

Article

# Making Sense of Sustainability: A Practice Theories Approach to Buying Food

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**Abstract:** In light of global climate change the relevance of sustainable food consumption is growing, yet access to it has not correspondingly developed. This paper addresses the issue of accessing sustainable food from a practice theories perspective. The case of students in Paris is examined by means of interviews and participant observation. Four indicators serve to structure the results, i.e., mode of recruitment, mode of engagement, degree of commitment, and bundles of practices. Based on this analysis, three types are constructed, each with distinct access issues. We conclude that access to sustainable food is not necessarily determined by financial means only, nor by individual attitudes, but should be analysed as embedded in the complex dynamics of multiple social practices. Building on these insights means that more attention for the actual practice of accessing sustainable food, the different elements, and bundles involved is needed when looking for ways to increase access to sustainable food.

**Keywords:** sustainable consumption; food access; practice theories

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## 1. Introduction

A call for the consumption of more sustainable food is increasingly heard [1,2]. To achieve this aim, a crucial element is how to advance access to sustainable food in order to make buying sustainable food more feasible. Some scholars argue that improved information provision about the sustainability of food will enhance access (see e.g., [3]). Behind this approach lies the assumption of a conscious consumer who makes rational decisions based on information and price. Yet, this expectation fails to address the so-called attitude-behaviour gap, or knowledge-to-action gap [4,5]. This means that consumers do not always straightforwardly act upon the knowledge on sustainability provided to them, but rather are also guided by other issues, including material, mental, and social barriers. Other literature primarily emphasizes the role of the supply side and the physical environment in accessing healthy and sustainable food (see [6,7] for an overview). Financial circumstances of consumers are also frequently flagged as a major factor determining access to sustainable food [7,8].

Critics of all of these interpretations of access instead call for more attention to the role of the broader “food environment” and consumers’ interactions with it [4–6]. These authors argue that understanding access as dictated by information, financial circumstances, or supply-side dynamics only, overlooks crucial factors, like the social and cultural environment, as well as personal preferences. Rather, access should be explained within the context of people’s “lived experiences” [7]. Such an approach warrants a qualitative study from a consumers’ perspective, to complement the existing primarily quantitative research focussed on consumer values and attitudes (see e.g., [2,9,10]).

In order to conduct such a study, the body of practice theories offers insightful theoretical and analytical tools (see [8–11]). With their focus on social practice as the basic unit of analysis instead of overstating either individual actors or social structures, practice theories start from daily routines

and habits to explain social reality. When applied to the question of access to sustainable food, a practice theoretical outlook can provide an analytical framework that moves beyond deterministic explanations. This paper shows how access is embedded in practices and how this conceptualization contributes to identifying what relevant elements enable access to sustainable food and to the embedded understanding of what sustainable food actually entails.

The main aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical contribution to the debate on sustainable food consumption by illustrating how a practice theoretical approach serves particularly well to explain the dynamics of consumption and access. In light of this aim, a case study is selected to inform our analysis as much as possible [11], guided by the following question: what are the practices of buying sustainable food and which access issues are prevalent in them? The case of students in Paris was chosen to study buying practices and access dynamics for several reasons. Firstly, students are going through a transitional phase. Having recently left their parents' home with its meanings, habits, and lifestyle, students enter a stage where they are faced with the challenge of developing their own perspectives and routines, in a context of significant budgetary and space constraints. Secondly, in Paris the supply of sustainable food is rather diverse, leading to a broad variety of potential buying practices. Thirdly, students provide for an interesting population in terms of financial circumstances, as they often have to live on a tight budget, especially challenging in Paris, which is characterized by high costs of living and expensive groceries. Typically, students will have expensive and small rooms in which they may not have fridges, freezers, or ovens at their disposal. Students in Paris may not be the average food consumer, but through the in-depth study of the dynamics in their daily practices we may generate more insights into the ways in which consumers more generally deal with sustainability when accessing food.

This paper deals with "sustainable" food, but it is less concerned with the actual sustainability of food choices. Instead, its main interest is how consumers make sense of sustainability in their food buying-practices, as public perception of what constitutes environmentally-sustainable food varies significantly. This study is, thus, specifically interested in the ways in which consumers themselves understand sustainable food. Admittedly, "sustainability" is a broad term, which is commonly conceptualized as consisting of three pillars: economic development, social development, and environmental protection (see [9] for a recent consumption study using all three dimensions, [12] for a more elaborate account). In French, however, this general concept of sustainability is difficult to translate. We, therefore, chose to opt for the equivalent of "environmentally-friendly food" in the interviews, thereby establishing a clear focus on the environmental dimension of sustainability. Beyond this delimitation, however, interviewees were free to interpret the concept, leading to insights in what consumers themselves considered as sustainable food.

The results of the case study are analysed based on a novel theoretical framework derived from practice theories, serving to distinguish between people on the basis of their modes of recruitment, modes of engagement, degrees of commitment, and bundles of practice. Our results indicate how actual buying patterns differ between practitioners, how access is contingent and how mismatches can occur between supply and demand. We conclude that access cannot, and should not, be considered as the outcome of a singular practice, but that interactions between materials and infrastructure, on the one hand, and consumer lifestyles with their temporalities and preferences, on the other, play a crucial role.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical framework of practice theories, followed by an outline of the applied methodology in Section 3. In the fourth section, the case study on students in Paris will be presented, and the closing section contains the discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The growing body of literature on practice theories (see i.e., [13–19]) contains rich insights for consumption research, mainly due to their appreciation of routines and habits. Research on sustainable

food consumption is particularly well served by these notions, as a large share of consumption takes place on a non-deliberate level; “we consume in a state of distraction” (after [20]). At the same time, routines can also be disrupted and change can come about, instigated for instance by developments in the social and/or physical environment. This practice theoretical vocabulary is then particularly insightful when considering the case of students, who go through a transitory phase during which habits from the parental home are translated into a new environment and whereby routines are challenged. These changes have consequences for both buying practices and access issues.

When operationalizing this practice theoretical literature into a conceptual framework four indicators were selected. These indicators were drawn up inductively when interpreting the data in order to analyse both performance and the entity of the practice [14]; i.e., to understand how the actual “doings and sayings” in the practice are linked through meanings, ends, connections, etc. [21]. The indicators chosen to uncover this entity and consequently differentiate between access issues are: mode of recruitment, mode of engagement, degree of commitment, and bundles of practice. First of all, “mode of recruitment” into the practice [22] refers to the way in which practitioners were enrolled in the practice of buying sustainable food. This indicator was chosen to underline the relevance of considering social trajectories [14] and to shed more light on change: what are some of the elements of practices that play a role in people changing their buying patterns to become a participant in the practice of buying sustainable food?

The next two indicators (“mode of engagement” and “degree of commitment”) are borrowed from Southerton [18], and elaborated further by Plessz and Gojard [23]. A practice contains multiple “modes of engagement”, referring to the way in which practitioners engage in a practice, or in Halkier [15] terms to the “emotional and normative orientations related to what and how to do something” (p. 361). This indicator reflects the different ways in which practitioners make sense of their own performances, particularly with regard to the status and place of their concerns with sustainability.

“Degree of commitment” to a practice, then, is “the value a practitioner attaches to the practice” [23] (p. 174), or the extent to which practitioners are willing to “go out of their way”: going beyond convenience and adapting their habits more fundamentally. This indicator can be used to reflect on the viability of the practice in the face of change: how far does a practitioner’s commitment go and which access obstacles will prove too much?

Finally, the last indicator is “bundle of practices”, which refers to other practices linked to buying sustainable food. Such bundling can occur, for instance, when, in Schatzki [24] terms, “their [the practices’] organizations contain the same element, i.e., the same end, rule, task or understanding” (p. 12). The present study is interested in the practices that are linked by their sharing of the aim of environmental sustainability. Identifying bundles of practices can show typical combinations of practices, illuminate the relative place the practice of buying sustainable food occupies in practitioners’ lives, and demonstrate the consequences for access of this position.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Case Study Background

The general attitude among French consumers is positive towards buying more environmentally-friendly food, provided that the prices of these foods are equal to their conventional variants and that a larger offer of sustainable food is available [25]. In France, the home consumer market for organic food is growing, for instance, between 2014 and 2015 by almost 15% [26]. Nevertheless, organic food is estimated to make up only 2.5% of the total food market. Organic food in France is mostly offered through four food providers: (1) supermarkets (46% of total organic food purchase); (2) specialized organic stores (36%); (3) direct sales (fresh market or farm; 13%); and (4) independent shopkeepers (5%) [26]. Consumers tend to buy organic food through more than one of these means of provision. An additional option for buying local, often organic fruits and vegetables, is through box schemes or AMAPs (“Associations pour le Maintien d’une Agriculture Paysanne” or “Associations for the

maintenance of a peasant agriculture”), which are increasingly becoming popular in France [27]. These AMAPs, a form of consumer-supported agriculture [28], consist of a local farmer and a group of individuals who form an alliance in which the growers and consumers share the risks and benefits of food production, and whereby consumers have products delivered from the farm every week. In 2012, over 1600 of such AMAP networks had been set up all over France, of which 260 were in the Ile-de-France region, where Paris is located [29].

### 3.2. Methods

Parisian students engaging in the practice of buying sustainable food were recruited as participants in various ways. First of all, they were approached through personal contacts at INRA’s ALISS research unit (Alimentation et Sciences Sociales, where the main researcher was based during the research); through student AMAP networks; through REFEDD (Réseau Français des Etudiants pour le Développement Durable, a pro-environmental association across French universities, with a Paris-based branch); and, finally, through snowballing. The main sources of qualitative data were semi-structured interviews with these students. As our main theoretical interest was in mapping practices, the interview guide was based on the operationalization of central concepts from practice theories, mostly based on Gram-Hanssen [30] overview of general elements of a practice. A total of 19 interviews were conducted over a period of two months (January–February 2016). Each of the interviews was transcribed in their original language (French)—translations into English of the quotes used in this paper were made by the main researcher and corrected by a French native at INRA. The interviews were consequently uploaded into Weft QDA (an open source software package for the analysis of qualitative data; Fenton, London, UK) and coded. Some codes were drawn up a priori, i.e., general practice theoretical concepts based on Gram-Hanssen [30] overview. These were complemented by more exact inductive codes grounded in the data, such as specific access issues and strategies students employed to address these challenges.

To complement the interviews, participant observation through “shopping along” was done, accompanying two students in their shopping routes through their usual location for doing groceries. These observation moments were supplemented by attendance of the distribution of vegetable boxes at one of the AMAPs (Leg’Ulm, the AMAP of the École Normale Supérieure). Lastly, the main researcher’s own trips to organic stores and supermarkets during her stay in Paris also served as observation material, in which her foreigner’s (Dutch) viewpoint allowed for a specifically perceptive outlook.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. General

Of the 19 students that were interviewed, 13 were female and six male. Most of them ( $n = 17$ ) studied at so-called “grandes écoles”. These are relatively elite higher education establishments with selective admittance procedures, and include AgroParisTech ( $n = 5$ ; no fees), the École Normale Supérieure ( $n = 3$ ; pays its students a stipend) and Sciences Po ( $n = 3$ ; has an income-based fee scale). The ages of the interviewees ranged from 18 to 26, with an average of 22 years, and most students were in the Master’s phase of their studies. Their study programs were diverse, with ecology being the most common study orientation ( $n = 5$ ), followed by a rather splintered field including business management, marketing techniques, sociology and environmental politics (all  $n = 2$ ). The average monthly income of the interviewees was 974 euro (min. 400, max. 1600). To compare this average to national French statistics: the minimum wage for 2016 was 1467 euro, and the poverty line set at 734 euro, with six interviewees falling under this line [31].

Concerning what constitutes “sustainable food consumption”, the various elements that were brought up by the participants were buying organic, local, seasonal, fresh/unprocessed food, eating less meat, vegetarianism, veganism, and buying products with less or no packaging. To clarify, when interviewees indicated they were a member of an AMAP, they checked the boxes of “organic”,

“local”, and “seasonal”, as AMAP products are all of these. Both organic and local were highlighted as important criteria for sustainable food by every single interviewee. Seasonality was also taken into account by almost everyone ( $n = 17$ ), followed by eating less meat ( $n = 15$ ). The number of actual vegetarians was much lower ( $n = 5$ ), and only one interviewee indicated she was a vegan, with another one expressing a leaning towards veganism. Packaging was referred to by about half of the interviewees.

The various locations for buying sustainable food that were mentioned were supermarkets, (online) organic stores, AMAPs and fresh markets. The most commonly used food provider was the supermarket; because organic stores are very expensive, many students resorted to shopping at the organic aisle in (large) supermarkets, where organic products are less costly and clearly displayed. However, other interviewees stated their dislike of supermarkets, because of the sheer amount of choice, the atmosphere, and/or the lacking offer of unpackaged products.

By contrast, the option to buy unpackaged products is amply available in the numerous organic stores in Paris. 12 out of 19 students indicated they went to organic stores to buy at least a share of their food products. At the same time, this option to buy loose products also withheld some students from shopping at organic stores, as practical issues like having to bring boxes and jars to the store when doing groceries did not match very well with the often impromptu nature of their shopping trips.

The AMAP or vegetable box scheme turned out to be popular. About half ( $n = 9$ ) of the participants were members of an AMAP. These AMAPs are tailored to the rhythm of student life. Whereas conventional AMAPs are usually paid for a whole year in advance, in Paris specific student-oriented AMAPs are well available which could be paid for per month or even per week. Quantities are also flexible: there is usually the option of sharing a box with another AMAP member, or paying per item. Lastly, fresh markets were also used for sustainable shopping, although only by a minority ( $n = 6$ ). Fresh markets have limited “opening hours” (often only on Sunday morning), which seemed a bad fit with the temporality of student life.

#### 4.2. Typology

To map the practice of buying sustainable food and related access issues, a typology was drawn up to do justice to the variation in the sample and allow for an accurate description of access problems (see Table 1 below). This typology is based on the four indicators from practice theories that were elaborated above in Section 2, and constructs three types: the food environmentalist, the balancing environmentalist, and the comprehensive environmentalist. Essentially, each of the types in the typology represents a different answer to the question: To what extent do you take the environment into account in buying food and beyond?

**Table 1.** Typology.

	<b>(1) The Food Environmentalist</b>	<b>(2) The Balancing Environmentalist</b>	<b>(3) The Comprehensive Environmentalist</b>
<b>Mode of recruitment</b>	Continuation	Modification	Transformation
<b>Mode of engagement</b>	Concerns with environment, health, quality and ethics in food only	Concerns with environment, health, quality, ethics and social equality in food and other domains	Concerns with environment in food and other domains
<b>Degree of commitment</b>	Know their limits	Question their limits	Push their limits
<b>Bundles of practice</b>	Recycling, buying second-hand	Transportation, recycling, saving energy, buying second-hand, activism	Transportation, recycling, saving energy, buying second-hand, activism

Below, we will first provide a brief introduction to each type by presenting an exemplary member of each category and sketch out the type’s general understanding of sustainable food and their buying practices. Consequently, we will further distinguish between the types and their participation in the

practice of buying sustainable food by addressing each of the four indicators individually, and finally discuss the resulting access issues that characterize each type.

#### 4.2.1. Introducing the Types

To start with the food environmentalists ( $n = 4$ ), Sarah (23) is in the second year of her Master's program in business management. Her father is a farmer and sensitized her to the importance of animal well-being. Eggs, fruits, and vegetables are the most important products Sarah almost always buys organically. Seasonality of products is something she also learned at home. She does indicate the problem of high prices for organic products. For Sarah, buying sustainable food does not mean a large overturning of her habits. Rather, it is routine for her to take the environment into account through her shopping: "Actually, I kind of do the same things as at home, when I do my groceries. I've sort of followed the habits from home. This coincides with a limited extension of her environmental concern to other domains".

For all food environmentalists, "sustainable food" means at least organic, local, and seasonal food. Three also mention eating less meat, with one being a vegetarian, and one person pays attention to the aspect of packaging. As for their buying patterns: the supermarket is the most popular provider of sustainable food, where choices for or against environmentally friendly food are sometimes made based on the mood and budget of the moment. One food environmentalist is also member of an AMAP and half of all food environmentalists go to the fresh market, but only one indicated to also shopping at an organic store. This group hardly pays attention to the environment when eating out.

Turning to the second type, Arthur (21) is a typical balancing environmentalist ( $n = 9$ ). He is a first year Master's student in environmental politics and economics. At home, he was not particularly taught to care for the environment. Over the course of his studies, Arthur began to develop an interest in the environment and became a member of pro-environmental associations. He pays attention to seasonality, eating less meat, and for half a year he also subscribes to his university's AMAP. For the remainder of his food products he shops at the next door supermarket—which he describes as not necessarily sustainable, but where he does look at the origin of products and buys organic products when possible. Arthur's concern with the environment is also extended to other domains, such as transportation, recycling, and energy consumption. He is willing to pay a bit more, and to travel somewhat further to buy organic products, but he also states that "if it [i.e., sustainable food] is really inaccessible, that is to say, if I have to travel for half an hour for something I can also find just across the street, I will stop".

Balancing environmentalists' interpretation of what constitutes "sustainable food" includes a sensitivity to food being local, organic, and seasonal for almost all of its members (except for two who do not refer to seasonality). There is more attention to the packaging of food ( $n = 5$ ) than among food environmentalists, and six out of nine balancing environmentalists also refer to eating less meat as important, with one actual vegetarian. Buying patterns are more structured and consistent than among food environmentalists. Although like the latter, balancing environmentalists shop at supermarkets for organic food, organic stores are also visited more often. Likewise, AMAP membership is higher, allowing for more constancy in buying sustainable food. Moreover, balancing environmentalists buy more products in their sustainable versions and some also take the environment into account when eating out.

Lastly, Lea (22) is an exemplary comprehensive environmentalist ( $n = 6$ ). She is in the second year of her Master's in agroecology. For Lea, taking the environment into account has meant a huge change in many aspects of her life. Growing up, she was not particularly sensitized to taking care of the environment. Her motivation for buying sustainable food primarily comes from friends she regularly had discussions and watched documentaries with on environmental issues. This trajectory was sped up during her time abroad studying and working at organic farms. Lea says about herself that she has "completely changed her diet". She is now a vegetarian with vegan tendencies, and purchases all of her groceries at an organic store, clearly expressing a strong dislike of supermarkets: "I can't

even go in anymore". In addition, she extends her concern with the environment to a large number of other practices: next to the more frequently mentioned practices such as transportation and recycling, Lea also changed to a greener bank.

Comprehensive environmentalists check the most boxes in answering what "sustainable food" comprises. All of them mention organic, local, seasonal, eating less meat, and all—minus one—also refer to packaging. Moreover, half of them are vegetarians, of whom two are vegan or inclining towards veganism. Regarding buying patterns, comprehensive environmentalists tend to buy almost all of their food products in their organic versions. All comprehensive environmentalists shop in organic stores, and some even exclusively do their groceries there. Supermarkets are also visited, but limitedly so, and only to complement. Four out of six comprehensive environmentalists also subscribe to an AMAP. This group is also the only group to categorically include eating out in the scope of their environmental concerns.

#### 4.2.2. Indicator 1: Mode of Recruitment

The recruitment of food environmentalists to the practice of buying sustainable food is the logical extension of a previously existing concern with food and is labelled "continuation". All members of this category were sensitized by their parents to pay attention to eating well and having a healthy, high-quality diet. Like Sarah, all food environmentalists referred to growing up in the countryside to explain their motivation for buying sustainable food. Due to this mode of recruitment, for food environmentalists buying sustainable food is not a drastically new practice demanding the invention and application of new routines. Their "routinized ( . . . ) behaviour" [14] or "doings and sayings" [32] are not significantly challenged.

Balancing environmentalists' mode of recruitment into the practice of buying sustainable food is characterized as "modification". Balancing environmentalists were recruited into the practice through studies or friends or both, and by a concern for the environment rather than for food. Their trigger for turning to this practice has come later in life, induced by exogenous factors in their changing (social) environment. As such, participation in the practice is not in continuity with their trajectory but rather "confronts" ["brings to the front", from practical to discursive consciousness, [33]] their habits and routines. Still, these changes are not as transformative as for the comprehensive environmentalists, but only present a modification to people's overall habits.

Comprehensive environmentalists entered the practice of buying sustainable food through a mode of recruitment called "transformation". Except for one, none of the comprehensive environmentalists were sensitized to respecting the environment by their parents. Rather, their motivations for participating in the practice of buying sustainable food can be found in more profoundly disruptive factors. Three out of six mention living abroad for an exchange semester or internship as contributing to their changing views, marking clear moments of disruption. The other three refer to frequent encounters with environmentally minded friends or enrolment in environmental associations as sources for transformation. For comprehensive environmentalists, these exogenous factors fundamentally altered existing routines and generated an altogether different "logic of practice" [34].

#### 4.2.3. Indicator 2: Mode of Engagement

Food environmentalists' mode of engagement with the practice of buying sustainable food is characterized by two "orientations" [15]. Firstly, a concern with the environment is not exclusive: it has to compete with other criteria for food. Three out of four group members indicate a concern with health, quality and/or ethics, when it comes to deciding which food to buy. Secondly, this engagement is limited to the practice of buying sustainable food and does not abundantly expand into other practices.

Balancing environmentalists have a more elaborate mode of engagement which includes an extension of environmental concern into other domains, such as mobility, recycling, saving energy, buying second-hand, and participation in pro-environment associations. However, like for the food environmentalists, a concern for the environment has to compete with other food criteria, such as

health, quality, and ethics. Shopping along with Tisha provided a neat illustration of these concerns with health and quality, as she repeatedly indicated the better quality and taste of specific organic products when verbalizing her choices of products. For instance, she explains her choice for the cheapest organic label jam:

“Those are too expensive [points at the jams from a specific organic label]. And this one costs one euro [points at and takes the jam from the supermarket’s private organic label]. In fact it’s the same price as the non-organic jam. So well, you don’t know whether “organic”, whether that means something. But it’s true that it’s better, well, you normally have less sugar. Anyway, the quality is considerably better, and it’s the same price.”

Clearly, in this case, quality and health are more important to Tisha than the precise philosophy or (environmental) values underlying organic labels.

Finally, comprehensive environmentalists’ mode of engagement is characterized by a concern with the environment in buying food and in other domains. What mainly distinguishes comprehensive from balancing environmentalists here is the environment being the main criterion in buying food, rather than having to compete with health or quality.

#### 4.2.4. Indicator 3: Degree of Commitment

Food environmentalists’ degree of commitment is restricted: they “know their limits”. To illustrate: Chloe repeatedly stresses her apprehension of supermarkets, but still opts for the easiest way and always goes there for her sustainable shopping. Buying sustainable food in the supermarket is not very demanding: it does not require a major rearrangement of shopping routes or routines, and is the most popular food provider among this category of consumers.

Balancing environmentalists’ have a higher degree of commitment which is best described as “questioning their limits”. An example can be found in Brenda, a 23 year old student in business management, for whom the environment is “something I have in the back of my mind often when I make choices in my daily life”, but who does distinguish herself from the extremely committed people: “There are these people who are super engaged and all, for me it’s just occasionally some small things”. Yet, these “small things” do cover quite a few practices, i.e., mobility, recycling, saving energy, buying second-hand, and activism. Brenda also buys a lot of organic products, in the supermarket, organic stores, and at the fresh market. Evidently, she is committed to the environment beyond just food. Brenda does, however, acknowledge limits, although she simultaneously challenges these: she is aware that she could do more.

Comprehensive environmentalists’ degree of commitment, then, can be characterized as “pushing their limits”. The considerable willingness of this type to change their food routines can be seen, for instance, in the fact that half of them are vegetarians or vegans, which requires a substantial change of diet. In addition, comprehensive environmentalists push their limits as almost all indicate a drive to further expand their concern for the environment, each in their own way. For Bruno, pushing his limits means having his own garden at some point, for Lea it means moving towards veganism, Christian and Agathe talk about taking packaging into account and Agathe also mentions further reducing her meat consumption.

#### 4.2.5. Indicator 4: Bundles of Practices

Among food environmentalists, bundling buying sustainable food with other practices is very limited, with only recycling ( $n = 2$ ) and buying second-hand products ( $n = 1$ ) being mentioned. As such, taking the environment into account is not the central end providing pivotal meaning to food environmentalists’ self-narrative. In other words, for these practitioners, participation in the practice of buying sustainable food is not a basic identity determiner.

Balancing environmentalists include a larger range of practices in the scope of their environmental concern, as the abovementioned case of Brenda exemplifies who also considers the environment in

the realms of mobility, recycling, energy management, buying second-hand and activism. For the balancing environmentalist it is more important to make their wider set of practices comply with their environmental convictions. To put it in the words of Arthur, “you adapt in order to be coherent with what you say, what you do, you adopt more responsible practices”.

Lastly, comprehensive environmentalists have similar bundles of practice as balancing environmentalists, but with a slightly higher average of connected practices ( $n = 5$  vs.  $n = 3$  for balancing environmentalists). Additionally, almost all comprehensive environmentalists include eating out in their environmental concern, and are also more advanced in arriving at eating out sustainably. They do so for instance by discussing organic restaurants within their social circle or by having phone applications with overviews of environmentally friendly dinner options. Comprehensive environmentalists’ basic narrative seems to be based on their concern with environmental sustainability. It is this conviction that serves as a core around which other practices are integrated and their lives are shaped. To speak with Shove, Pantzar and Watson [22], “[a]s people become committed to the practices they carry, their status changes sometimes to the point that they become that which they do” (p. 70).

#### 4.2.6. Implications for Understanding Access

Having detailed each of the types with their respective modes of recruitment, modes of engagement, degrees of commitment and bundles of practice, we will now show how these indicators and the types they construct help understanding access. We will do so by first elaborating the shared access issues of housing and finances and detailing the response of each type to the financial challenge. Next, more particular access issues encountered by each type will be discussed, i.e., convenience among food environmentalists and social bonds for comprehensive environmentalists. Finally, a brief outline will be given of our conclusions from this case study.

In general, the amount of access issues is not significantly higher or lower for any of the three types, but their nature differs. One exception is the issue of housing, which is a similar challenge for each type. Problems encountered in this domain include the absence of ovens or freezers, the latter of which prevents storing left-over meals. Living together with other people also influences access to sustainable food, in two different ways. When fellow residents show a similar concern with the environment, access increases due to the exchange of for instance recipes and tips for good stores and restaurants. On the other hand, when housemates do not care as much for the environment, this sometimes presents difficulties because budgetary priorities will, for instance, differ between environmentalists and their housemates. In general, then, interviewees express that living alone is easier because it allows them to make their own choices—although it does come with other problems, such as struggling with quantities of food.

Turning to finances, for all interviewees monthly budgets are restricted, with an average total budget of 975 euros and an average food budget of 218 euros—two interviewees (both “comprehensive environmentalists”) are excluded from the calculations regarding food budgets because they were unaware of how much money they spent on food, reiterating the profile of the comprehensive environmentalist as someone who does not feel too much hindered by finances when buying (sustainable) food. Indeed, examining the way in which students respond to the challenge of balancing finances with convictions reveals differences between the three types and significantly makes finances more of an issue for some than for others. To start with food environmentalists, these students spend 25% of their budgets on food, which is average. Their most important response to the higher costs of sustainable food is a resorting to shopping at the organic aisle of the supermarket. Moreover, they are also more selective in the products they buy sustainably. They tend to buy only some products in their environmentally-friendly version, mostly dairy, fruits, and vegetables. Although food environmentalists do express a willingness to pay a bit more for sustainable food, they envisage this as something to develop and expand in the future, when they will have a higher and steadier income. In short, finances substantially impede food environmentalists’ access to sustainable food.

Balancing environmentalists have the lowest overall budgets (865 euros) but the highest food budgets (235 euros). They also show a readiness to pay more for sustainable food. Nevertheless, the tension between budgetary constraints and a commitment to sustainability is still quite strongly felt in this group, in which the latter typically loses out. Like food environmentalists, this type is also selective about the food products they buy sustainable. Similarly, balancing environmentalists generally consider organic stores too expensive for doing all groceries and they, therefore, also shop at the supermarket's organic aisle. However, at the same time among this type there is a stronger awareness of the limits of buying sustainable food at the supermarket. As Tisha puts it, "I prefer buying organic [food] that is not so expensive. It's a bit better. But I know that sometimes it's not great either". Finances, thus, present a smaller, but still reasonable, access issue for balancing environmentalists.

Comprehensive environmentalists do have slightly higher overall budgets than the other types (1150 euros), but neither their average food budgets nor the percentage of their budgets spent on food are significantly high (200 euros; 16%). Rather, in weighing prices against principles comprehensive environmentalists go further in favouring the latter, which translates into a larger willingness to adapt in the face of the financial challenge. For instance, comprehensive environmentalists are more ready to prioritize food in their budgeting, as Bruno illustrates:

"I figured that if I try to minimize eating out in restaurants, that really makes a significant price difference, I figured that on that condition I could afford almost any organic product I want. Rather than saying, I'm going out, and afterwards I'll restrict my budget and buy poor quality stuff, I prefer to try to limit outings, or in any case to restaurants for example, to continue being able to afford buying organic."

Financial considerations are thus not entirely absent among this last type, but they do not constitute an insuperable obstruction to accessing sustainable food: strategies can be employed to circumvent the challenge.

Moving on to more specific access issues, then, food environmentalists recurrently show a tendency to let "convenience" determine access to sustainable food. For instance, if the store closest to one's home is a shop that neither has an extensive variety of organic products nor offers products without packaging, then food environmentalists will typically still go to this store and end up buying less environmentally friendly products, simply because it is easiest and least time-consuming to go there. Another illustration can be found in Sadia, who avoids going to the Biocoop (an organic chain store) across the street from where she lives, because of their extensive offer of loose products. She finds this too demanding because it obliges her to always bring her own bags and jars, so she ends up going to another store. Sadia is also never actually going to the fresh market despite planning to do so, because it opens only on Sunday mornings and she likes to party on the weekend and sleep in.

Among comprehensive environmentalists, in turn, the issue of convenience in access is nearly absent. Instead, these practitioners have conformed themselves to the rhythm and temporality of the practice and are willing to adjust their routines to arrive at buying sustainable food. They are ready to adapt other practices to better accommodate the practice of buying sustainable food (whereas, for food environmentalists, this priority is reversed). Rather, comprehensive environmentalists' most significant and distinctive access issue is the role of social ties. All category members refer to having, at some point, felt hindered by their social environment in choosing for environmentally-friendly food. For instance, Stephanie, who is a vegan, has felt socially obliged to discard her vegan principles when offered home-made cake containing dairy products, feeling it would be socially unacceptable or rude to refuse when someone had put in so much effort.

From another perspective, the social environment can also advance access. Most comprehensive environmentalists have likeminded social circles: a concern with the environment seems to be an important factor for them in choosing a social group. Finding access then becomes easier within this social circle, and awareness grows through it. Nevertheless, perhaps due to this increasing sensitivity which goes hand in hand with higher levels of engagement, commitment and bundles of

practice, the social does become more of an obstacle *outside* of the comprehensive environmentalists' circle of friends. Comprehensive environmentalists' interpretation of what constitutes sustainable food also includes more aspects than that of the other types, meaning they will more frequently be confronted with and challenged on their principles in everyday life as their convictions simply cover a larger domain.

Finally, despite the variations in access issues elaborated above, a more general conclusion can already be drawn. Looking from a practice perspective has helped explain the success of some and the failure of other food distribution channels in providing access. When comparing the AMAPs with the fresh markets, attention is drawn to the different temporalities these practices produce and to the extent to which these are in agreement with those of student life. With time in student life being a rather unpredictable element, the fixed and limited "opening hours" of fresh markets present a problem of access. On the other hand, the AMAP is a means of food provision that has successfully evolved itself to fit the rhythms of student life. As the original annual, one-size AMAPs were too rigid for students, special student AMAPs were installed that were specifically tailored to student lifestyles. Moreover, AMAP membership only requires a small effort, i.e., picking up the vegetable box each week. Since distribution usually takes place at the university, this does not require large detours and can easily be combined with going to classes.

What matters most, then, is enabling access by better aligning the various practices associated with buying sustainable food and their temporalities and rhythms with the lifestyle of students, in order to also include those who are less committed. Concretely, this is already happening by accommodating shoppers through making organic products available in supermarkets, which only requires a slight change of course, and by adapting the AMAP to better fit the rhythm of student life. Alternatively, efforts could respond to students' habits of eating in university canteens and aim for offering sustainable food options there, which again demands no grand gestures but anticipates well people's propensity for convenience. Moreover, there is also potential in the increase of the use of digital applications such as OptiMiam (an anti-food waste app with an overview of the local offer of leftover fresh products) and YesWeGreen (an app with information on local eco-friendly projects such as restaurants, second-hand stores, AMAPs and community gardens). Together with AMAP Facebook groups and online food blogs for recipes, these digital technologies correspond well with student lifestyle and contain promises for increasing access to buying sustainable food.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This reflection starts with an evaluation of the indicators used above, then moves to assessing the typology as a whole, and finally concludes with some insights for theorizing on and researching access to sustainable food.

### 5.1. Evaluating the Indicators

In evaluating the indicators used above, it is important to note that it is jointly, as a portfolio, which serves to illustrate this paper's central argument that access is embedded in a network of socially-shared tastes and meanings, knowledge and skills, and materials and infrastructure. Each indicator highlights one particular aspect of this embeddedness. The first indicator, *mode of recruitment*, proves useful for its insights into practice trajectories, which are significant towards understanding the extent of people's concern with sustainability and/or food, and as such towards explaining people's actual buying practices. The distinctions between continuation, modification, and transformation also aid further understanding of successes and failures, stability and change, and directions of practices' development. Secondly, the indicator *mode of engagement* does not differentiate as strongly between the three types, but does illustrate how people's motivations for participating in the practice of buying sustainable food need not necessarily stem from a concern with sustainability, but can also come from other considerations, such as health worries. Thirdly, the indicator *degree of commitment* distinguishes more clearly and is important in light of understanding and evaluating dynamics and change within

the practice. In order for the practice to persist and even expand, it seems important to continue recruiting practitioners, like the comprehensive environmentalists, with high degrees of commitment and willingness to push their own limits and the limits of the practice. This indicator is also useful for its insights into which access issues would prove to be insurmountable for some practitioners, for instance when buying sustainable food would mean travelling twice as long as for normal food shopping or when social ties compete with principles. Lastly, the indicator *bundles of practices* most clearly separates between the first and third types and serves to explain the extent to which meaning is attached to sustainability and, consequently, the place of the practice in a practitioner's lifestyle.

### 5.2. Reflecting on the Typology

What distinguishes one practice from another, or “[w]hat is it that allows one to say that many performances which are not identical are all part of the same practice”? [14] (p. 146). This central query of practice theories arises upon reflecting on the typology used in this paper. What exactly does this typology describe: are the three types of environmentalists just distinct participants in one and the same practice (a typology of practitioners) or do the types represent different practices altogether (a typology of practices)? To answer this question, Dobernig, et al. [35] propose a two-fold assessment: (1) comparing the internal components of the practices at stake—i.e., Shove, Pantzar and Watson [22] materials, competences, and meanings; and (2) applying a diachronic approach to see how the practice of interest connects with other practices. Analysing the typology based on the first criterion suggest that materials, competences and meanings do not differ fundamentally between the types, but only gradually. The second criterion does however show considerable differences as shown above under indicator “bundles of practice”.

Thus, differences between practitioners are the outcome of practitioners' varying portfolios—of which bundles of practice constitute one element. More committed practitioners will, accordingly, carry larger bundles of practices than less committed ones, but do still populate the same practice. Conceived of in this way, our typology of practitioners is in fact compatible with Dobernig et al.'s second criterion and its outcomes.

A final point on the relationship between the types: they should not be considered as three stages on a progressive scale, but rather as three different possible pathways within the practice. The various modes of recruitment correspond with significantly distinct motivations, commitments, and bundles of practices. These do not necessarily succeed one another: being a food environmentalist does not imply that one will ever become a comprehensive environmentalist. Rather, the types represent distinct routes through the practice.

### 5.3. Theorizing on Access

Finally, the findings of this study bear consequences for the conceptualization of access and for how to research and address it. When doing this we need to acknowledge the limits of our empirical study as it covers a limited group of students in Paris. Nevertheless, we can claim that, as our analysis has demonstrated, accessing sustainable food is characterized by plurality, containing different modes of recruitment and engagement, degrees of commitment, and bundles of practice. To understand access, it is crucial to dig deeper than the observable behaviour that is performed, and to disclose underlying meanings, ends, connections, etc. First, this makes clear that access cannot, and should not, be considered as the outcome of a singular practice. Rather, buying sustainable food is connected to numerous other practices in many different ways. Sometimes a link is established through shared meanings or ends, bundling several practices through a shared aim for more sustainability. At other times a connection is formed through competition, for instance when buying sustainable food competes for time with practices of working and studying. How these linkages develop and how strong they are differs between practitioners and depends on interactions within and between the different elements of practices, materials, meanings, and competences, resulting in various access outcomes. Like the effect of production on consumption, also access is moderated by the nexus of

practices [14]. Crucially, this means that efforts to improve access cannot and should not address one single aspect only, but rather should build on understanding and addressing the continuous negotiations between and dynamics within practices and their elements. Thus, uniform strategies to promote sustainable food consumption are likely to be ineffective as they ignore these differences and dynamics. Designing more effective strategies to promote sustainable food consumption should, therefore, build on in-depth understanding of these practices of access and accept that no one singular strategy will suffice to reach all consumers.

Secondly, this also calls for a sensitivity for the interactions between materials and infrastructure, on the one hand, and practitioners' lifestyles with their temporalities and preferences, on the other. Access is not solely determined by material components, but rather is a result of the interplay between the food on offer and people's trajectories, knowledge, meanings, narratives, and networks. This study's example of the success of the AMAP in aligning well with the rhythm of a student lifestyle versus the failure of fresh markets to achieve this, serves as an illustration of such an embedded understanding of access. Research should, therefore, focus on interactions rather than statically assessing material and infrastructural circumstances and deducing access issues from these. Nevertheless, the physical environment should not be discarded altogether, as materials clearly do provide an important background against which dynamics of access unfold.

Thirdly, this research also aimed to critically assess the decisive role that finances play in buying practices. Examination of the ways in which practitioners negotiate the question of money with their convictions leads to the conclusion that finances matter, but that limited resources are not insuperable in finding access to sustainable food. Even a "low-income" group like students manages to arrive more or less at their desired pattern of buying sustainable food. Assuming that this and similar groups are automatically excluded from accessing sustainable food due to their financial circumstances, therefore, seems unfounded. Rather, to account for the myriad strategies in which practitioners' resourcefulness in finding access becomes apparent, research should open up to include trade-offs between buying sustainable food and other practices, such as the adaptation of cooking preferences or habits and budgetary priorities in the face of financial challenges. Zooming out from the moment of buying sustainable food in this way allows for a more nuanced view of the role finances play in access.

Lastly, the above analysis has mostly focused on a consumer perspective, showing how actual buying patterns differ between practitioners, how consumption is contingent, and how mismatches can occur between supply and demand. By also studying more extensively the precise dynamics of production at play in the practice of buying sustainable food, production and consumption can be even better coordinated and access further improved.

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