Interviews ranged from 40 to 140 minutes (averaging 70 minutes) and were audio recorded and transcribed. Following standard qualitative procedures, we took handwritten notes during the interviews and captured key insights (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

**TABLE 2**  
**INFORMANTS**

<b>Case</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Job</b>	<b>Type Home</b>	<b># People</b>	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Persistence Level</b>
<b>1</b>	Aline	21	Student	Flat	1	Education	High
<b>2</b>	Arthur	36	Project manager	Flat	4	Ecology	High
<b>3</b>	Bérangère	34	Manager	Flat	1	Vegan diet	High
<b>4</b>	Camille	24	Graphic designer	Flat	2	Ecology	High
<b>5</b>	Clothilde	35	Bank project manager	House	3	Ecology	High
<b>6</b>	Elodie	37	Teacher	House	4	Ecology	High
<b>7</b>	Isaure	46	Chief financial officer	House	4	Ecology	High
<b>8</b>	Judith	24	Doctoral student	Flat	1	Ecology	High
<b>9</b>	Julia	22	Student	Flat	2	Vegan diet	High
<b>10</b>	Lara	34	Bank manager	Flat	2	Ecology	High
<b>11</b>	Léonore	34	Osteopath	Flat	3	Ecology	High
<b>12</b>	Maëlle	55	Accountant	House	2	Health	High
<b>13</b>	Marthe	34	Consultant	Flat	3	Ecology	High
<b>14</b>	Mathias	26	Looking for a job	Flat	2	Vegetarian diet	High
<b>15</b>	Maya	24	Merch manager	Flat	1	Vegetarian diet	High
<b>16</b>	Melchior	27	IT project manager	Flat	2	Health	High
<b>17</b>	Régis	26	Student	Flat	2	Ecology	High
<b>18</b>	Sabine	40	Jewelry designer	House	4	Ecology	High
<b>19</b>	Salomé	50	Educator	Flat	1	Ecology	High
<b>20</b>	Solène	34	IT project manager	Flat	2	Ecology	High

21	Alex	33	Operations manager	Flat	1	Vegetarian diet	Low
22	Amandine	38	Dentist	Flat	4	Ecology	Low
23	Annabelle	25	Accountant	Flat	2	Ecology	Low
24	Danielle	66	Retired	Flat	2	Ecology	Low
25	Dorothee	42	Project manager	House	3	No	Low
26	Fabienne	39	Teacher	House	4	Ecology	Low
27	Germaine	59	Financial manager	Flat	1	Ecology	Low
28	Madeleine	36	Doctoral student	House	3	Food diversity	Low
29	Maïté	43	Head of innovation	House	4	Ecology	Low
30	Manuela	32	Trainer	House	2	Economy	Low
31	Marjorie	62	Retired	House	2	Ecology	Low
32	Marylou	20	Student	Flat	1	Ecology	Low
33	Roxane	21	Student	Flat	1	Ecology	Low
34	Samantha	27	Doctoral student	Flat	2	Economy	Low
35	Sigmund	22	Student	Flat	1	Ecology	Low
36	Anne-Laure	38	Nurse	Flat	4	Trend	Low
37	Albane	45	Teacher	House	3	No	None
38	Colette	61	Store manager	House	2	No	None
39	Eva	63	Retired	Flat	2	No	None
40	Hortense	43	Teacher	House	4	No	None
41	Nadège	28	Civil servant	Flat	2	No	None
42	Nadine	66	Retired	House	2	No	None
43	Vanessa	40	Head of program	Flat	2	No	None
44	Zoé	20	Student	Flat	2	No	None

We began the in-depth interviews with grand-tour questions (McCracken 1988) (e.g., “Can you tell me about your last packaging-free product purchase?”), followed by specific questions about how they manage to consume without packaging, what barriers they associate with this Zero Waste sustainable consumption pattern, how they organize their packaging-free product shopping experiences, and how they shifted to this consumption pattern. We especially tried to understand the resources they needed to deploy for these purposes.

During the interviews with less persistent respondents, we used the photo-elicitation technique (Collier and Collier 1986) to understand their particular perceptions of the consumption pattern. This technique was well suited to this profile of consumers because their

experience with the consumption pattern was limited.

We concluded the interviews with a broader perspective on Zero Waste consumption as a whole. The highly persistent respondents explained how they manage to maintain sustainable consumption patterns; the less persistent ones noted the barriers that led them to go no further, to have difficulties in progressing, or to go back to their former consumption pattern. As the interviews progressed, we slightly modify our interview guide to better reflect our focus on consumer discipline. At the end of the interviews, we asked the informants to send us photos to illustrate their own way of consuming without packaging. This enabled us to grasp the diversity of images associated with packaging-free product consumption. Data collection resulted in 1033 pages of single-spaced text and more than 106 photos.

We also conducted Instagram netnography in two stages: before the first COVID-19 lockdown (February 2020), which identified 586 posts using #vrac (which means packaging-free in French), and during the first lockdown (April 2020), with gathered 800 posts (1386 posts in total). This data set enabled us to deepen our understanding of how consumers maintain the Zero Waste sustainable consumption pattern. Texts and hashtags associated with images provided access to the meanings consumers gave to their choices, allowing us to go beyond the individuals' words and view a world of images. The photographs collected from the netnography enabled us to consider consumer discipline in a physical and material way by highlighting daily consumption patterns consumers are not always able to verbalize.

### Introspection and Participant Observation

To gain an understanding of the research object from an insider's viewpoint, we engaged in introspection (Gould 1995; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993) of our own experiences with



packaging-free products; one researcher managed to maintain this consumption pattern, while the other believed it took too much effort to maintain over time. This introspection provided insight into what might differentiate consumers. The introspection consisted of retrospection of our past experiences that occurred over time and continued in the present. We kept diaries on our experiences, in which we documented our relevant thoughts, feelings, or behaviors regarding our consumption pattern.

The researcher who was highly persistent in achieving a sustainable consumption pattern also had the opportunity to join a Zero Waste city program for a six-month period from January to June 2021. This program aimed to help 30 families implement packaging-free product consumption to reduce their waste and sent them equipment to do so (i.e., a composter, a scale to weigh the waste they generated, and an application to enter regularly the amount of waste they threw away to measure their progress). During the program, the families also followed six training sessions (e.g., how to compost, to prevent food waste, or to make own cleaning products) to help them improve their sustainable consumption pattern and exchange good practices between families. For the researcher, this participant observation was an opportunity to both question her own consumption and understand how other consumers manage to maintain sustainable consumption patterns over time.

### Expert Interviews and In-Store Observations

To glean greater insight into packaging-free product consumption (from an individual to a social viewpoint), we collected more macro-level data, going beyond consumer behavior. To do so, we interviewed experts from packaging-free product stores (i.e., store and department managers). We signed a research contract with a well-known organic retailer that was among the

first to develop packaging-free products in France. This partnership gave us access to both the organic field and this retailer's stores. We conducted 10 interviews, representing 20 hours and 40 minutes of audio files, about the specificities of the packaging-free product department and to discover managers' perceptions of consumers' motivations, potential typical profile and behaviors, and of the constraints of packaging-free products.

During site visits over a four-month period (from October 2019 to January 2020), we observed 30 stores that offer packaging-free products. We recorded field notes and took 322 photos of devices, merchandising, and communication support. We visited different kinds of stores according to their specialization on packaging-free products or not, their size, and their geographic area.

We also systematically reviewed the leading French distribution-focused and weekly magazine *LSA* ("Self-Service News" in English). We identified 167 articles between April 2016 and April 2020 on packaging-free product consumption with a "vrac" keyword search. This step gave us a 360-degree vision, with a focus not only on consumers as recipients of the offer but also on stakeholders who extend the offer (e.g., suppliers, retailers) in the packaging-free product market (macro-level).

## Analysis

For all data, we took an iterative analysis approach. We conducted an intratextual analysis to grasp individual specificities and identify emerging codes and categories. We wrote analytic memos for each respondent to conduct an intertextual analysis and find common themes (Thompson 1997). We compared new data with prior data and moved back and forth between individual and joint analysis. We highlighted recurring themes, which enabled us to build our

theoretical framework. Using several steps for data collection enabled us to test the interpretations that emerged from the consumer interviews and refine them with additional data collected through netnography or participant observation. The results thus present the emergent themes around consumer discipline.

Moreover, the development of descriptive and interpretive informant profiles was central to the analysis (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). These within-person analyses indicated how people succeeded in maintaining sustainable consumption patterns by focusing on “truth moments” and by linking the cultural and contextual aspects with the consumption pattern. We also used triangulation to consolidate our interpretations.

We conducted a comparative analysis of interviews with both consumers who managed to maintain the consumption pattern and those who did not. This analysis involved coding the second series of interviews according to the coding of the first series to assess the differences between both types of consumers. For example, when a category emerged from the interviews with highly persistent informants, we consulted the interviews with less persistent consumers to find anything that was connected with this specific dimension.

We used the images to help understand how consumers exercise discipline, as they might not be aware of it. This analysis of images reinforced or completed the analysis of the interview discourses. We were able to uncover a “practical” dimension of consumer discipline from the photos the respondents sent us and Instagram images. For example, the organization of jars stacked in a kitchen drawer and the labeling of the jars revealed consumer’s sense of organization.

Next, data from the expert interviews and press were particularly relevant for revealing cultural or collective dimensions. These data were instructive of the boundary conditions of

consumer discipline.

Finally, introspections had two objectives: to improve understanding of the topic and to validate whether our results corresponded to the reality we experienced. A review of the results by each researcher also enabled us to validate whether the reality we described matched our life experiences (Gould 1995). To analyze the introspection data, we adopted an analytical distance, alternating between emic and etic perspective.

## RESULTS

We offer a theorization of how consumers exercise discipline, a practical ability that corresponds to knowing how to frame, plan, organize, execute, and measure the concretization of a goal, such as maintaining sustainable consumption patterns. Moreover, by extending the individual (micro) focus to a social (macro) focus, we uncover the role of external environmental factors that can hinder or encourage discipline, including others, the market, and the situation. We begin with two consumer archetypes to illustrate the way consumers either manage to maintain the consumption pattern or not through discipline.

### Archetypes of Persistence: Highly Persistent Consumers and Less Persistent Consumers

*Maintaining Sustainable Consumption Patterns.* Sabine is representative of people who have managed to maintain sustainable consumption patterns. Sabine, a 42-year-old woman, is married to a dentist and is the mother of 5- and 9-year-old daughters. She lives in a city and owns a house. She left her own dentist job when she began living her passion: handcrafting jewelry from leather scraps. She now runs her own business. Sabine began to consume packaging-free products little by little at the same time as her awareness of the waste she was generating grew.

Her goal was to bring less packaging, if any, into her house (framing). Things accelerated when she received the book *The Zero Waste Family* as a gift. Reading it opened her eyes to the possibility of implementing new consumption patterns in her daily life to minimize her impact on the environment. This book was full of tips that served to anchor the consumption pattern in her daily life, and informal discussions with friends, who were undertaking a similar change her, helped her improve it (influence of the environment). She began going to new stores that offered packaging-free products and even gave up consuming some products she could not find without packaging or could not easily produce herself (e.g., sparkling water, chips). She also began collecting jars and bags (organizing) and increasingly avoided purchasing packaged products (framing). This consumption pattern increased when she began making her own laundry detergent, deodorant, and other cosmetics products (executing), which allowed her to broaden her consumption of packaging-free products to nonfood items. She also had to test some specific products, such as sodium bicarbonate, used in her many preparations (executing). This consumption pattern took on its full meaning when she realized she was producing much less garbage (measuring) and noticed an increase in her personal well-being (e.g., better digestion). She associates her packaging-free product consumption with consuming better-quality, local and less processed products.

In parallel to this change in consumption pattern, Sabine believed that some of her other practices should also start generating less waste and reducing harm to the planet. Thus, she travels most of the time by bike and buys almost no new clothes, thereby benefiting both the circular and local economy (framing). Although this consumption pattern may seem restrictive to some people, it is not for Sabine; rather, she considers consuming in this way a pleasure. Sabine finds packaging-free product consumption easy because she is used to it and also because she

lives close to stores that offer a wide range of packaging-free products (influence of the environment). She often takes a half-day during the week to shop and takes her jars, which she stores in advance in the bags of her bicycle, with her (planning). She has organized her kitchen and cupboards so that the jars reflect optimized storage (executing). Sabine has been proceeding this way for more than three years and only makes some exceptions when she is on holiday with friends, because imposing her consumption pattern on other people, especially in unfamiliar places, is difficult (influence of the environment).

*Declining Sustainable Consumption Pattern to Full Abandonment.* Anne-Laure is representative of people who failed to maintain sustainable consumption patterns. Anne-Laure, a 40-year-old woman with 7- and 9-year-old children, lives in a spacious apartment in a city. She works as a part-time nurse and is married to an airline pilot. She began consuming packaging-free products at first out of curiosity and then because she believed it would allow her to minimize her impact on the environment by producing less waste and consuming more locally. She discovered packaging-free products because the store she used to shop at in her neighborhood offered them. As most people do, she began buying dry grocery products such as dried fruits, rice, and pasta. Because she was satisfied with these purchases, she began consuming more packaging-free products (framing) until one day when she discovered an insect in her cereal. She complained to the store's salesperson who told her that it could happen and that it was a sign that products were pesticide-free. Anne-Laure nevertheless continued to consume packaging-free products, with a desire to go further, by systematically consuming products without packaging and buying other product categories; however, this was not successful. First, she ran into difficulty in bringing her own containers because she does not always anticipate her purchases and therefore often does not remember to take jars with her. In

addition, she does not know how to measure the number of containers she needs (organizing) but instead must guess the amount in the store. She also explained that she feels lost in the packaging-free product aisles because she encounters products she is not familiar with and does not know how to prepare and cook them. Not having information to take home, such as a recipe, also makes her feel uncomfortable (influence of the environment). Second, when she decided to try buying liquid detergent without packaging, the effort was not successful because she found it too complicated to help herself in the store, that it required too much time, and forgot to bring back the empty can for another purchase (planning). Overall, she noted that she usually goes shopping when she is in a hurry, sometimes during lunch time (influence of the environment). The planning that packaging-free purchase requires does not correspond to her way of doing things and she is not ready to make the effort to change. She is also not ready to give up consuming some products to avoid packaging as other consumers do. She continues to buy products that her children are used to, even if they are overpackaged, because they like them. She reported that she does not persist in achieving the consumption pattern and usually goes to traditional stores (influence of the environment) that offer her temptations and few packaging-free products. In addition, her husband, who sometimes does the shopping, does not follow in her attempt to adopt sustainable consumption (influence of the environment). Finally, she admits that one of her motivations was to follow a current trend (i.e., favoring an attractive aesthetic dimension of consumption), of which she finally got tired.

#### Consumer Discipline: The Experience of a Practical Ability

As noted previously, beyond its psychological dimension, consumer discipline includes a necessary “how-to” practical dimension. This dimension corresponds to the articulation of five

interrelated actions that enable people to maintain sustainable consumption patterns: framing, planning, organizing, executing, and measuring.

*Framing.* Discipline occurs when the consumer has defined a set of subgoals to help achieve the focal goal. Consumer discipline means setting a long-term goal to achieve, which serves as a driver. Consumers first try to set short goals to attain their long-term goal and to achieve a goal within a certain period and one at a time. In this way, they impose a first rule on themselves. Consumers are then more likely to maintain sustainable consumption patterns when they set different goals at the same time. Disciplining oneself thus requires a unique goal and progression in actions to attain it. Dalton and Spiller (2012) show that forming implementation intentions for multiple goals makes pursuing these goals at the same time difficult and thus limits consumers' commitment to these goals. As Sabine explained:

At first I wanted to attack everything at once, that is to say, eliminate all the packaging. I quickly realized that this was not possible, that I had to work step by step. So, I started by stopping things that I thought were stupid like buying paper towels or water bottles. Then I bought the things that seemed simple to consume in packaging-free version like pasta, rice, et cetera.

Barsalou (1991, 27) proposes that goals and their attributes are represented in "frames," which he defines as "flexible, loosely organized bodies of knowledge." Thus, people can have a focal goal and subordinate goals. The primary motivation for engaging in subordinate goals stems from the superordinate goal it serves (e.g., to maintain packaging-free consumption); therefore, subordinate goals, which are represented in a cognitive frame, correspond to stopping buying and consuming packaged products. For example, one respondent said that she first decided to finish consuming all the products she had at home and then to stop using some.

Consumer discipline also implies maintaining a certain consistency in one's goals so that



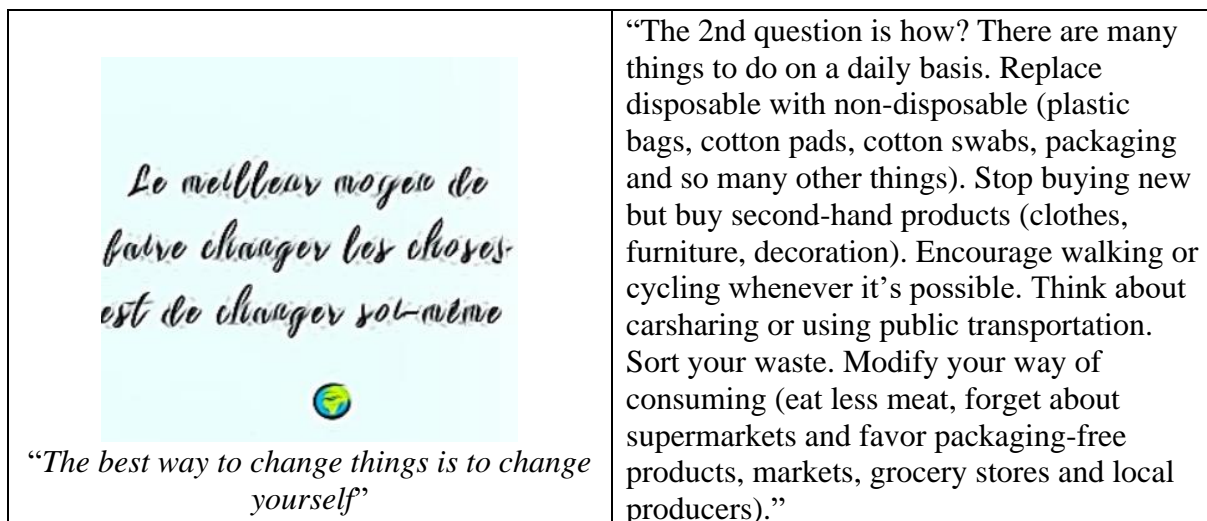
the consumption pattern remains sustainable over time. First, this consistency means repeating the same behaviors to attain the goal. As Clothilde noted:

Be consistent enough with yourself.... If you decide to buy these fruits and vegetables or these nuts without packaging, you realize that it is easy, so why not do it a second time and a third time and a fourth time.

Second, consistency also means multiplying behaviors. To maintain a sustainable consumption pattern, consumers must have a holistic vision of their consumption and logically adopt a set of sustainable consumption patterns. Packaging-free product consumption is indeed a consumption pattern that is embedded in other patterns, such as batch cooking (Instagram post #9 by ma.vie.presque.zero.dechet), buying second-hand products (Instagram post #81 by vers le.futur), undertaking do-it-yourself projects, recycling, and gardening. Instagram post #81's image is actually a philosophical saying or proverb that shows a connection between all behaviors (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1

ILLUSTRATION OF FRAMING (POST #81)



Zeiss (2018) notes that the switch to packaging-free product consumption involves intertwined individual changes: a switch also requires a change in the relationship to cooking and

food in general by valorizing homemade products. More generally, research shows that people who engage in sustainable action in one domain are often more likely to perform sustainably in other domains as well (i.e., positive spillover; Juhl, Fenger, and Thøgersen 2017; Ölander and Thøgersen 1995).

*Planning.* Consumer discipline also involves planning, including deciding on the steps to follow and what means to use over a specific period to achieve a goal. The objective is to manage time and anticipate challenges as much as possible.

The main characteristic of planning is time management. Here, consumers can maintain sustainable consumption patterns only if they are willing and able to devote time to it and manage their time. Consumers mentioned that they set aside time during their day or their week for the consumption pattern. The time is generally fixed, though some flexibility is sometimes required, as Bérangère noted.

You have to be super organized, besides the time, which is another point, you have to be very organized and you have to plan. So if I know that I'm going to make a recipe, I need, let's say chickpeas or I need red or white beans, the day before I have to put them in water in the fridge to soften them, to be able to use them, otherwise I'm stuck and I can't cook.... I don't buy ready-made meals at all, I make everything myself, in larger quantities, so I freeze [them].

According to Foucault (1975), discipline, which decomposes and recomposes activities, can also be understood as a method for capitalizing on time. Planning enables consumers to be more organized and better prepared before facing a task. Thus, it facilitates self-regulation by converting an abstract goal into concrete implementation steps to reach that goal (Townsend and Liu 2012). Planning is one way to help consumers exercise self-control.

Consumers also need to go against the current trend, which in essence is rather a race after time. As informants Bérangère and Corine explain, they have to get out of the habit of living quickly, of not making any effort and choosing the least time-consuming solutions. This is in line

with the notion of achieving slowed-down experiences of time through consumption (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Woermann and Rokka 2015). The ability to manage one's time is the opposite of any form of improvisation and impulsive behavior. Consumers do not regulate behaviors that result from unplanned and spontaneous impulses (Baumeister 2002). Impulsive behavior indeed occurs when self-control has failed.

Consumers who manage to discipline themselves also tend to implement certain strategies, such as anticipation, that affects both purchase and consumption. Anticipation is “a process by which consumers consider the physical, experiential, social, emotional, or behavioural consumption outcomes that are expected to accrue to the self from a yet to be realized consumption decision or experience” (Vichiengior, Ackermann, and Palmer 2019, 132).

Consumers adopting packaging-free product consumption need to know how to manage their purchases over time and to consider them in a medium-term horizon. Some respondents, such as Maëlle or Arthur, explained that they consider a one-week length and think about what they will need for their meals over that period. Such planning also influences the way they prepare meals because cooking some of these products requires anticipation so that they are ready and available when they make the recipe. Freezing or batch cooking are examples of practices of anticipation (in Instagram post #87, the consumer buys large quantities of baguettes and then freezes them). In some situations, consumers may also choose to postpone behaviors if they do not find a solution that corresponds to their focal goal. Thus, they sometimes manage their time differently by postponing the purchase decision if the product they need is packaged, as Clothilde noted.

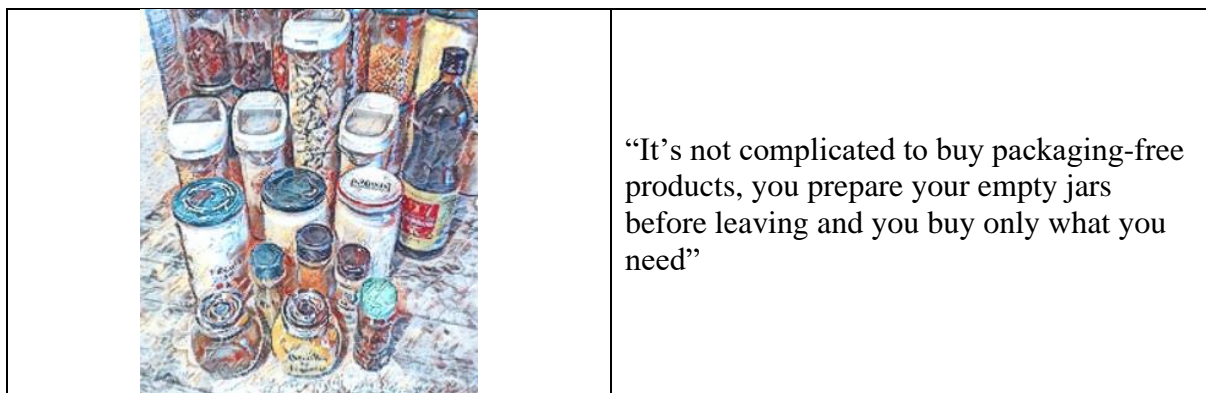
Well now, I really ask myself the question: “Do I really want to buy my nuts in plastic packaging?” ... It can postpone my buying decision, saying “well no, I'd rather postpone my purchase; I'll buy it later when I'll go to that store.”

Finally, planning facilitates the initiation of goal-directed behaviors in the presence of a specified opportunity, which enables people to respond to opportunities, even if they present themselves for only a short moment. Planning provides distinct volitional benefits by facilitating self-regulatory processes when impediments to plan implementation occur (Gollwitzer, Bayer, and McCulloch 2005).

*Organizing.* Consumer discipline also means being able to organize oneself and make choices appropriate for the focal goal. A sustainable consumption pattern implies a new organization of the flows linked to consumption, such as material physical and logistical flows. Consumers need to be meticulousness in doing this, as an absence of organization would make it impossible to maintain a sustainable consumption pattern. As the objective of packaging-free product consumption is to reduce the amount of packaging generated, consumers need to organize themselves to replace packaging (Instagram post #214: the image in figure 2 shows tidied and lined-up products, indicating prepared consumption).

FIGURE 2

ILLUSTRATION OF ORGANIZING (POST #214)

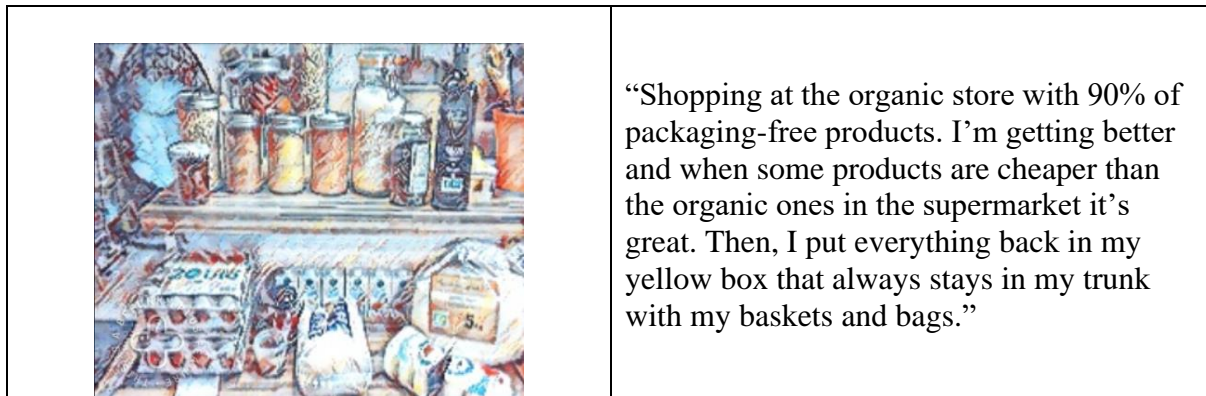


Consumer discipline requires making material choices. In terms of flow management, when consumers choose packaging-free product shopping, they need to take their bags and jars

to transport their purchases. The Instagram post #36 by atelierdefee insists on the necessity to systematically think about putting back baskets or bulk bags in the trunk of the car. This post also emphasizes the impact of this organization on the improvement of the consumption pattern (see figure 3).

FIGURE 3

ILLUSTRATION OF ORGANIZING (POST #36)



In terms of inventory management, consumers use several strategies for jar labeling to gain more visibility of the products available. Some consumers label jars by hand and even invest in a professional labeling machine, as Clothilde’s photos show (see figure 4). Some respondents simply put the jars upside down in their drawers, as sometimes the lids are not transparent, to visualize the content of the jar even without labeling. This action allows them to exert control over their consumption, as Marthe explained:

All my jars are stored in drawers, low drawers actually so I can see them over the top.... So, I see the lids and I write the content on the lid with a paint marker, a Posca, which allows me to put the lid under hot water, it takes off what is written and then I can write something else.

FIGURE 4

PROFESSIONAL LABELING MACHINE



The choices of devices and materials are central to the organization of the consumption pattern.

Consumer discipline also requires making logistical choices. The choice of transportation mode is the main logistical dimension that consumers need to organize. Respondents often prefer a transportation mode that is in line with their environmental convictions (i.e., walking, cycling). They then add some device to transport their purchases, such as baskets on their bicycles or a wheeled shopping bag to handle the weight of glass jars. Consumers also need to choose how to store their products at home.

*Executing.* Executing involves going through an experience multiple times in a logic of trial and error. This also sometimes implies a form of creativity and progress to do better and to optimize the experience.

To achieve their focal goal, disciplined consumers usually like to test things out, sometimes several times. They like to do things by themselves, which offers them a chance to try things and a guarantee that they will meet their expectations. In this way, they have control over their consumption. Instagram post #71 illustrates this by recommending that consumers “test regularly small things to go towards this consumption pattern.” A new consumption pattern can be established and maintained only through various attempts. That is, only by trying can consumers improve, and this improvement, in turn, helps them pursue their focal goal.

According to Bagozzi and Warshaw (1990), the process of “trying” is a major element of goal

pursuit.

As disciplined consumers are highly persistent in achieving the consumption pattern, they thus also sometimes demonstrate a creativity in their consumption patterns, such as reusing and personalizing packaging or jars to avoid unnecessary consumption by purchasing new ones. This echoes the links that Wilson (2016) highlights between consumer creativity and environmentalism, through the phenomenon of consumer upcycling, a practice that occurs when a consumer adapts, modifies, or transforms waste into a useful item instead of throwing it away. To maintain sustainable consumption patterns, consumers indeed need to be able to do things by themselves. Faced with any difficulty, those who do not learn how to do things or lack creativity may give up more easily. This is in line with Giesler (2008), who shows that creativity (e.g., use of personalization) makes it possible to overcome the limits of the market offer (Sandicki and Ger 2010). This also echoes people's "mechanical ability" and tendency to "work with their hands," suggested by Leonard-Barton (1981, 248).

*Optimizing.* A rule that disciplined consumers impose on themselves is a search for systematic optimization of resources in the execution of sustainable consumption patterns. Disciplined individuals tend to structure the logistic flows of their daily life. For example, consumers need to be able to judge their stocks to manage them sufficiently, as sustainable consumption is also intimately linked to nonwasting. This photo of Elodie's drawer in figure 5 shows this optimization of her storage space, in which she chooses square transparent boxes to use as much space as possible in the drawer and to be able to see the remaining quantity of products. The way consumers must rigorously organize themselves at home refers to the heterogeneous distribution in space and specification of place that discipline requires (Foucault 1975).

FIGURE 5

ILLUSTRATION OF STORAGE OPTIMIZATION



*Measuring.* Having discipline also involves consumers concretely monitoring their progress in maintaining sustainable consumption patterns and self-rewarding themselves. It also helps them face any challenges along the way. These steps enable consumers to note their improvements and thus feel encouraged to continue their efforts.

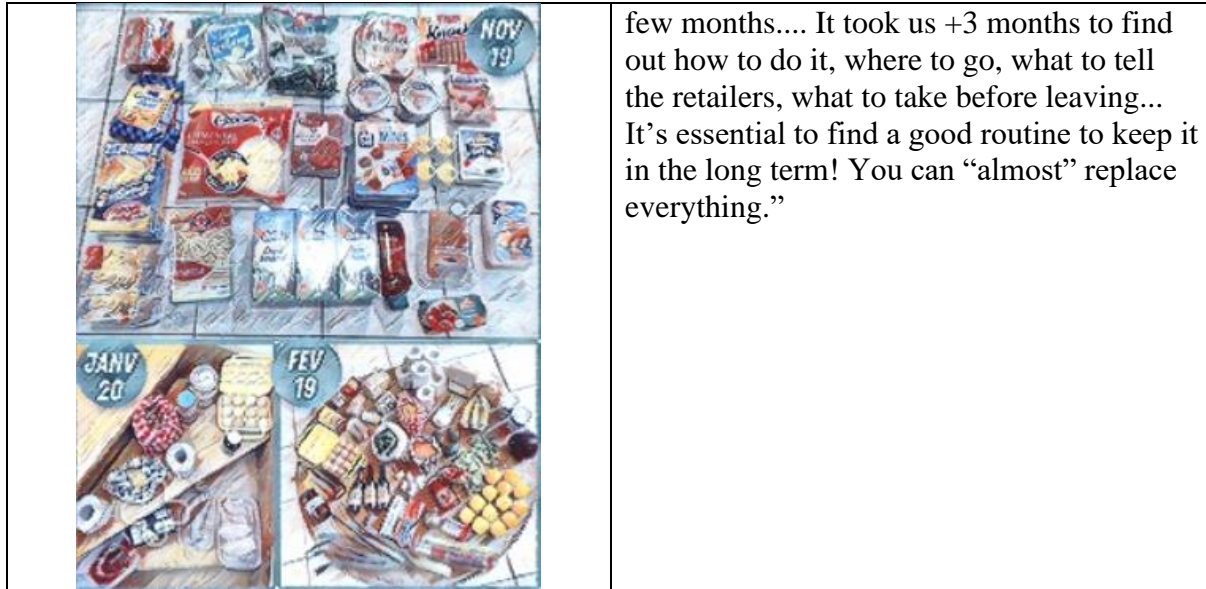
With regard to monitoring, consumers exercise discipline by tracking their efforts and situating themselves in relation to their focal goal; they need to make sure of their progress over time. Instagram post #92 by *direction\_zerodechet* (see figure 6) is an example of this constant monitoring for maintaining sustainable consumption patterns, by highlighting the evolution of purchases month after month. The image depicts a before and after comparison that shows the progress of the behavior. In addition, during one researcher’s participation in a Zero Waste city challenge, the regular entry of waste weighing in an application enabled her to see her efforts and thus helped her monitor her progress toward the goal.

FIGURE 6

ILLUSTRATION OF MEASURING (POST #92)

	“We agree that Zero Waste shopping is much prettier in pictures? Well, the idea is not to do it just for the pictures. But it’s just to show the evolution of our shopping in a
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In terms of the focal goal that consumers initially determine and set for themselves, consumer discipline means measuring the results of their action in relation to this goal. This measurement acts as a form of reinforcement to encourage the behavior and thus promote its maintenance. Indeed, consumers need to see the impact of their efforts in concrete terms to sustain the dynamics of change (Schaffer and Thomson 1992). This result can be a lower environmental or social impact, as mentioned by Instagram post #160 by les\_petits\_ecolos, who imagines how much waste the sustainable consumption pattern has saved (see figure 7), and by post #149 by roots.and.future, who notices that it is not necessary to take out the garbage as often.

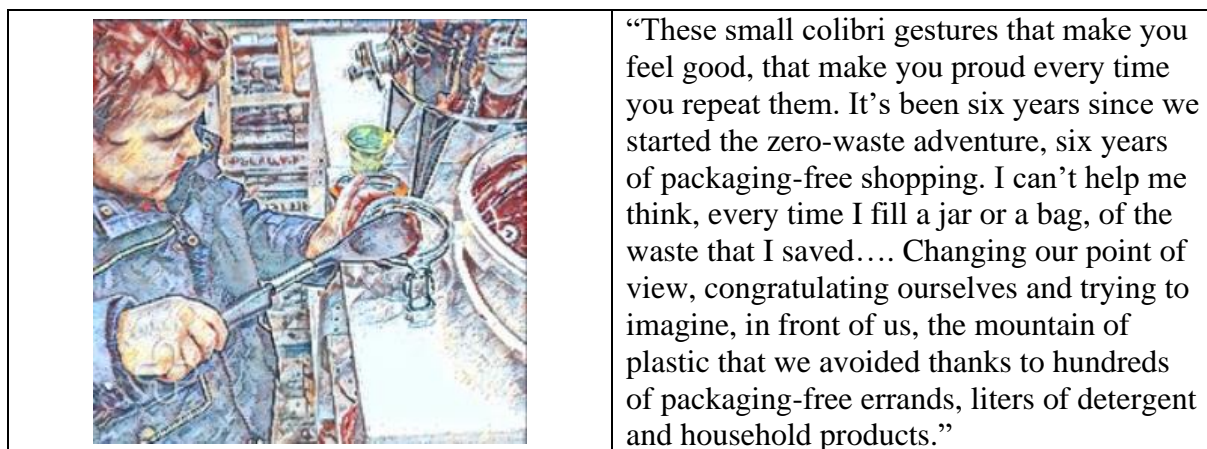
Previous studies have shown that sustainable behaviors are often abstract, vague, and distant from the self (Reczek, Trudel, and White 2018) and that consumers usually do not act on issues that are impalpable in nature (Griskevicius, Cantú, and Van Vugt 2012). Here, consumers who were able to persevere in their sustainable consumption patterns observed tangible results and thus began the dynamics of behavior maintenance. When consumers get close to their goal,

being able to visualize the finish increases their efforts to reach it (Cheema and Bagchi 2011).

The specificity in our case is that the goal might sometimes be difficult to apprehend. This is the reason small clues help show consumers their progress in relation to their goal. The more specific, visual, and concrete this goal is, the more successful consumers are in maintaining discipline.

FIGURE 7

ILLUSTRATION OF MEASURING (POST #160)



Exercising consumer discipline also implies self-rewarding. While disciplined consumers are able to delay gratification, they also need it to encourage themselves to maintain a behavior. In the image in Instagram post #209, the thumbs-up expresses the idea of a successful action that the consumer wants to share with her community (see figure 8). Showcasing (small) successes for themselves but also for the community with which consumers interact is important to keep momentum going. This echoes research that shows the role of positive emotions, such as pride, in determining sustainable consumer behaviors (Bissing-Olson, Fielding, and Iyer 2016).

FIGURE 8

ILLUSTRATION OF SELF-REWARDING AND FACING CHALLENGES (POST #209)



“Amorino ice creams to take out in zero waste? Successful challenge! Nothing is impossible: a little organization, a bit of anticipation, a pinch of resourcefulness, a spoonful of goodwill, a touch of courtesy with the artisans, and the deal is in the bag! Or rather the bowl! Vegan strawberry and chocolate sorbets for me :)”

Disciplined consumers also enjoy facing challenges. Marthe explained that she confronted packaging-free product consumption as if it was a game or a challenge that she needed to tackle. Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi (2012) suggest the importance of relatively difficult and “optimal” challenges to ensure the enjoyment of intrinsically motivated, goal-directed activities. Nevertheless, Marthe had to ask herself questions every time she considered a purchase, to maintain the consumption pattern as well as to challenge the habits she had developed to make sure that they fit into this new consumption pattern. Disciplined consumers are in a process of continuous improvement to maintain sustainable consumption patterns.

### Boundary Conditions of Consumer Discipline

By extending the micro-individual focus to a macro-social focus, our data analysis shows the role of external factors that can hinder or encourage discipline. These factors—the others, the market, and the situation—then constitute boundary conditions to the maintenance of sustainable consumption patterns.

*The Others.* The influence of other people refers to the monitoring role of these people in inhibiting or encouraging consumers in their discipline (Foucault 1975). First, some respondents

expressed how difficult it can be to stay disciplined and aligned with their goals when household members do things differently:

My husband and my kids love to order sushi on Friday nights. We all love that for sure but if it would only be me, I would limit myself. The sushi is always overpacked; it makes me sick.... But objectively it pleases everyone so much that I let myself be tempted because I am alone against everyone; finally, I do not prevent them from ordering but it undermines my principles.” (researcher introspection)

Regarding the influence of others in consumer discipline, Cronin et al. (2015, 1909) highlight a “social dimension to consumer discipline” and specifically the role of “those close to [the consumer].” They describe the role of the others as helpers to assist in compensating for the inabilities of the person involved. Consumers who need to maintain a discipline that was imposed on them generally trust this other person, even if he or she is not exemplary. In our research, consumers are able to discipline themselves but people close to them, in particular their family, may hinder that ability. These others therefore do not act as monitors of or assistants in the effort but as disruptors by adopting behaviors that go in the opposite direction.

Second, disciplined consumers can also assist the others, outside or inside their home, to develop their own discipline. The dynamics of consumers’ mutual assistance is particularly effective in maintaining discipline. Transmitting tips or strategies between peers (i.e., providing or receiving information) and feeling part of a collective network are critical to discipline and, thus, to maintaining sustainable consumption patterns. The following comment from post #210 gives an illustration of this phenomenon:

After a year of changes towards a simpler life I now want to share with you all my tips, advice and ideas to make your transition to a more responsible lifestyle. Here is my food buffet with glass jars to store food.... This first step can be accessible to anyone with a little bit of organization that I could explain later.

In addition to helping consumers develop their own discipline, the others can play a major role in maintenance over time.

Since the end of my participation to the Zero Waste city program, I stopped keeping track of my progress because I did not have to compare it anymore to what others did. I realized that I was less careful. I started to consume again some products that I had stopped consuming because they were generating unnecessary waste and I went back to some bad habits. That's when I realized how important it is to be involved in a group in order to make the process a success. When I act alone I am less serious and attentive; when I share with other people I am more stimulated to go through with the process. (researcher introspection).

Sharing seems to be at the heart of what enables consumers to maintain discipline. Maëlle noted:

With Zero Waste people it's easier to get into a conversation and ask for advice because you share a value of "we're going to keep a little bit the Zero Waste approach and we're going to try to consume packaging-free products...." I've always lived in the countryside with this system of exchange and sharing.... Thanks to all the groups that we have, like WhatsApp with friends, we share, we say, "Hey, you should try this." Or when I went to the cooking workshop, for example, I say, "Well, I tried this, it was not bad." And that's how I discovered things.... It's always linked to the same thing in fact, it's this story of sharing.

This quote corroborates work on the role of others in building consumption together (Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013). Barnhart and Peñaloza (2013) call for an exploration of the dynamics of power when people consume with others and the collective meaning of consumption. In highlighting this collective dimension of consumption, our results show that consumers need to get disciplined to maintain sustainable consumption.

*The market (the offer)*. In the market dimension, the offer and its accessibility constitute the first key elements that can hinder or encourage discipline. When consumers face an offer that remains restricted, compared with the mainstream market of packaged products, it is difficult for them to maintain sustainable consumption patterns. As Mathieu explained:

You quickly realize that when you go shopping to supermarkets, you can't buy anything or very few things without packaging, everything is packaged in plastic, while this is what you try to avoid as much as possible. It does not constitute a mainstream and therefore it does not facilitate the accessibility of the consumption pattern.

Some consumers emphasize how difficult it is to find unpacked products (in Instagram post

#212, the text underscores the difficulty in finding products without any plastic package; figure 9), though they agree that things are changing and that alternatives are available.

FIGURE 9

ILLUSTRATION OF THE OTHERS (POST #212)



Thus, maintaining discipline could be facilitated with an evolution of the market, in particular a change in innovation by retailers and manufacturers.

Manufacturers are adapting and reviewing their range of products and the composition of these products, lightening their packaging, better assuming their social and environmental responsibilities and starting to better respond to this new consumer trend.... Cooking at home was already a strong trend before the crisis. The offer is not really up to the task yet and it will be even less in the coming months. It would be illusory to think that consumers have become “cordon bleu” in a few weeks and that they are now able of all culinary prowess.... We will have to make it easier for them by offering them prepared, pre-cooked or pre-cut products. When the lock down will be over, our consumers will want to keep the benefits of home cooking while they will have infinitely less time to spend for it. It is therefore up to the food industry to innovate in order to help consumers do things well, quickly, all by themselves. (LSA, May 7, 2020, “Covid19, The Urgent Need to Adapt Its Offer”)

According to Cronin et al. (2015), when trying to stay disciplined, consumers largely confront the marketplace as if it was an enemy or a saboteur working to subvert their self-control. Cronin et al. (2015, 1911) refer to a “powerlessness to potentially harmful market processes”, that is, an alienating market in which consumers are trapped by marketing claims that prevent them from maintaining discipline. In another context, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) show the challenges for

"fatshionistas" because their choices in mainstream markets are too limited. Similar to people who go on a diet or plus-size consumers who struggle to find a consumption pattern that meets their needs, consumers who buy packaging-free products must deal with market constraints, without waiting for manufacturers and retailers to evolve in their practices.

The market also refers to a complementary dimension (i.e., the physical accessibility of products). Sustainable consumption patterns indeed require physical actions that some consumers cannot manage to implement. The respondents' discourses reveal a kinesthetic vocabulary (e.g., "crouch," "kneel," "lift arms," "carry at arm's length") that justifies the physical accessibility of sustainable consumption as a constraint that may hinder the maintenance of the consumption pattern. As Amandine noted:

It [packaging-free product shopping] requires a bit of dexterity, of ... well, to go and help oneself ... in the silos, et cetera ... even people in wheelchairs, for example, I imagine that it's [silo] too high, well, things like that, the clutter in the store, et cetera. But I imagine that it [silos] might be thought out for people with reduced mobility and everything, well it's worth thinking about it.

Physical constraints can also be compared with cognitive constraints that prevent individuals from doing things. A store expert noted the physical but also cognitive difficulty in understanding and operating some packaging-free devices in stores (see figure 10).

FIGURE 10

PACKAGING-FREE DEVICES IN STORES



Market rules constitute another important element that enable consumers to exercise discipline. These rules refer to a framework required by sustainable consumption patterns that might be legal or not. When consumers bring their own containers to avoid using store packaging, they may face refusal because the rules of the market are not yet clearly established. With an absence of rules' institutionalization, the balance of power between demand and supply, which does not favor consumers, is still being established. This aspect refers to the question of norms. As the market has not yet adopted the Zero Waste norm, consumers confront difficulty in maintaining discipline in an uncertain and nonstabilized environment. In the case for overpackaging removal (Monnot et al. 2019, 366), manufacturers “will not go down that path unless their competitors do the same.” A store expert also indicated that one of the difficulties is juggling unclear and changing rules. Moreover, when the rules are not fully established, consumers tend to impose their own, as Mathias described:

I forbid myself some things, but they are specific to me in fact, that's what I mean. It's not the packaging-free product consumption that implies that [forbidding oneself some things], I do impose it on [myself].

Cronin et al. (2015) also mention the role of “the object.” In our research, purifying and decontaminating the object (i.e., the packaging-free product) is not relevant. When consumers fail in their discipline and contravene their own rules (i.e., not consuming packaged products),



they may justify their choice and try to neutralize their action. For example, some consumers console themselves by thinking that they will reuse the purchased packaging or recycle it, to minimize the impact of their consumption.

*The situation.* The market offer also needs to be considered in relation to the situation in which the consumption occurs. That is, consumers' environment may inhibit or encourage discipline. Sustainable consumption is easier to maintain by consumers whose daily travel constraints are limited and who live close to packaging-free product stores or by consumers who have time to anticipate their purchases.

Furthermore, when consumers need to leave behaviors they are used to, their discipline may disappear. Many do not know where to source packaging-free products or how to begin consuming sustainably. Going on holidays or moving are also emblematic moments of loss of spatiotemporal reference points that may hinder usual discipline because places are unfamiliar, on the one hand, and time is generally devoted to doing something else, on the other hand. As Sabine commented:

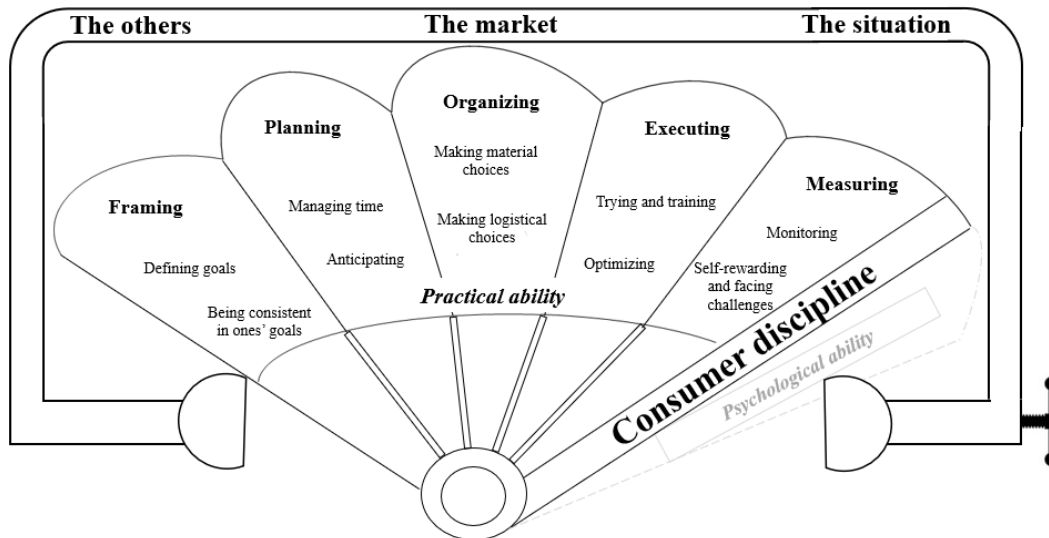
When I'm on vacation with my friends, it's not easy to impose my practice [on] everyone and you do what is easiest with what you can get, so I let go a little, exceptionally ... well, we're on vacation!"

This quote echoes Schultz, Oskamp, and Mainieri's (1995) call to consider interactions with the environment in which sustainable consumption patterns occur. The location serves as another variable that can hinder consumers' exercise of discipline.

Consumer discipline is analogous to a fan (i.e., the exercise of interrelated activities: frame, plan, organize, execute, and measure) caught in a vice (i.e., the three constraining factors: the others, the market, and the situation) (see figure 11).

FIGURE 11

CONSUMER DISCIPLINE, ANALOGOUS TO A FAN CAUGHT IN A VICE



## DISCUSSION

This research proposes a theorization of consumer discipline to deepen understanding of how consumers exercise discipline to maintain sustainable consumption patterns, beyond adoption. Our research posits that many consumers can discipline themselves if they have the psychological and practical abilities to do so and if the environment in which they live does not work against them.

Consumer discipline is the ability to perform tasks to achieve a self-determined long-term goal (i.e., reducing or eliminating packaging waste). Beyond a psychological ability, it implies a practical ability to frame, plan, organize, execute, and measure the concretization of the goal. This “how-to” approach of consumer discipline sheds greater light on discipline and the way consumers attain the targeted goal. However, this ability can be hindered or, alternatively, encouraged depending on the environment, others, the market, and the situation in which consumers find themselves. Even just one of these elements can undermine consumer discipline

and, thus, the maintenance of sustainable consumption patterns. Overall, this research makes contributions to two fields: (1) the field of sustainable consumption in general and of Zero Waste and packaging-free consumption research in particular and (2) the field of consumer control, with another view of consumer discipline.

### Contributions to the Field of Sustainable Consumption

Research on sustainable consumption has examined adoption of sustainable consumption patterns and the role of psychological factors (e.g., motivation) in this adoption (e.g. Pieters 1991). Compared with this research, our study focuses on the maintenance of sustainable behavior, rather than its adoption, and highlights the role of consumer discipline in effortful maintenance. Our study extends this field in three ways. First, it enriches the understanding of factors that drive consumers to maintain sustainable behaviors. Beyond motivation, which generally explains the adoption of sustainable consumption patterns, research has shown the importance of individual abilities (motivation–opportunity–ability model; Ölander and Thøgersen 1995; Thøgersen 2005). While several studies have addressed these abilities (e.g., Stern 2000), our research highlights a specific ability—namely, consumer discipline—and the actions that underpin it.

Second, our research echoes work on sustainable behaviors that mentions the effortful dimension (Thøgersen 2005), which can undermine these behaviors. Previous research has revealed the role of “perceived consumer effectiveness,” defined as “a domain-specific belief that the efforts of an individual can make a difference in the solution to a problem” (Ellen et al. 1991, 103), in maintaining sustainable behaviors over time (Ellen, Wiener, and Cobb-Walgren 1991; White, MacDonnell, and Dahl 2011). Indeed, individuals’ low sense of self-effectiveness

in preserving the environment explains why they do not adopt or change their behaviors in favor of the environment. Our research shows how consumers exercise discipline partly out of a feeling of self-efficacy. To sustain discipline, consumers perform different activities: frame, plan, organize, execute and measure to develop efficiency in the consumption pattern and to maintain it. The feeling of self-efficacy goes hand in hand with consumer discipline.

Third, we found that some consumers perceive the maintenance of a sustainable consumption pattern and its inherent discipline as a pleasant experience, whereas previous research generally finds perceived constraints (Beitzen-Heineke et al. 2017; Fuentes et al. 2019). Our research highlights what a respondent called “the paradox of simplicity”—achieving a goal (i.e., maintaining sustainable consumption patterns) can be difficult, but the process to attain it (i.e., exercising discipline) can be simple. When consumers see that their efforts result in success (the “measuring” aspect), they reinvest their effort on an ongoing basis. Corral-Verdugo et al. (2009, 2011) show that consumers engage more in proenvironmental behaviors when they derive some hedonic pleasure or happiness from them. Consumers appreciate being able to track their progress, and they experience joy every time they reach a subordinate goal.

#### Contributions to the Field of Consumer Research on Discipline

First, this research contributes to consumer behavior studies that focus on “self-control” (Baumeister 2002). Beyond psychological aspects that characterize self-control, this research shows the power of practical aspects, because self-control is also a question of exercising discipline. To be able to set self-determined long-term goals, recognize costs and consequences of actions, and monitor and detect shifts in motivation away from goal-directed actions and rectify them, consumers need to deploy practical abilities.

Second, and in line with the previous point, we show that discipline needs to be viewed as the social construction of individual ability. Indeed, while discipline reflects an ability at the individual level, it is also actionable at the level of the environmental context in which it occurs. We show that others, the market, and the situation can constitute barriers or favorable elements for discipline. Thus, consumers' abilities are individual, but they are also collective. Our research leads us to question the purely individual approach of discipline, which often makes consumers feel isolated and guilty, and argue for approaches that are rooted more in the context in which they are embedded (Fischer et al. 2007). In a similar vein, Foucault's (1975) circumscription of discipline indicates that discipline results from powers and counterpowers. Here, it is the power of consumers that enables discipline, but they encounter forces that can hinder them in their quest.

Third, previous research generally presents self-control as resistance to temptation that requires people to alter their behavioral patterns and inhibits their dominant response (Muraven and Baumeister 2000). Self-control also refers to choosing a behavior that aligns with social standards, norms, and morals, despite personal preferences (Baumeister 2002). The object we investigated herein is different. Indeed, sustainable consumption, such as packaging-free product consumption, is not the standard (the dominant market is packaged products). Consumers need to escape from the dominant market proposition to an alternative (i.e., packaging-free products). Therefore, their exercise of discipline is not so much related to the psychological dimension of self-control but to the practical dimension, which involves the exercise of interrelated activities. Our research thus contributes to the literature by examining a minority behavior that has favorable collective impacts (i.e., reducing or even eliminating packaging waste).

Fourth, in our examination of the maintenance of sustainable consumption patterns over

time, we found that consumers exercise discipline little by little and that it is precisely this progression that allows the maintenance of the consumption pattern. Discipline to maintain sustainable consumption patterns implies a set of interrelated activities, as in project management. The temporal dimension is fundamental to implement these activities that necessary start with framing the focal goal. Nevertheless, respondents' discourse shows that there are loops between the different activities, both influencing the other.

### Societal and Managerial Implications

Research on sustainable consumption and packaging-free product consumption emphasizes multiple perceived constraints (Beitzen-Heineke et al. 2017) and sacrifices that consumers must make when engaging in sustainable consumption. These sacrifices make such consumption difficult to pursue because of a perceived complex path (Longo, Shankar, and Nuttall 2019). Our research extends the literature on consumer responsabilization (Cherrier and Türe 2022; Giesler and Veresiu 2014). We show that consumers need to exercise discipline to maintain sustainable consumption patterns but this ability can be hindered or, alternatively, encouraged depending on the environment in which consumers find themselves.

Consumer discipline to maintain sustainable consumption patterns refers to a set of activities that consumers impose on themselves and follow to achieve a self-determined goal in an environment that is effort-demanding. While consumer discipline implies an individual effort, this work has implications for firms and public policy, which also have responsibility in making effort for sustainable consumption. That is, these stakeholders need to help reduce the constraints on consumers so that they can more easily maintain sustainable behaviors (Thøgersen 2005).

Both the environment and the market can contribute to disrupting consumer discipline and

thus interrupt maintenance dynamics. Because consumers' choices depend on retailers' choices, retailers should more systematically favor sustainable offers (e.g., cookies without packaging) and eliminate nonsustainable offers (e.g., packaged cookies) when possible. Manufacturers and retailers can also provide consumers options when sustainable products are not available (e.g., by offering cooking workshops or recipe cards) and give them advice on best practices or tools to optimize their time and resources. The aim would be to support their organization by offering them services. For example, companies could offer step-by-step guides to help consumers plan and organize. To measure their consumption patterns, consumers also need monitoring tools, such as self-assessment tools. Brands could offer loyalty cards, for example, to help consumers identify the proportion of sustainable purchases made.

For consumers who believe that maintaining a sustainable consumption pattern and exercising discipline will be too difficult, manufacturers and retailers could also innovate to allure them to sustainable consumption. Indeed, packaging-free product silos are often unattractive, compared with the colorful shelves of packaged goods. Marketers should thus consider aesthetics in addition to environmental benefits to promote a positive perception of sustainable consumption and the discipline necessary to maintain it. As the collective dimension is also crucial for the maintenance of sustainable consumption patterns (Cherrier and Türe 2022), brands should find ways to foster brand subcultures on social networks or by hiring specific influencers.

Maintaining sustainable consumption can also be difficult in an environment in which standards are not established and manufacturer and retailer practices diverge. Consumers must juggle between more or less durable offers, depending on the shops they visit. This situation argues in favor of stabilizing norms that consumers can conform to and that support their

behavioral changes. In this case, the role of public policy is essential to define rules that manufacturers and retailers should follow.

Finally, support can also come from other institutions such as municipalities, which sometimes offer sustainable services (e.g., composters) to their citizens. To encourage discipline, they could provide consumers with weighing scales to help them measure their garbage weight. They could also help consumers attain a concrete vision of their performance by holding performance races or challenges. Such events would allow consumers to position themselves in relation to the achievement of their focal goal.

#### Further Research

Our research raises several issues for future research. For each of our results, other types of sustainable consumption patterns might come into play, such as mobility (e.g., taking a bicycle rather than other more polluting means of transport) or food self-sufficiency (e.g., becoming self-sufficient by managing a vegetable garden and no longer frequenting large-scale retailers). To maintain the use of a bicycle on a daily basis, for example, consumers must set the subordinate goal of riding to work a few times a week (framing). They must also define a period of use for the bicycle and reconfiguring their daily travel times (planning). They must then choose equipment for bad weather or to overcome security constraints (organizing). Next, they need to try to optimize their journey by finding new bicycle lanes or shortcuts (executing). They can also try to rent or buy an electric bicycle if the market offers such (influence of the market). Finally, they then need to observe how their bike-riding has helped them (e.g., decrease in gasoline bill, enhanced well-being) in their daily life (measuring). This example shows that our results can be generalized to other contexts, but a replication study on other sustainable consumption patterns



would be useful.

Another important avenue for future research would be to examine more systematically how consumers' personal histories are linked to cultural factors that inform their persistence. That is, research could test consumers' predisposition to discipline depending on their individual characteristics. Our sample mainly included white, educated, and middle-class consumers. Thus, investigating whether our results also apply to other types of consumers would be useful. Consumers may be unequal in their ability to establish discipline: some consumers, whose motivations are particularly strong, may easily discipline themselves given their social or intellectual capital, while others may not. This raises the question of the potentially greater level of effort required for consumers with fewer personal resources. Moreover, research should explore the role of culture in consumer persistence of sustainable consumption. Indeed, our research context is on packaging-free consumption, but packaging may carry significant symbolic dimensions that we ignored (e.g., in Japanese culture, in which packaging constitutes a standard of propriety and communication).

Doing so would shed greater light on the accountability of all actors, not just consumers. The intensification of consumer responsabilization is not the only key to the transition to sustainable consumption.

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