

Becoming Sustainable: A Qualitative Study of the Consumer Journey to Engagement

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Abstract

Achieving sustainable development goals depends in part on consumers' active involvement. Yet many people who express cognitive and emotional support for sustainability do not translate it into consistent market choices and household practices, demonstrating the well-documented attitude-behaviour gap. This paper argues that consumers "become" rather than "are" engaged in sustainable consumption. Consequently, engaging them is a gradual process through which they build and sustain their involvement. Supporting them in this process requires a holistic approach, triggering not only their minds and hearts but above all their actions. The study has two objectives. First, it seeks to characterise the multidimensional process of sustainable consumer engagement by identifying stages and critical moments in the transition from neutral or unsustainable behaviours to stable sustainable routines. Second, it identifies the main catalysts and inhibitors shaping this process. The paper draws on a qualitative study involving 20 in-depth interviews conducted in spring 2026. Using "engagement stories," the interviews explored respondents' pathways toward greater sustainability in everyday consumption. The material was analysed through a deductive-inductive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that sustainable engagement rarely begins with pro-environmental ideology alone. More often, it is triggered by specific life circumstances and everyday tensions, such as budget pressures, visible waste, health concerns, or direct experiences of environmental degradation. Maintaining sustainable practices, though, requires consumers to overcome time constraints, financial costs, fragmented knowledge, and infrastructural frictions. The most durable forms of engagement emerge when sustainable choices combine personal values with practical and economic benefits and become embedded in daily routines. The paper demonstrates how individual sustainable consumption is gradually built in three-dimensional space set by consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. By tracing this process, the study contributes to research on sustainable consumption and offers recommendations for marketers and public institutions seeking more effective interventions to support sustainable transformation.

Keywords: consumer engagement, sustainable behaviours, behavioural interventions, behavioural change

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