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How to Cope with Perceived Tension towards Sustainable Consumption? Exploring Pro-Environmental Behavior Experts' Coping Strategies

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Abstract: Pro-environmental behavior experts (PEBEXs) encounter tensions associated with sustainable consumption, just like other individuals. What distinguishes them is their high level of knowledge, motivation, and reflection on climate change topics, as intended by many downstream policy interventions targeting individual consumption behavior. Based on 31 problem-centered interviews with PEBEXs, we found two general coping strategies: contributing to maximizing sustainable consumption and accommodating to the minimization of perceived tension. These coping strategies offer a promising source of information for individuals in general on how to drive personal consumption behavior in more sustainable directions and how to deal with accompanying barriers and tensions. Because coping strategies can be trained, the introduced strategies can support the design of interventions targeting individual consumption decisions. Furthermore, we emphasize the importance of accompanying upstream interventions, such as structural changes, to support individual behavior changes.

Keywords: pro-environmental behavior; sustainable consumption; climate change; coping strategies; ecological coping; experts

1. Introduction

Climate change is arguably one of the most critical and urgent problems of our time and represents what Rittel and Webber [1] referred to as a “wicked problem”. Wicked problems are problems that cannot be resolved by one individual alone because they are complex, ill-structured, and of public concern. They have no definite formulation, have no ‘true-false’ but rather ‘good-bad’ solutions, and are symptoms of other problems [1,2]. Climate change is the result of collective action and can only be solved by collective action [3].

A significant driver of climate change is unsustainable human behavior [4–6]. Changing consumption patterns to be more sustainable is, therefore, necessary to address climate change [7]. Two broad approaches have been suggested to achieve this: upstream and downstream policy interventions [8]. Upstream interventions advocate structural changes to regulate individual behavior by providing contextual support through rules and regulations. Conversely, downstream interventions target individuals’ behavior changes via information campaigns to increase knowledge of and attention to the consequences of consumption on climate change. At first sight, the downstream approach sounds intriguing, as it focuses on empowering consumers’ own ability to change their decision-making as opposed to the more paternalistic upstream approach [9].

However, solely motivating individuals to increase sustainable behavior without accompanying structural changes may be problematic. The increase in knowledge and attention is likely to create a situation in which consumers experience tension between their consumption wishes and needs and

the consequences for the climate [10]. The coined terms “eco-anxiety” [11] and related “ecological coping” [12] indicate recently growing attention on questions of how to deal with perceived tension related to climate change. How consumers cope with this perceived tension to overcome the intention-behavior gap and not only justify a lack of engagement but also maximize their contribution at the same time is thereby an important yet still not enough understood question. In a recent literature review, ElHaffae, Durif, and Dubé [13] called for qualitative studies that try to better understand the intention-behavior gap and focus on solutions to overcome it. Furthermore, they found that coping strategies are a promising source to minimize that gap. This study follows their call by focusing on how pro-environmental behavior experts (PEBEXs) deal with perceived tension or stress.

The rationale to focus on PEBEXs rather than regular consumers is as follows. Like regular consumers, PEBEXs have consumption wishes and needs. However, in terms of knowledge, attention, and motivation, PEBEXs represent, by definition, a critical case [14]. PEBEXs have expert knowledge on how individual efforts can mitigate or amplify the effects of climate change [15] and how to leverage appropriate strategies to deal with climate change [16,17]. Moreover, compared to regular consumers, they are more reflective and emotionally involved in climate change issues and are more motivated to act accordingly [18]. Hence, PEBEXs represent what the aforementioned downstream policy intervention ultimately has as a goal: Knowledgeable, attentive, and motivated consumers. Therefore, we ask, “How do PEBEXs cope with the perceived tensions associated with sustainable consumption?”

Our study proceeds as follows. In the following, we provide the background, arguing for PEBEXs as a critical case, and providing the theoretical background on coping strategies. After that, in Section 2, we describe the methodology before presenting our results in Section 3. In Section 4, we discuss our results and limitations before we conclude in Section 5.

1.1. PEBEXs as a Critical Case

PEBEXs represent a critical or intense case, as they provide an opportunity for the in-depth study of the phenomenon under investigation [19,20]. Already today, PEBEXs experience the climate change-related tension that individual consumers will perceive more and more in the future due to downstream interventions [21]. Thus, it is of particular interest to understand how PEBEXs’ expert knowledge on climate change and the related call for transformed, more sustainable consumption behavior allows them to change or cope with their level of sustainable consumption behavior.

PEBEXs’ working conditions might create a social dilemma for them [22]: Even though PEBEXs are concerned about the environment and motivated to drive sustainable behavior, research shows that sustainable consumption behavior at home and work differ [23]. PEBEXs might perceive that their work environment requires them to perform actions with negative environmental impacts [24,25]. For example, attending a climate change conference typically involves high-impact behavior such as traveling [26] or low-impact behavior such as drinking bottled water available at the venue [27]. At the same time, it may be necessary for PEBEXs to attend a conference to maintain their network, present current work, obtain feedback, influence their peers or policymakers, and enhance their reputation, all of which may expand their influence in advancing pro-environmental behaviors by others.

PEBEXs are likely to experience tension resulting from a dissonance between their conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors [28,29]. To reduce the uncomfortable state of psychological discomfort, PEBEXs—just like all individuals—engage in coping strategies to reduce the feeling of dissonance [30,31].

1.2. Coping Strategies

Coping refers to “thoughts and behaviors that people use to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful” [32] (p. 746), or a person’s conscious effort to reduce perceived tension [33]. Early research on coping strategies highlighted extreme situations [34], emphasizing that people apply basic coping styles to different perceived stressors (e.g., information seeking versus avoidance). An extended argument then suggested that people’s basic situational coping behaviors depend on the nature of the stressful situation (e.g., illness, job loss). This context-dependent

view is similar to the notion of coping flexibility [35], such that people choose strategies according to a situation or point in time. The context might change over time, as would the effectiveness of a chosen coping strategy, so different coping strategies might occur consecutively (see Figure 1).

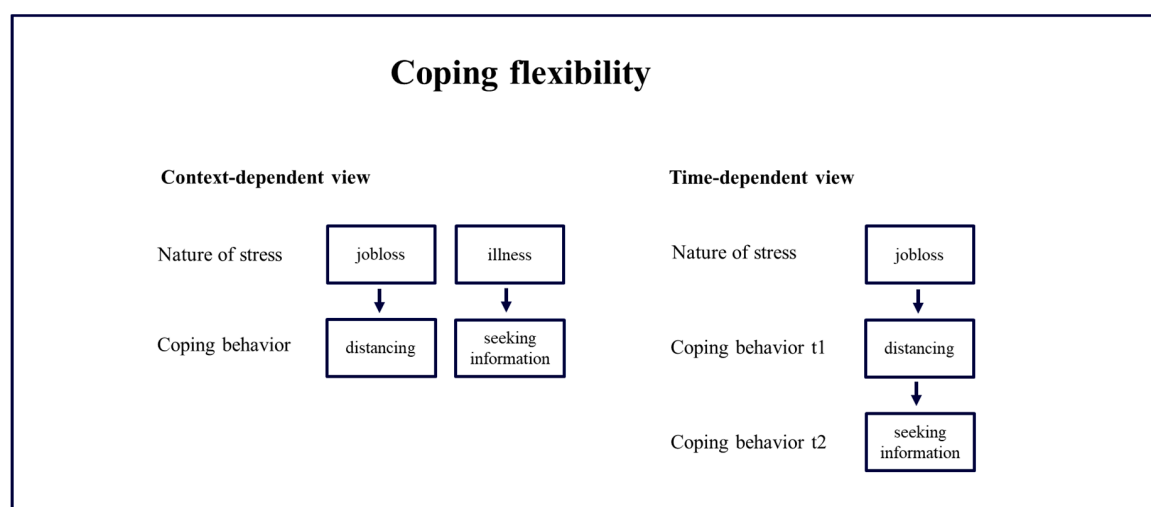


Figure 1. Coping flexibility—context- and time-dependent views.

The variety of coping strategies may be distinguished into the two broad groups of function-oriented and direction-oriented coping strategies [36]. Function-oriented coping strategies [37–39] include problem-focused coping aimed at reducing or resolving the problem/stressor, emotion-focused coping aimed at reducing the negative feelings associated with the problem/stressor. An extended view includes meaning-focused coping, aimed at revising the meaning of the problem/stressor, and social-focused coping aimed at seeking external support.

Direction-oriented coping strategies [33,40] encompass engagement coping, aimed at dealing with the problem/stressor and the related feelings, and disengagement coping, aimed at escaping the problem/stressor, with the latter strategy often being mentioned in connection with maladaptive outcomes [37]. Figure 2 provides an overview of these common classifications.

Function-oriented coping strategies			Direction-oriented coping strategies		
Type	Function	Examples	Type	Function	Examples
Problem-focussed	to resolve stressor	<i>taking control, seeking information</i>	Engagement coping	to deal with the stressor & related feelings	<i>taking control, positive reinterpretation, seeking support</i>
Emotion-focussed	to reduce negative feelings	<i>wishful thinking, distancing</i>	Disengagement coping	to avoid action to acknowledge the stressor	<i>avoidance, denial, wishful thinking</i>
Meaning-focussed	to revise meaning of the stressor	<i>benefit finding, positive reinterpretation</i>			
Social-focussed	to seek external support	<i>emotional support, instrumental support</i>			

Figure 2. Function—versus direction-oriented coping strategies.

Importantly, the above distinction is not mutually exclusive. Engagement coping, for example, includes several function-oriented coping strategies, while disengagement coping links to emotion-focused coping through the emphasis on avoiding any action that acknowledges the existence of the stressor. Hence, while the grouping may imply that the different strategies can clearly be distinguished,

this is often not the case. Instead, commonly used coping strategies feature multifunctionality and multidimensionality [41]. In this study, we understand coping as individuals' distinct efforts to reduce perceived stress.

1.3. PEBEXs' Coping Strategies

Independent of the extent of perceived stress, many stressors are chronic or unsolvable for an individual alone [42]. In the example of climate change, the perceived stress-level may range from daily hassles to life-threatening concerns [43,44]. In this context, the term "eco-anxiety" emerged, expressing a severe and debilitating worry regarding the risks related to climate change [11]. The related coping strategy is introduced by Helm et al. [12] as "ecological coping", to capture problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies related to stressors explicitly stemming from climate change.

Homburg and Stolberg [45] postulate that, in response to environmental problems as stressors, individuals can activate problem-focused coping that leads to pro-environmental behavior (PEB). Based on self-reported survey data, they refer to eight problem- or emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with climate change as a stressor: problem-solving, expression of emotions, denial of guilt, relativization, wishful thinking, self-protection, pleasure, and resignation [45]. Stoll-Kleemann, O'Riordan, and Jaeger [46] described how their participants, Swiss citizens, showed a variety of denials to deal with the feeling of dissonance to avoid changing their consumption behavior into a more sustainable direction. Examples of denials as a coping strategy involved blaming others' inaction and emphasizing doubts regarding their responsibility and power. Lorenzoni et al. [21] explored the barriers UK citizens perceive against engaging with climate change. They differentiated individual and social barriers, and argued that besides structural changes to ease sustainable consumption decisions, tailored information interventions to raise attention and knowledge are needed to engage citizens.

To date, research on climate change as a stressor and overcoming barriers towards a more sustainable consumption behavior has focused on regular consumers only. Also, the focus has been mostly on emotional coping strategies as disengagement coping and thereby limited to maladaptive outcomes for the climate itself.

In this paper, we argue that exploring the PEBEXs' coping strategies might be of great importance. PEBEXs are individuals with high levels of knowledge, motivation, and reflection towards climate change topics and, thus, reflect what downstream interventions ultimately aim to create: knowledgeable, motivated, and reflective consumers. If PEBEXs' coping strategies differ from those of regular consumers, this knowledge is crucial for future pro-environmental behavior policy.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Interviewing PEBEXs

PEBEXs are experts in PEB [15] and simultaneously individual consumers with a work and private sphere [23]. These circumstances affect how PEBEXs as individuals feel and engage in PEB themselves [18].

Expert knowledge as a source of expertise in different research fields is critical [47]. A recommended approach to elicit expert knowledge uses qualitative research designs [47,48]. With interviews, researchers seek access to experts' rich "knowledge consist[ing] not only of systematized, reflexively accessible knowledge relating to a specialized subject or field, but also has to a considerable extent the character of practical or action rules of decision, collective orientations and patterns of social interpretation" [49] (p. 54). We elicited PEBEXs' expertise on how to change consumption patterns in a more sustainable direction. Interviewing PEBEXs was a means to access their specific knowledge of sustainable consumption and their subjective interpretation and guidance for solving the problem.

Qualitative approaches to explore individuals' coping strategies are well established in prior research [50–55]. For example, Carmen et al. [52] interviewed self-defined sustainable consumers from Spain to identify their coping strategies. In their interviews with environmental sustainability

practitioners, Mitra and Buzzanell [55] explored perceived work meaningfulness and highlighted the tensions of the job that arise due to problematic work situations. Related to coping constructs specifically, Chatzidakis et al. [51] explored how neutralization techniques might explain consumers' engagement in unsustainable consumption, and Gruber and Schlegelmilch [50] explored neutralization strategies to explain differences between social norms and actual behaviors by Austrian consumers.

2.2. Sampling and Participants

For the purpose of this study, we considered 'experts' as those individuals who have been educated and specialized in their particular area of work and have extensive knowledge of wider PEB issues. They might hold academic or business positions. Participants qualified as PEBEX when they were members in acknowledged PEBEX networks, had relevant credentials and research interests according to different professional and social media profiles (e.g., on ResearchGate¹ or LinkedIn²), and at least five years of professional experience as PEBEX [56].

An initial recruitment email was sent to the electronic mailing lists of acknowledged PEBEXs networks, such as SCORAI (Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative) and VCSC (Virtual Community on Sustainable Consumption)³. These networks share a focus on sustainability and PEB topics, willingness to change society for a greater good, internationality, and openness to expertise from various researchers and practitioners. We witnessed that the requests were actively shared in the targeted communities. The recruitment message outlined the study purpose and design and presented the profile of potential participants (see Appendix A).

After the screening of the potential participants, those who were selected received a second email, with a request for possible interview dates and an informed consent form (Appendix B). The consent form contained information about the aim, content, and applied methods and why participation by PEBEXs was of special interest. It also assured anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time, but did not offer any incentive for participation. Participants needed to sign the informed consent form. Finally, a last email confirmed the interview appointment, and the interviewer and participant exchanged Skype contacts.

Our expert-based sampling was purposive and thus produced a notable variety among potential participants in terms of gender, age, experience, and country of origin. Table 1 lists brief characteristics of the participants, though their names are changed to ensure anonymity [57]. Of the 31 participants in this study, 21 replied to the initial recruitment email, 7 were recruited from snowball sampling among early participants, 3 were recruited based on recommendations by colleagues. Seventeen were women, and 21 worked as academics at various levels (professor, associate, assistant, post-doc, Ph.D.). The ten business participants held positions such as director, program or project manager, social entrepreneur, and so forth. On average, the participants were 44 years of age (ranging from 27 to 75 years). Twelve countries of residence were represented, as were 13 nationalities.

2.3. Interview Procedure

PEBEXs were interviewed via an ex-post investigation of their individual consumption behavior, focusing on their experiences and reflections. The interviewer prepared intensively to review each interviewee's field of work, job position, work environment, and available biography, as recommended for interviewing experts [58–60]. The interview questions were designed to be flexible in responding to themes and questions as they arose during the interview. A stock of provocative questions was available to overcome any potential "talk tracks" created by an expert. In this sense, the interview guide (Appendix C) was semi-structured and was not followed strictly for each interview but rather applied according to the natural interview flow. Four pilot interviews also functioned to anticipate any issues [58,61]; following the first two pilot interviews, some minor adjustments were made to the order of questions, a few questions were removed, a short questionnaire pertaining to participants' demographics was added.

Table 1. List of participants.

No.	Participants Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Position	Country of Residence
1	Anna	female	30 s	academic	Germany
2	Alexander	male	40 s	academic	Germany
3	Bella	female	40 s	academic	Switzerland
4	Benjamin	male	50 s	academic	US
5	Claudia	female	50 s	academic	Denmark
6	Christie	female	40 s	business	Denmark
7	Darcia	female	30 s	business	Ecuador
8	David	male	20 s	academic	UK
9	Eva	female	30 s	academic	Denmark
10	Emma	female	30 s	business	Germany
11	Frank	male	30 s	academic	US
12	Finley	male	70 s	business	Australia
13	Gabriel	male	30 s	academic	Sweden
14	George	male	40 s	business	Australia
15	Harry	male	40 s	business	UK
16	Hannah	female	40 s	business	Australia
17	Ida	female	30 s	academic	Finland
18	Ian	male	50 s	business	UK
19	Jane	female	50 s	academic	Germany
20	Judith	female	40 s	academic	Switzerland
21	Karla	female	40 s	academic	US
22	Katherine	female	40 s	business	New Zealand
23	Laura	female	40 s	academic	Austria
24	Liam	male	30 s	business	Germany
25	Matthew	male	60 s	academic	US
26	Martin	male	40 s	academic	US
27	Nathalie	female	40 s	academic	Sweden
28	Nancy	female	30 s	academic	France
29	Oscar	male	30 s	academic	Germany
30	Oliver	male	50 s	academic	Switzerland
31	Penelope	female	30 s	academic	Sweden

The actual interviews began with an introduction to the process and the study. Anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time were reiterated; if the participants had any questions, they could ask at this point. Next, participants were reminded that the interview focus was on how PEBEXs perceive and deal with potential contradictions regarding PEB, with a note that it was of specific interest to hear about their personal behaviors and experiences. To explore the manifestations of applied strategies, we started with open, exploratory questions to get participants involved in narrating their motivation towards PEB, the definition of PEB, and related experiences, in both work and private contexts [58]. Then, probing questions supported a deeper dive into specific aspects. This approach is known as a problem-centered approach [62,63]. Specifically, the interviewer probed examples of perceived contradictory behavior that the participants had mentioned, tensions, and applied coping strategies. To help participants relate to the topics, mode of transport was offered as an example of a likely source of tension in everyday decision-making. The behaviors mentioned by participants ranged from transport (e.g., flying) to food (e.g., red meat) to housing (e.g., energy, clothing).

Using Skype as a channel addressed some limitations of classical interview procedures. In particular, the PEBEXs could control where (e.g., office, home) and when (in a local time zone) the interview took place, which should increase their sense of comfort. This channel was familiar to all of the participants and did not require any specific instructions. Using Skype instead of personal meetings also waived any travel requirements, which was appropriate considering the overall study topic. Moreover, this method enabled contact with an international, varied, and purposeful sample at almost no financial cost [64–66]. Due to technical reasons, two interviews were conducted using

Zoom, one interview by phone, and one interview in person. On average, an interview lasted 69 min (range of 45–94 min). All interviews took place in the second quarter of 2018. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the interviewer took notes during and immediately after each interview to capture first impressions and particularities. The transcribed interviews resulted in 489 single-spaced pages. The interviews were conducted in English, the applied professional language of all participants.

2.4. Analyzing the Data

Thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative analysis with the aim to identify, analyze, and report patterns to provide a rich and detailed thematic description of the given data and its important themes and broader meanings [67].

We followed Braun and Clarke's [67] introduced six-step approach with slight adjustments to our specific research question and data [20]. Even though we started the analysis with some prior knowledge of the data from general background reading, we wanted to free our mind from earlier research and knowledge about coping strategies as much as possible and to make ourselves familiar with the data in an open-mined approach of reading it from start to end. We focused broadly on interesting, unusual, contradictory, and exciting topics [68], noting down initial ideas for potential themes. Second, we generated an initial coding, a manual (paper-based) open coding cycle [58]. Here, the introduced research question, not a specific theoretical framework, guided the iterations of our inductive coding through the whole data. One piece of data could be coded once, different times, or remain uncoded. Third, to start searching themes, we transferred the manual codes into Nvivo 12 software, gathering all initial codes into potential themes. We started to sketch potential relationships on memos in NVIVO. Forth, we reviewed the potential themes and how they "fit" with the coded data and the entire data set. In this step, themes might be combined, refined, separated, or discarded. On the level of the coded data, each theme was considered to form a coherent pattern. On the level of potential themes, overarching themes were considered to make sense as a "thematic map" of the analysis [67]. Fifth, we defined and named the themes. At this step, we also revisited the literature to link our themes with existing theory. In a recursive process, we refined the themes to an overall story that related to or provoked common knowledge and clearly defined the individual themes and sub-themes. Sixth, we selected compelling data examples to support the analysis and to produce the final report answering our research question. Although quantification of qualitative data requires care [69], we summarized coded passages of our data and their prevalence according to themes and participants in Table 2. Overall, this provided additional information to guide the sense-making of emergent patterns and their prevalence in our data [67,70]. The sheer number of coded passages is not, per se, of importance, but the relationships among different participants and their coping strategies are. For example, the results supported the notion that coping strategies are applied flexibly because many informants referred to using multiple coping strategies at different points in time when facing a stressor in a specific context. We decided to identify passages as exemplary quotes after their ability of demonstrating the essence of what we wanted to capture. Our intention with this approach was to ensure a fuller understanding of how participants cope with their experienced tension in breadth and depth.

Table 2. Prevalence of passage coding according to themes and participants (from most to least frequent).

	Gabriel	Hannah	Emma	Nathalie	Claudia	Nancy	Alexander	Benjamin	Christie	Ian	Katherine	Penelope	Darcia	George	Laura	Oliver	Jane	Ida	Bella	Martin	Oscar	Eva	Finley	Matthew	Anna	Liam	David	Frank	Harry	Karla	Judith	Passage-Codings	# Respondents (Out of 31)	% Respondents
Contributing	20	15	15	3	7	13	14	9	12	11	10	12	2	10	3	8	6	3	5	9	10	5	5	9	2	6	6	3	7	2	6	248	31	100%
Measuring & comparing impact	2	1	3	0	3	3	6	0	1	2	0	3	0	3	1	3	2	1	0	0	0	2	1	3	0	0	0	2	3	0	1	46	20	65%
Simplifying by rules of thumb	5	7	2	0	1	1	3	3	4	3	2	4	1	4	1	1	1	0	4	3	2	3	1	2	1	4	1	0	2	2	3	71	28	90%
Finding benefits	3	1	5	0	0	3	2	3	2	2	2	1	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	2	3	0	3	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	40	19	61%
Contributing on a higher level	1	2	1	3	3	1	2	0	0	2	3	2	1	0	0	0	3	2	1	3	3	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	1	0	0	38	19	61%
Exercising influence	9	4	4	0	0	5	1	3	5	2	3	2	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	0	2	1	1	0	0	1	52	19	61%
Accommodating	5	9	5	17	11	5	3	8	5	4	5	3	12	4	11	6	8	10	7	3	2	6	6	2	8	4	3	6	2	7	2	189	31	100%
Asking for support	1	1	3	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	5	1	0	3	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	25	16	52%
Avoiding	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	15	12	39%
Venting	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	4	1	0	3	2	0	2	4	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	29	19	61%
Distancing oneself	2	2	0	4	1	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	7	1	1	2	4	2	3	1	0	1	1	0	3	0	0	1	2	2	0	44	21	68%
Denying influence	1	4	0	11	10	2	0	2	3	2	1	0	5	0	1	2	2	4	0	2	0	4	2	1	4	2	1	5	0	3	1	75	24	77%
SUM	25	24	20	20	18	18	17	17	17	15	15	15	14	14	14	14	14	13	12	12	12	11	11	11	10	10	9	9	9	9	8	437	31	100%

3. Results

We found two main strategies of coping that describe how PEBEXs cope with the perceived tension associated with barriers towards sustainable consumption: contributing and accommodating. To strengthen the lived nature of the narratives, the next section presents quotes that highlight participants' different coping strategies with respect to their (un)sustainable consumption behavior.

3.1. Contributing Strategies

The analysis revealed five contributing strategies (themes): measuring and comparing impact, simplifying by rules of thumbs, finding benefits, contributing on a higher level, and exerting influence.

Measuring and comparing impact. The participants use explicit measures of carbon emissions as a control unit to define how they perceive and assess their own or others' impacts. As experts, they rely on scientific measures and refer to the carbon footprint as a "common metric" of environmental impacts, which allows them to control and judge their own or others' behaviors.

"In bringing it back to a common metric, it allows us to compare things which are otherwise very difficult to do. ... Taking the charger out of the wall, with the same vigor, or the same enthusiasm, that I would also, for example, switch off the oven, when I was cooking dinner. But when you apply a tiny bit of science to that, you realize that turning an electric oven—assuming they both come from the same energy source, assume it's a polluting energy source, you can switch off the oven for half a second less and the phone charger could be on for a YEAR and it wouldn't even come close to it." (George)

Participants also elaborated on using the metric daily, such that it becomes second nature, and seemed confused that other people do not rely on it:

"I think those who are really experts about climate issues, they are aware of course, yes. But outside this specific academic field, even the most highly educated people have NO idea about kilograms, or tons, or milligrams of CO₂. That's really strange. When I give some talks somewhere, I include a little quiz. If you burn 1 L of gasoline for a CAR, how much CO₂ will then be created? Is it 2.3 milligrams, 2.3 g, or 2.3 kg? And it's of course kilograms. ... But MOST people have not this idea of orders of magnitude of what happens. They have, through their simplest everyday actions, they have no relation that tells them the orders of magnitudes." (Oliver)

When measuring their own behavior in these terms, some participants referred to the carbon footprint as if it was an independent thing, disconnected from their actual meaning, and a parameter to be optimized, as when Emma noted, "Of course, I know that flying is so bad, and this is kind of ruining my whole footprint."

As a consequence of measuring their own behavior in any matter, comparisons with others follow as an exercise of (self-)control but also to give themselves absolution. Consuming less than average or similar comparisons makes it possible to accept their practices:

"We know how much we consume, and compared to others with the same type of house and lifestyle, we have a low consumption, so we are not concerned about it." (Claudia)

Simplifying by rules of thumb. This theme appeared in almost all interviews and combines two components. First, due to their knowledge, participants believe they can judge the actual impact of their consumption; they know what to focus on when cognitive and time capacities are limited. This focus on high impact behavior is a prominent rule of thumb:

"I try to start where the impact is biggest. As I said, I don't fly within [European country], don't eat cheap meat every day, or don't eat cheap meat at all, and don't eat meat every day. Reduce packaging wherever possible." (Liam)

Second, they make up their mind about reoccurring consumption decisions and follow those self-determined rules of conduct. The rules help them avoid repeating similar decision-making efforts, as reflected in the concept of so-called self-nudging [71]. Some examples relate to meat intake (e.g., only eating meat when invited) or travel modes (e.g., not flying in their home country, not attending events overseas, only attending conferences once a year).

Finding benefits. This strategy arose in statements by half of the participants. The actual conflict or discomfort they perceive is transformed into a positive mission, giving them the relief to do the right thing in the context of their job requirements:

“So, it’s really the aviation which brings me into conflict. But NOW I think I’ve started to see it. There’s a saying that people won’t always listen to people, won’t always believe what you say. But they will always believe what you do. (. . .) Because they’re so shocked that I would take that 24 h train journey, or NOT come to that meeting, when I have the opportunity. That’s so shocking to them, that they will therefore then listen to what I say. So, I actually now start to see it as part of my job. . . . I now tell myself that taking that long train journey is the most important part of the work I will do there. That will have more impact than anything I say, or it will give the weight to whatever I say at that meeting. So rather than seeing it as only a kind of personal MORAL conviction, I actually now start to see it as my job. And that has helped me to kind of stop going back and forth with, like, am I doing the right thing or not.” (Christie)

Christie’s job is to travel and attend meetings. She does not refuse to do that but instead transforms her tasks in a way that is compatible with her pro-environmental attitude. We identified this as a top-down approach to cope with her feelings of cognitive dissonance by translating the stressor into something positive.

A practical behavior applied by participants to feel better about their consumption is to minimize it. These PEBEXs question their private and job-related consumption to acknowledge that they (and others) are better off with less. These narratives also contain social criticisms of materialism, perceived as a social norm of the Western world:

“You know, I think we have, in very many places in the world, developed a strong desire to have THINGS. And, in some cases, the more things, the happier we’re supposed to be. And so I think in—I’m as addicted to things as most people. And so, I’m interested in trying to reduce that kind of consumption. . . . There are so many, there are so many self-justifications. Like, I NEED the newest computer, because it’s faster, I do a lot of data modeling. So I NEED IT. I don’t REALLY need it, because I won’t be able to tell the difference in how quickly the calculations are going.” (Finley)

Contributing on a higher level. Half of the participants emphasized their actual profession as a sign of personal involvement due to their meaningful work. Meaningful work is purposeful, significant, and encourages a perceived match with individual values and beliefs [72]. Perceived task significance similarly refers to a person’s certainty that the work tasks have a positive impact on others [73]. High personal involvement and perceived task significance appear equivalent to meaningful impacts on climate change. Thus, we realized that PEBEXs perceive and express their work as meaningful, per se, and frame their profession as more impactful than their personal consumption behavior. This attitude implies a justification of their actual environmental impact (whether due to job-related matters or leisure activities).

“So, I don’t think I am that focused on being sustainable in my working life. You could say that’s a paradox. But it’s because I think in my working life, I just, it is not that I don’t think about it or completely ignore it, but there is something higher on the agenda and that is to do my work. . . . It’s a long time since I did interviews, but I had to do interviews in the outskirts of the city. I would go by car to these interviews, because going by bike and

being sweaty and not really feeling up to doing it. In that case I would always choose the means of transportation that would make me do my work the best, even if it is not the most sustainable choice.” (Claudia)

Their perceived meaningful work is in potential conflict with how to remain true to PEBEXs’ motivations and intentions for entering their career path. Some participants reflected on how hard it is to resist tempting offers, such as flying in general or class upgrades earned by flying more, perceived as status symbols. Ida, therefore, realized the need to engage in active reflections from time to time:

“When you work with some issues for a long time, you might get a bit disconnected from the original purpose, because you are busy solving the everyday problems, completing tasks, meeting deadlines and so on. But every once in a while, for instance, when I’m hiking, or doing some outdoor activities, I kind of remember what is the purpose of my work. And my motivation to work in the field.” (Ida)

Withstanding the temptations associated with a career as a PEBEX can be exhausting, especially because gaining recognition as a PEBEX is easier if the person follows the rules of the game, such as attending popular conferences or publishing in top journals. Being a highly motivated PEBEX early in his career, David decided to split his academic publications: publish in top journals of his field to ensure his survival in the academic system but also publish in open access journals, which he perceives as more sustainable in a social justice sense, in that they offer anyone access to his insights. Oliver, who has already established a career in academia, elaborated on how he can afford to pursue his values more and break the rules of the game without fear of being kicked out of it:

“Well, I’m now relatively stable in my position, so I don’t have to take a next step in my career. I can sort of afford being more consequent. I know, I just could have lost some stupid games by not flying to the US, or so. I mean with games—games that are played, and more people making careers, and looking for jobs et cetera [sighs].” (Oliver)

Exerting influence. Participants described using the power they gain in the scope of their work. This contributing strategy presupposes an awareness of their power, accrued through their ability to shape the choice architecture of others in their job environment. Academic PEBEXs might use lectures to influence students, as Benjamin does deliberately:

“... [I] generally find a way to talk about animals, and show slaughterhouse videos to my classes. I don’t care what I teach, I do it anyway. I’m the teacher, I can do what I want, that’s kind of my attitude [laughter] so ... I think students should know how animals are being treated.” (Benjamin)

In a business setting, Christie consciously, but not transparent to others, uses the self-assigned power gained from her job to recommend event speakers. Without official rules to require more sustainable behavior, she anticipates them by applying her own rule of inviting speakers who do not need to fly to attend:

“I couldn’t go—they asked me to suggest people to invite. And they showed me their guest list. And it was people from ALL over the world. ... So I just suggested people, you know, there’s a LOT of great experts in [Country] so I just sent them a list of those. And one of them was able to go, which was great.” (Christie)

Similarly, but actually seeking transparency and attention by others, Emma acted when she organized a big conference. Even though she had to devote more time and effort, she set up a more sustainable traveling default for conference participants. In her perception, the achieved impact is beyond just quantified carbon emissions, because many conference participants talked about it, “it was actually a big conversation topic”. In the eyes of PEBEXs, social norms are important constructs when

attempting to change behaviors for the greater good. However, the conscious use of their power to influence their environment in a more sustainable manner is perceived as an important instrument to initialize change in other people's minds, because when an existing social norm is being violated, it might initiate a new—more sustainable—social norm:

"If the norm would change, (. . .) "OH, if I fly I'm breaking a norm. If I eat meat (. . .)", like it began with smoking. Smoking is no longer accepted for some reason, but it's used to be different. So this changed, yes. Surprising, completely surprising. So, maybe these things could, COULD in principle, change. But as long as they don't change, the effort is to break a social norm." (Oliver)

For Hannah, breaking social norms and becoming more radical over time was intertwined. She started to communicate openly about her political engagement at her workplace, partially to get others engaged:

"We're trying to engage people by creating a norm, for example. I did put an out-of-office message when I went up to the [political demonstration] just most recently so that everybody in the office who emailed me while I was away heard that I was up [politically demonstrating]." (Hannah)

Evaluation of contributing strategies. The five themes emerging from the interviews highlight how PEBEXs apply contributing strategies to address less sustainable behavior by themselves or others. Such contributing strategies focus on the actual stressor and may be directed inward or outward. Inward-directed strategies (self-mastery) enable PEBEXs to control their behavior related to the stressor. Outward-directed strategies (engaging) instead let them influence others' behavior. This categorization of inward- and outward-directed strategies is overlapping, in that some strategies are more inward-directed than others, and vice versa, and a few imply a smooth transition across strategies (see Figure 3).

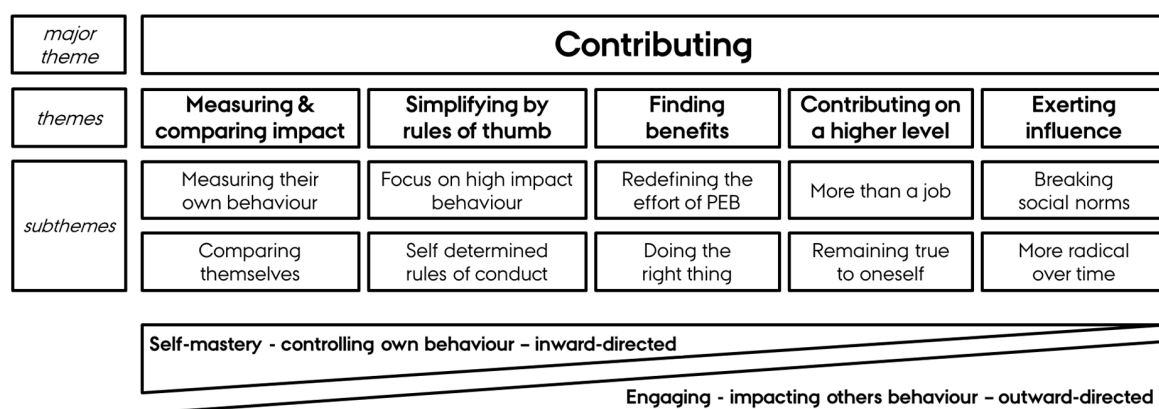


Figure 3. Contributing strategies of pro-environmental behavior experts (PEBEXs).

No clear distinction of the themes and subthemes into behavioral or cognitive coping strategies arose to establish a salient pattern, yet their consideration revealed some interesting insights. Behavioral coping is partly mirrored by the theme of measuring and comparing impact. To judge consumption-related carbon footprints of others and themselves, PEBEXs exercise control by using measurements that allow them to compare specific consumption behaviors according to a scientifically acknowledged, fact-based approach. Cognitive coping is explicit in the theme of contributing on a higher level, in that meaningful behavior is difficult to measure, but PEBEXs assess them as positive and high impact, per se. The challenge of comparing the actual impact of influencing others versus causing a negative environmental impact (e.g., flying to knowledge-sharing events) can be resolved cognitively by overweighing measurable, negative impacts with immeasurable, assumed positive

impacts. In an extreme position, PEBEXs seemingly grant *carte blanche* to their peers or themselves in situations that involve meaningful behavior:

“Over 30 long-haul flights a year? You know, like 5-h-plus flights. In some years I was in 40 different cities, like, 20 countries, you know. . . . I [have] done about 7 years of work in the real-world, implementing sustainability in very large government departments in [Country]. And as part of that work I know I’ve done my job, my part in reducing a LOT of greenhouse gasses. And so I’m kind of feeling like, you know, the balance sheet is still tipped in my favor because I’ve done that work.” (Katherine)

At the other extreme, PEBEXs assign a “*carte noir*” to themselves or peers who claim that diffuse meaningful behavior compensates for any real negative environmental impact:

“But then we start to see this funny thing developing, where people kind of, I include myself with this, we kind of decide whether it’s “worth it.” Like, is our flight justifiable? Like, as if the climate cares, you know, the climate doesn’t care if you’re going on a SHOPPING trip to New York, or if you’re going to the to the UN to give a speech. Like, it’s still gonna be 2 tonnes of carbon.” (Christie)

The challenge of comparison remains; no contributing strategy can resolve the issue of a lack of an underlying measurement unit that can effectively compare the estimated impact of future behavioral changes (benefit) with actual carbon emissions (cost). Thus, PEBEXs keep asking themselves, in an ongoing process, when is the negative environmental impact caused by their behavior worth it?

“So the contribution that I can make in that room, . . . they could move 5% more plant-based meals over half a billion meals, is that equivalent or not to the carbon footprint of me flying over there? I have no idea how to answer that. But I think that is the conversation that goes on in my head.” (Harry)

3.2. Accommodative Strategies

We found five accommodative strategies (themes) from the interviews: asking for support, venting, avoiding, distancing oneself, and denying influence.

Asking for support. Approximately half of the participants mentioned their active engagement with others to deal with perceived tension. Engaging with others instead of remaining in isolation with their experiences and related feelings is prominently mentioned as teaming up. In most cases, participants refer to colleagues or peers as teammates, who experience similar struggles and actively reflect as the participants have done. They feel most understood when working with colleagues who have gone through similar challenges, almost like an unofficial support group. Hannah’s description of her work environment likely could apply to anyone working in social professions, like social workers or teachers, where supervision is integral to their jobs:

“And I’ve noticed that working in the environmental field, and working with activists, I can see how easily people get burnt out and overwhelmed, with the struggle. Of frustration of things not changing quickly enough. And so I’m quite mindful of the importance of continuing to work on the bigger things, but to work with other people and to take a break when you need to.” (Hannah)

Another form of asking for support is voicing their feeling of dissonance, which has a two-fold significance. First, it gives participants a sense of a break from being a role model for other individuals, being out of reach for them. Emma sees this as an advantage, she believes that she can connect better with average consumers and show them a realistic way to engage in behavioral change, by sharing her experienced challenges:

“I think being honest is important. And speaking about the challenges. Not portraying yourself as a superhero, but saying I have these 3 reasons and I am really trying to do a change and it is not easy and sometimes I do not manage well and sometimes I just want to have fun and not think about it and do things like I always did them or like everyone else is doing them.” (Emma)

Second, voicing feelings of dissonance has also been mentioned to facilitate commitment to and discussion about how to overcome experienced challenges for the individual PEBEX themselves.

Venting. The participants might liberate themselves or vent, often by being sarcastic. Liberating oneself is directed inward, and a high level of involvement characterizes the participant's self-perception, whether cognitive, affective, or behavioral. To deal with the experienced tension, they seek to liberate themselves by showing gentleness or “not being too hard on myself.” Katherine distinguished her status as an individual with needs and wants and a member of society with needs and wants. As in a good relationship, both should balance, so neither the society nor the self should suffer:

“I’m a hedonist as well, so with me there is a level of work-life balance I need to have, and there is also a level of DOING the right thing, and not being a complete ascetic. Because I do like, I do like the nicer things in life. I just try and make sure that I get them at the least cost to society, or the environment. But it doesn’t mean that I’m not having them, when I really want them. So it’s like finding a balance, I guess.” (Katherine)

Oscar also argued for treating himself with kindness, using sustainability terminology, to emphasize that harming his well-being would be an unsustainable behavior in itself:

“My PRIMARY goal, is it to work well? Is it to follow my values? Which is, for example, I like my life, I want to take care of myself. And therefore my primary intention is to live a day which is, you know, which is not harmful to myself. So causing suffering to myself is not sustainable.” (Oscar)

Being sarcastic instead is directed outward, as a way for participants to deal with the tension that arises when others do not engage to an expected extent. Sarcasm mostly has a negative connotation and reveals the anger or frustration of PEBEXs, thereby enabling them temporarily to vent those feelings as a coping strategy. Sarcasm appeared when Oliver described the potential reactions and thoughts of colleagues if one of them acts according to their recognition of the need to transition toward a more sustainable lifestyle, such as by no longer flying. His sarcastic statement reveals feelings of hope and hopelessness at the same time, again in combination with breaking existing norms:

“Nobody expects that you REALLY—you really MEAN what you say, yes? And this was actually the BEST reaction I could hope for. Because it’s, it’s really FUN! It’s really fun to see people thinking “WELL, actually that COULD be an option of walking the talk? WOW! Someone is doing this! WOW! Oh, no I don’t want, but it’s interesting that someone is doing it,” so—that’s when I tried, and try reading the thoughts [laughter] of these people, it’s a funny effect, yes.” (Oliver)

Avoiding. This approach includes avoiding conversations and avoiding thinking about the topics. The first is outward-directed, and it implies avoiding contact with others by being selective about who they talk to when they choose to have conversations, and which topics to discuss. This active approach allocates limited resources to maximizing the effects for driving sustainable consumption behavior; it also reflects lessons learned from former experiences, revealing insights about where to not invest effort:

“I find it difficult to be taken seriously when I suggested things like ‘Well maybe you shouldn’t be driving a huge 4 L diesel car.’ Because it’s socially unacceptable to say in that environment. And plus, it wouldn’t have any effect as well. So it would only distance me further from them culturally, but also not have any effect anyway.” (George)

Benjamin described a similar contradiction, which made him reflect on how difficult it was to find balance. A local group to which he belongs discusses how to initiate change in the local community, and a host, who was very critical of energy-intensive lifestyles, lived alone in a huge house, where she had a gas fireplace running. Although social norms hinder both these informants from talking freely, they also realize that such conversations would be an ineffective allocation of their resources to drive behavioral change.

The inward-directed form indicates that participants are aware that they avoid thoughts about their own environmental impact. As part of their job, PEBEXs reflect on environmental matters all the time and might choose to take breaks when they consciously allow themselves to not reflect on their behavior. They still might realize the negative environmental impact of their consumption decisions, as a kind of background noise, but they allow themselves to slip out of their professional role and enter a non-reflective state once in a while:

“I think that sustainability experts and people working in this field have more awareness about the impact and more knowledge about it, but sometimes you also try to ignore it and deny it, if you just have your free time, your private time and you just don’t want to think about this at the moment. You just want to enjoy, or be part of something or you know, go to that restaurant or fly to that vacation destination or buy this and that, just because you want to do it and you don’t want to think about it, because that thinking about it is related to your work maybe and maybe also related to that bad feeling of yours.” (Emma)

Emma clearly craves breaks from her constant reflections as a PEBEX, similar to people’s experiences with dieting, such that cravings are well known as part of the behavioral change process.

Distancing oneself. Two-thirds of the participants referred to external limitations that hinder them from engaging in sustainable consumption behavior, such as rules imposed by their work environment. These rules that limit more sustainable consumption behavior do not readily separate into formal or informal rules. Participants were not questioning them:

“I am paid to do that, so I feel it is in my job description.” (Harry)

“Well, I don’t know, like... as long as it was required from my job I went to conferences.” (Darcia)

Darcia also reflected later on how much she trusted her employing organization. Similar to the other participants, she chose her work environment deliberately to ensure a more sustainable corporate purpose, and she realized that the company’s green image made her believe that it would act sustainably in all domains, including flying as the default traveling mode:

“It’s as if there was some sort of like a blindness, you know? ... I guess we all trusted very much in how the [company] was doing, was acting sustainably. So, I guess it kind of gives you some kind of relaxation, like “yeah, they’re going to take care of it” ... , so you kind of like give over the responsibility to the institution instead of staying with it yourself and staying conscious of all the decisions that are being made during your work life there, right?” (Darcia)

Internal limitations result from setting limits, such that the participants themselves restrict their engagement for different reasons. One such limitation is connected to the contributing strategy of simplifying by rules of thumb, but whereas for that strategy, the overarching goal was to drive more sustainable consumption behavior, here the overarching goal is to be successful in the job. Traveling to events that are considered critical makes the location and mode of travel less important:

“That is the conference on [field] where everyone meets.” (Anna)

Also, examples from the private domain were shared:

“I do have a hobby, which is from this point of view, not so good. I’m a kite surfer, and this is something you cannot really do in [European country]. And therefore I usually fly once per year somewhere. Okay, so. Not sustainable.” (Laura)

During the interview, it became clear that this hobby was important to Laura and would not be dropped; she draws a line between what she is willing to give up for a more sustainable consumption behavior and what not. Among all other consumption domains, which feature sustainable behaviors, her hobby of kite surfing is so essential to her well-being that she distances herself and claims the right to not to do as much as possible for the greater good. Frank similarly takes a domain-specific view:

“There cannot be a blanket statement that someone can be sustainable on all, across all domains, I guess. That is my perspective, actually.” (Frank)

Another domain in which participants consider limiting their engagement relates to the question of whether to have children. A few participants deliberately decided not to have children for environmental reasons. Penelope reflected on her and others’ decisions to have or not to have children and sees an even bigger responsibility to engage in sustainable consumption if people decide to have children. Not solely to ensure the future for them, but rather because those children themselves are considered to be an environmental burden to the planet:

“For some people, some of my good friends included, that’s incredibly central to their sense of what it means to have a meaningful life, and their purpose on earth, and what they wanna do with their time, and I mean they would feel unfulfilled and fundamentally unsatisfied with having been alive without having been a parent. And in that case I think, “Of course it makes, I mean, the right thing for them to do is to have children.” BUT, knowing that that is the biggest—the decision with the biggest impact on the climate, I think that also has implications for what it means to be a responsible parent in trying to work harder to give kids a safe climate to grow up in.” (Penelope)

Setting limits essentially reflects the right of self-determination, in any domain, be it private, work, food, or transport. There seems to be an individual need to have the freedom to set individual limits and shares of how and how much to contribute to the greater good.

Denying influence. This accommodating strategy involves participants who assert that personal engagement in sustainable consumption has little influence on the actually needed societal transformation. The underlying assumption is that individual behavior does not matter as much as structural change, so they do not want to focus on changing individual behavior in their work context or in their sustainable practices. That is, they do not engage in individual sustainable practices, to avoid a suboptimal allocation of their resources or to limit further expectations from observers that their individual behavior can overcome the societal challenges of climate change. Participants expressed their belief that individual behavioral change is not sufficient, even as an entry point, to achieve societal transformation, and their focus as PEBEXs should be on achieving structural changes:

“I don’t believe that much in individuals deciding to do things different. I want more the structures to be changed. I don’t know if I want to change people’s behavior, I want to change the society. So that we consume less energy. That is two different things for me. So, I don’t think that you can go out and say to people you should change your behavior. I think we should change the way we are organizing our society so that everybody will be changing their behavior.” (Claudia)

Sometimes informants mentioned a reinforcing relationship between individual and structural changes, such as Ian expressing a view of individuals as agent provocateurs to initiate structural change:

“I don’t actually see individual behavior change, individual responsibility, as being the primary way that change will come about or change comes about. It’s part of it, but I think you

have to think in terms of multiple systems change. So, people who are working on changing the system I think are important. . . . You know, the kind of challenging the producers, the policy changes that are needed, the financial system changes, the business system changes and so on.” (Ian)

In a critical self-reflection, Frank questioned the actual reach of academic PEBEXs. To him, publishing research findings and teaching offers limited channels to communicate and accelerate societal transformation:

“I teach consumer psychology. These students who are supposed to be the next professionals in the field, they learn their senior year or in their graduating year that “Oh, we generate so much waste. We did not know that.” That was surprising for many of the students. So, how far is the knowledge dissemination point? We do (. . .)our research and we try to publish in the [acknowledged journals in the field], whatever it is. Do we think beyond that?” (Frank)

Another form of denying influence involves participants who argue that calling for change does not imply living the change. They take a stand against the expectation that any inferable responsibility translates from being a PEBEX to being a role model, using different rationales for why they as PEBEXs should not engage in sustainable practices or at least not present themselves as role models for achieving sustainable consumption. Finley, for example, finds it difficult to be a role model, because being too perfect might hinder actual goal achievement:

“I fear that if they [PEBEXs] were 100% successful in acting sustainably, they would then appear SO different to everybody else, who is often doing their best. By feeling that they weren’t really doing very well, I think they would so distance themselves from those people that they might even have a negative effect . . . you might find a medical practitioner who was so OBSESSED with cleanliness that people feel, why, look. I just can’t do all that! [laughter], so we come back to being an expert in sustainability, and if we are TOO perfect, it just means that other people feel distanced from that. And may, indeed, give up.” (Finley)

Nathalie compared PEBEXs “walking the talk” with being professionally biased and questions the scientific independence of academic PEBEXs who become too involved:

“I’ve come across some researchers that are . . . the green life is an ideology, it’s kind of a religion. And if you have that, those pair of glasses on, I think you are at risk of not seeing the results in front of you, you are at risk at looking at your data, with those glasses, particular glasses on. And I’ve seen examples of that, where I think you have to question whether or not the interpretation of a certain data set is really the correct one, because if you would’ve been more objective in relation to the field of research you’re in.” (Nathalie)

Evaluation of accommodating strategies. The five accommodative strategies, asking for support, venting, avoiding, distancing oneself, and denying influence, describe how participants adapt to perceived tensions in their everyday life as PEBEXs. The first one has the most temporal and relational character. People take a break from the perceived tension to regain their mental capacities. Venting also is transitory in character; being sarcastic can support a shift from strong negative emotions to a constructive, problem-focused view. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how to prevent liberation from becoming a lasting habit of self-justification to avoid uncomfortable tension. Avoiding is relational too, and it can be applied as a way to take a break, but the participants mainly mentioned it as a way to escape from reflections on their individual consumption decisions. It constitutes a form of emotional coping, such that internal and external factors that might stimulate reflection (e.g., exposed contradictions) can be avoided by not thinking or talking about them. Distancing oneself is temporal and domain specific; it can be constructive and restorative if people consciously allow themselves to separate single behaviors out from the overall equation of their sustainable behavior. Yet, it also might become unconstructive and undermining if broad, frequent consumption behaviors get removed,

such that the overall lifestyle is mostly disengaged. Finally, a denying influence strategy creates the greatest risk that PEBEXs will withdraw from a drive to engage in sustainable consumption behavior. Although seemingly problematic, it remains an accommodating strategy that can provide stress relief for the individual.

These accommodating strategies thus can be distinguished according to their temporal dimension (Figure 4). Those in the temporal category apply to give PEBEXs a rest or brief respite. During these periods, the stressor may appear unresolvable immediately, but the PEBEXs still maintain a fundamental sense that it can be resolved eventually. In contrast, strategies in the lasting category suggest a belief that the stressor is beyond their capabilities or any influence through individual behavior change. They are still coping strategies; they allow the person to reduce the negative influence of the stressor, even without focusing on the actual stressor, as contributing techniques do. This categorization as temporal or lasting is overlapping, and most strategies entail restoring capabilities, reflected in the high motivation of the participants to act.

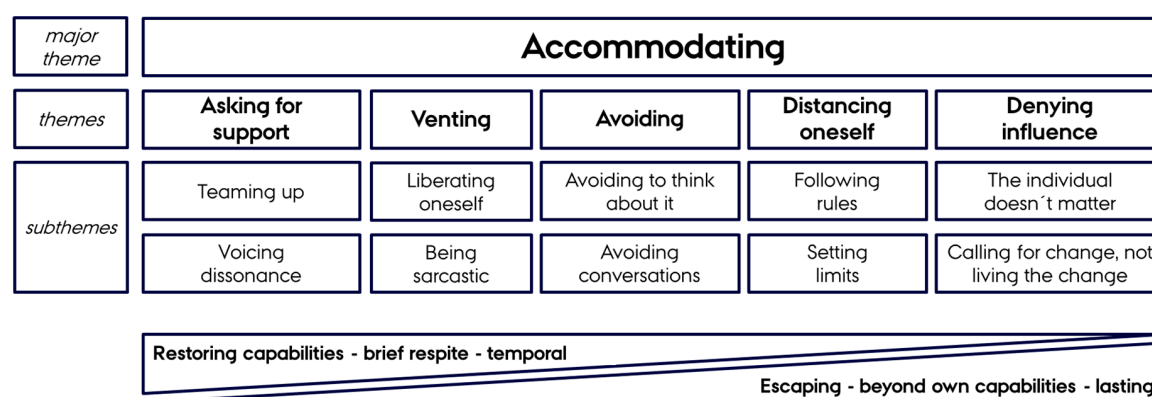


Figure 4. Accommodating strategies of PEBEXs.

3.3. Contributing Versus Accommodating Strategies

PEBEXs' contributing strategies are clearly linked to engagement and disengagement coping. The accommodating strategies, however, are more divided. Moving from a temporal to a lasting state, the risk grows that people become overwhelmed by the perceived tension and seek escape in the long run. Accommodating strategies are important coping strategies. However, they entail the risk that actors will adopt a habitual exit strategy for their (un)sustainable consumption behavior. Thus, accommodating strategies may become disengagement coping.

During the analysis, it also became apparent that participants do not exclusively adopt any specific category of coping strategies. They are context-specific, time-dependent, and person-specific. Coping strategies can occur in parallel, a series, or alternating order, depending on what the person regards as the most supportive option in a particular situation. Hannah offered an example:

"Well, I deal with the feelings in two ways, one by not doing it too much, and the other by... making sure that I'm trying to have a light footprint everywhere else. So, you know, leaving my car behind as much as possible, and, you know, sharing cars with other people, and, living in [incomprehensible due to technical issues] way. But, also, every now and then just ignoring it. Ignoring, allowing myself to just ignore the face of the planet." (Hannah)

4. Discussion and Limitations

4.1. Discussion

The need to communicate and drive sustainable consumption is expected to grow. Governmental and organizational intervention campaigns, such as the Sustainable Development Goals formulated by

the United Nations [74] are spreading the word worldwide, targeting people's awareness. People will be more and better informed and face more and more tension due to the growing threats by climate change. In a recent literature review, ElHaffae, Durif, and Dubé [13] called for more qualitative studies on the intention-behavior gap, but with a special focus on, e.g., coping strategies as a promising source to minimize that gap.

This study set out to further our understanding of how individuals—particularly PEBEXs—cope with the perceived tensions associated with sustainable consumption. Our focus on PEBEXs rather than regular consumers was driven by the insight that PEBEXs represent a critical case, allowing the in-depth study of the phenomenon under investigation. Like regular consumers, PEBEXs have consumption wishes and needs. However, different from regular consumers, PEBEXs—by definition—are what downstream policy interventions ultimately have as a goal: knowledgeable, attentive, and motivated consumers. Based on 31 interviews with PEBEXs that we analyzed, we identified two main strategies that PEBEXs employ to cope with the perceived tension associated with barriers towards sustainable consumption: contributing and accommodating. Subsequently, we discuss our contribution to the literature.

First, our analysis revealed two distinct main strategies that PEBEXs employ to cope with the perceived tension associated with sustainable consumption, each of which was composed of five themes. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to provide a typology that characterizes coping strategies in the context of tensions associated with sustainable consumption. In particular, we find contributing and accommodative strategies that PEBEXs use to cope with perceived barriers and tension to (not) contribute to the societal challenge of climate change. Importantly, the two strategies serve different purposes: contributing strategies aim to maximize sustainable consumption. They seek to overcome barriers toward more sustainable consumption behavior. Thereby, the focus may as well be inward-directed, that is, controlling their behavior, as it may be outward-oriented, that is, impacting others' behavior. As such, the contributing strategies relate to the problem-solving and engagement coping concepts discussed in the literature. Conversely, accommodating strategies aim at minimizing the perceived tension and, thus, are less focused on addressing the actual problem. Accordingly, they are related to emotion-focused coping.

Second, our results highlight the temporal distinction among accommodating strategies. This temporal distinction represents a novel insight into the coping literature, with exciting implications. Accommodative strategies allow individuals to escape a stressor they perceive as unresolvable. The escape potentially results in lasting disengagement coping. Importantly, however, our results show that individuals may also rely on accommodative strategies that entail only a temporary escape mode. Hence, these accommodative strategies enable individuals to re-access contributing coping strategies later, for example, in a problem-solving mode.

Accommodative strategies can provide cognitive, affective, and behavioral breaks to help individuals regain energy to devote to more problem-oriented strategies. This context-specific finding reflects a climate change context. Climate change is a stressor that is not resolvable within the span of any single individual's lifespan. Therefore, this context-specific finding helps advance our general understanding of coping strategies that likely arise when a stressor appears chronic or unresolvable.

Third, we interviewed participants who have reached a high level of knowledge, motivation, and reflection on climate change topics, as intended by many policy interventions targeting individual consumption behavior. This novel approach allowed us to identify that such individuals do not perceive lower barriers, but instead higher ones towards sustainable consumption behavior. PEBEXs' perceived higher barriers to sustainable consumption behavior might stem from the responsibility felt due to their role as PEBEXs: there is evidence that PEBEXs are motivated and want to engage and share their knowledge regarding climate change [14]. In this sense, they can represent social issue supporters, which Sonenshein et al. [75] define as people who identify with a social issue and support it, even when it comes at a cost to their career or family. Our results indicate that reflection on others' and their own consumption behavior is integral to PEBEXs' daily lives, sometimes creating a critical level of tension. As Longo et al. [76] showed, and our results echo, too much knowledge can paralyze people and hinder them from executing sustainable consumption behavior.

Overall, our results regarding PEBEXs' coping strategies seem to relate to climate change being a wicked problem. Climate change is the result of collective action and can only be solved by collective action—it cannot be resolved by an individual's actions alone [3]. Downstream interventions hold the potential to increase consumers' knowledge, motivation, and reflection, thereby driving sustainable consumption behavior by applying appropriate contribution strategies. However, our results reveal that, overwhelmed by the sheer futility of ones' contribution towards solving the climate change problem, individuals may apply accommodative coping strategies that yield lasting escape rather than support. This insight highlights that relying solely on downstream interventions is not enough. Rather, to drive consumers towards more pro-environmental behavior, downstream interventions need to be accompanied by upstream interventions that alter individuals' structural environment to support more sustainable consumption behavior [77]. To ultimately be successful, efforts of empowering consumers' own ability to change their decision-making need to be complemented with more paternalistic approaches, as reflected in rules and regulations.

4.2. Limitations

The views and experiences of the participants are embedded in their cultural context, and though they represented 13 nationalities and 12 countries, the experts were almost exclusively from the Western hemisphere (an exposing piece of information itself, revealing the author's cultural imprint and access to participants). A study of PEBEXs situated in contexts in which the negative social and environmental consequences of unsustainable consumption are experienced more personally might reveal different qualities and forms of tension and coping strategies.

Only one researcher, the author, coded the data of this study. This can be acknowledged as a limitation of the study. Sometimes it is recommended in the literature to code with a second coder to “ensure that data is thoroughly explored from all points of view (. . .) (and) can also provide reassurance that consistent, reliable interpretations underlie the final analysis” [78] (p. 366). However, as researchers, there is always a need to make decisions that could have been taken differently. As an example, Braun and Clarke [67] criticize the use of the term “emerging” or “discovered” themes as a passive understanding of the coding process, denying the active and interpretative role of the involved researcher. Instead, they recommend being aware and sensitive about what decisions are taken along the way of analyzing the data. The decisions taken in this study—such as identifying and selecting themes—have been made as transparent as possible, acknowledging that other researchers might have decided differently.

We also see the broader question of whether and how researchers in the field of sustainable consumption—“one of their own”—can maintain objectivity and avoid bias while interviewing PEBEXs. This bias likely can be minimized but not eliminated. A rigid scientific approach, with ongoing acknowledgment of this potential source of bias and critical conversations with outside parties, was thus deployed. Being “one of their own” also might have had a beneficial effect, in terms of creating a secure environment in which participants felt understood in their daily efforts and challenges. Similarly, social desirability bias cannot be eliminated, but the study design sought to reduce it as much as possible, with a carefully drafted interview guide and extended interview sessions to make the participants comfortable.

Furthermore, the individual preparation for each interview was very detailed. Inspired by Zuckerman's [79] intensive reflections on the overall interviewing process of elite interviews of Nobel laureates in science, the author found it important to steer the perception of herself as a potential interview partner early on in the interview. For every participant, detailed background information was prepared, aiming to steer that the participants will perceive the interviewer as a combination of a well-prepared layman expert in their specific field and an expert in her own field. Showing interest in a participant's scientific work, especially in their personal experiences, was mostly acknowledged as an interesting interview topic because some expressed a lack of opportunities to express and discuss those matters. These considerations mainly came into effect in the warm-up phase, but also during the interviews, when participants sometimes consciously or unconsciously checked on the interviewers' topic-related knowledge to ensure what level of communication to choose.

Nevertheless, being “one of their own” might have also negatively affected some participants. Participants might have felt to answer more socially desirably about their motivations to act pro-environmentally friendly as they might have expressed themselves to somebody not related to the field. As the participants were expected to have basic motivation towards sustainability topics due to their job profile, could they have expected the same of the interviewer.

However, the qualitative approach helped to explore the research questions through intensive time and discussions with PEBEXs as participants. Although the participants voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study can be viewed as a positive selection bias, the pilot interviews offer some defense against it. These pilot test participants were selected based on a pre-screening of their professional background, but no apparent differences marked their conversations compared with the later interviews. Still, to explore if the motivations, experienced tensions, and coping strategies are widespread, a survey-based study would be insightful.

However, seeking advice from PEBEXs about environmental policies, in general, has also been criticized. Truelove and Gillis [80] therefore argued for laypeople’s significant perspective on PEB to account for their specific view on barriers towards PEB.

5. Conclusions

The focal stressor in this study was the experienced tension of PEBEXs who face barriers to their sustainable consumption, which provided a starting point for learning from experts who are highly aware, motivated, and knowledgeable, such that they can reflect critically on others’ and their own consumption behaviors. The participants’ main coping strategies are contributing and accommodating. These coping strategies offer a promising source of information for individuals in general on how to drive personal consumption behavior in more sustainable directions and how to deal with accompanying barriers and tensions. Because coping strategies can be trained [32], the introduced strategies can support interventions targeting individual consumption decisions.

Interventions could yield training consumers not only on the level of individual, stand-alone behaviors, but instead training a more holistic concept of assessing their capabilities to make more sustainable consumption decisions. An example could be existing footprint calculators that are yet often limited to a portfolio of individual consumption decisions such as buying and living but do not take political engagement through voting or work-related behavior into account. In general, strengthening the individuals’ perception of self-efficacy regarding official and unofficial consumption rules seem promising. In particular, since well-trodden paths of required (work-related) traveling has been questioned heavily due to the Corona pandemic, this might open mindsets in general to reconsider existing paths of consumption behavior.

However, our results also revealed a lack of structural support for more sustainable consumption behavior in people’s everyday life. Otherwise, consumers worldwide will continue to experience increasing and similar tensions in their everyday decisions and efforts to engage in sustainable consumption behavior. Instead of training on how to maximize sustainable consumption and minimize tension, individuals might find themselves believing in their inability to achieve a more sustainable consumption behavior or to solve problems related to climate change, as the concept of learned helplessness suggests [81]. We are called to minimize that risk by accompanying downstream and upstream interventions, so we as a society can succeed with societal transformation toward the greater good of the planet and the people.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research center (see link below) and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. https://badm.au.dk/fileadmin/Business_Administration/MAPP/MAPP_ethical_guidelines.pdf.

Appendix A : Initial Recruitment Email

Subject:

Wanted-Experts for Skype interview-Research project

Text:

Dear experts in the field of sustainable consumption,

In connection with my [project name], I need to interview experts in the wider area of sustainable consumption.

I invite you to be part of my current research by allowing me to have a Skype interview with you. The interview will take max. one hour.

This study aims at understanding the contradictions individuals may or may not feel regarding the sustainability of their private consumption decisions and decisions in their work life. —You are invited to take part in this research because of your expertise in the field of sustainable consumption and my expectation that you are probably more sensitive to possible contradictions like these than most other people.

As mentioned, this research will involve your participation in a max. one hour Skype-interview. If you are willing to participate, please reply to [researcher's e-mail address]. We will then find a time that suits you to schedule a Skype call, and I will give you more information. Naturally, you will keep the right to change your mind about the interview at any point, even after having been interviewed.

Thank you very much for considering your participation.

Have a great day,

[name of the researcher]

Appendix B : Informed Consent Form

Informed consent form—Qualitative research project

My name is [name of the researcher]. I am doing research on sustainable consumption behavior in everyday situations. My research aims at understanding individuals making (un-)sustainable consumption decisions in their everyday life. I am interested to learn about situations where individuals behave sustainably and where they don't and how and why that behavior can change over time. The results of this project can give ideas to policymakers and companies on how to engage individuals in sustainable consumption decisions in their everyday life.

You are invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as an expert in the field of sustainable consumption can contribute much to our understanding and knowledge about which difficulties individuals can face by making sustainable consumption decisions and on how to overcome those difficulties.

This research will involve your participation in an approx. 1 h Skype-interview. Using Skype, the interview can take place where you want it to take place and where you feel comfortable. The Skype-conversation will be recorded to facilitate the transcription process and all the information obtained through this interview will be analysed for purely academic purposes. The information recorded is confidential and your identity will be kept confidential.

You will not be provided with any incentive to take part in the research, but your participation is likely to help me to find out more about sustainable consumption behavior and to add to the knowledge that exists about the topic. I would be happy to share the results of the study with you.

Please ask me any questions regarding the research project you want, and I will take time to explain. If you have questions later, please feel free to ask them. It is your choice whether to participate or not. Even if you agree to participate, you may change your mind later and stop participating.

I have been invited to participate in research about sustainable consumption practices. I have read the information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

[Date and signature of participant]

Appendix C : Interview Guide (Slightly Shortened)

Introduction

The whole interview guide is not followed strictly, it is a tool and will be used depending on the flow of the actual interview.

Information given to the interviewees at the beginning:

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. As you already know, the aim of this study is to learn more about human behavior. In particular, I want to explore how experts in the field of sustainable consumption perceive and deal with potential contradictions in their work life. An example could be travelling to conferences.

The interview will take approximately 1 h. To give you an outlook: I will start asking you some background questions regarding your job and work place. Thereafter, I will ask you more specific questions. As always, there are no “right” or “wrong” answers. I am interested in situations, where you feel a contradiction, and in understanding, how and why you did or do various potentially contradictory things. I want to understand how you feel and act in such specific situations, your experience/opinion. All this is important to me and I therefore kindly ask you to not hold back. The interviews are, of course, anonymous, and only used for scientific purpose. And you can stop the interview at any time. Thanks a lot for giving your consent. Do you have any questions?

If it is ok with you, I start recording the interview now, it is only the voices that will be recorded, no pictures.

Interview guide

Daily routine—To get started, I would like to have an idea about your daily routine. Please walk me through a normal office day of yours?—Please start by leaving your home in the morning and how you get to work ... ?

Profession as a PEBEX—I would like to hear a bit more about your job...

How would you describe your main tasks? On a daily basis?

What motivates you work in this specific field?

(Did your motivation towards that change over time? If so, how?)

Sustainable behavior—Now I would like to talk about what you personally perceive as sustainable and unsustainable behavior to get an understanding of your views and assessment of these aspects.

What does sustainable behavior mean to you in your private context? How would an unsustainable behavior look like in your private context?

(How do you feel about that behavior? Can you elaborate a bit on that?)

How would an unsustainable behavior look like at work? Can you remember examples, where a specific behavior made you think? (Please share your thoughts and feelings. Again, it can be in any typical work situations, like the office, lecturing, meetings, lunch or coffee breaks.)

(Do you perceive yourself behaving differently in your private and your work life, when it comes to sustainable behavior? How? Do you think, that one is more important to you than the other?—Why?)

Conference participation—Now I would like to hear about situations where you may have perceived conflicts, or potential contradictions between your personal attitudes regarding behaving sustainably and your behavior at work.

Are there any situations you could think of? Please elaborate on that ...

(Have you talked among colleagues about (un-)/sustainability during conferences?

Or talked about (un-)/sustainable behavior at work in general?)

Comparison with the average consumer—The next questions are about your thoughts on differences between experts and average consumers ...

What do you think—Are average consumers facing different challenges than experts in the field of sustainable consumption? What differences? What does that mean to you, if anything?

(Assume someone says, it looks like experts in the field of sustainable consumption are equally likely to fail to engage in sustainable behavior as other people. Do you agree? If so, what are your thoughts on why that is?)

Do you think your professional background makes it easier for someone like you to choose more sustainable options?—Why, please elaborate.

Do you think it is important for an expert in the area of sustainable consumption to want to change people's behavior? To want to change their own behavior? Why?

Coping strategies—the last part of the interview is about how people deal with situations, where they experience tension between the different requirements of their job and a goal of making sustainable choices.

People often feel conflicts between different goals we follow... Do you sometimes feel a tension between the requirements of your job and the goal to support behavior change into a more sustainable direction?—Can you give an example?

Can you think of examples, where the level of tension experienced is different?

(Why do you think does the level differ?)

What is your strategy to achieve the sustainable behavior that you would like to have?

Are there any principles or rules you follow in your consumption behavior to make it more sustainable? In your work behavior?

Information given to the interviewees at the end (select the appropriate ones):

Is there something that you would like to add, comment or ask?

You are welcome to write just a short E-Mail or give me a call also later on, if something comes to your mind that you want to add.

How do you feel after being interviewed via Skype?

It would be very helpful to get some demographical data for the research project. May I send you a link where you can answer some questions about yourself? It should take about 5 min.

Thank you very much for your time and effort! Thanks for participating.

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