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Sustainable Consumption in Context: A Cross-Cultural Study of Social Representations

Franziska Weder ¹, Urša Golob ² and Klement Podnar ^{2,*}

¹ Department of Business Communication, Vienna University of Economics and Business, 1020 Wien, Austria; franziska.weder@wu.ac.at

² Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia; ursa.golob@fdv.uni-lj.si

* Correspondence: klement.podnar@fdv.uni-lj.si; Tel.: +386-15805100

Abstract: This study explores how consumers in developed and developing countries perceive sustainable food consumption and how these perceptions are shaped by local contexts. Using the theory of social representations, which frames sustainability as a system of values, ideas, and practices, we conducted a mixed-methods analysis of data from online focus groups in ten countries. The results reveal significant differences between sustainability frontrunners in developed countries and consumers in developing countries. Consumers in developed countries focus on immanent representations, linking sustainability to concrete practices such as recycling, buying organic products, and brand awareness. In contrast, consumers in developing countries adopt more transcendent views, emphasizing moral responsibility, tradition, and collective well-being, and often expecting government regulation to drive change. Barriers such as high cost, lack of knowledge, and skepticism reflect underlying socio-economic inequalities, particularly in developing contexts. The study highlights how global sustainability norms interact with local realities, revealing mismatches that limit the effectiveness of universal approaches. These findings underscore the need for context-sensitive policies and strategies that address local barriers while remaining consistent with global sustainability goals. More broadly, this research underscores the necessity of culturally tailored approaches to promote equitable and inclusive socio-ecological transformations.



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1. Introduction

Sustainable consumption, which refers to the practice of satisfying needs through the acquisition, use, and disposal of goods and services in a manner that does not jeopardize the ecological and socio-economic conditions of current or future generations [1] (Geiger et al., 2018), is a critical aspect of Goal No. 12 (i.e., Sustainable Consumption and Production) in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2]. This global goal has gained significant attention, highlighting the need for indirect and voluntary approaches to sustainable behavior change [3]. Despite this emphasis, sustainable consumption remains a complex and multifaceted issue, shaped by the north–south divide [4]—a term describing the economic and developmental disparities between industrialized, wealthier countries in the global north and resource-constrained, often lower-income countries in the global south. These contrasting realities call for a nuanced understanding of how sustainable consumption is perceived, framed, and enacted across different regions.

Although much is known about the global need for sustainable consumption [5,6], gaps remain in understanding how it is interpreted by consumers in different socio-cultural contexts [7]. Existing research has predominantly focused on ‘universal’ frameworks, such as reducing carbon footprints or promoting green purchasing [8,9]. However, much of this knowledge is derived from extensive studies of Western countries, which on average exhibit patterns of overconsumption [10]. In these contexts, sustainable consumption often emphasizes individual behavior change and market-driven solutions, such as purchasing eco-labeled products [4]. In contrast, non-Western contexts may prioritize collective practices, health, and meeting basic livelihood needs [11,12].

Knowledge about sustainable consumption therefore remains disproportionately associated with Western consumers, leaving limited insight into how local realities shape its meaning and practice, particularly in regions where sustainability discourses are less institutionalized or heavily influenced by global norms [13]. Comparative research across Western and non-Western contexts is sparse [11], and key questions about the cultural and socio-economic influences on sustainable consumption remain largely unanswered [14].

To address this, there is a need for theoretical frameworks that consider the influence of local norms and discourses on sustainable consumption [14] and broaden the understanding of its various aspects [7]. This study explores the social representations of sustainable consumption—the collective values, ideas, and practices shaping individual behaviors and attitudes toward sustainability [15]. Specifically, the study focuses on sustainable food consumption, which is a critical global concern in sustainable production and consumption because food production and consumption have significant environmental impacts [11,16,17]. Our research aims to understand how consumers from diverse countries conceptualize sustainable food consumption and the barriers they face in adopting sustainable practices.

This research used both qualitative and quantitative methods, analyzing data from online focus groups in five developed (Australia, Austria, Germany, Slovenia, USA) and five developing (Chile, China, Colombia, Iran, Malaysia) countries. By applying thematic analysis to these narratives, we uncovered the social representations of sustainable consumption, followed by correspondence analysis (CA) to visualize how these representations vary across countries. By considering consumption as a socially constructed practice [18], our study underscores the importance of contextualizing sustainable consumption within specific social, economic, and cultural frameworks. Ultimately, our research contributes to the growing call for more contextual, cross-cultural studies on sustainable consumption [11,19], enriching the global dialogue on sustainable development by comparing diverse contexts and offering insights into how different regions approach sustainability particularly by comparing Western and non-Western contexts [7].

The remainder of the paper continues with the theoretical framework, which discusses the perspectives on sustainable consumption and introduces the social representations approach to sustainable consumption, arguing for a contextualized approach. The theoretical introduction is followed by the methodology and results section that presents the results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis. This is followed by a discussion and conclusions.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1. Sustainable Consumption: Perspectives and Challenges

Sustainable consumption has emerged as a critical concept within global environmental and development agendas, particularly since its inclusion in Agenda 21 at the 1992 Rio Summit and later as a core pillar of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [20]. Defined as consumption that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own [1], it represents a critical response to

escalating environmental challenges and socio-economic inequalities. However, despite its global significance, sustainable consumption remains a complex and contested concept, shaped by diverse cultural, economic, and political contexts [21].

In the literature, sustainable consumption is approached from two dominant perspectives: individual efficiency-oriented approaches and systemic approaches [9,22]. Efficiency-oriented approaches focus on individual behavioral changes, emphasizing mindful purchasing, reducing waste, recycling, and adopting eco-friendly lifestyles [8,23,24]. This perspective aligns with rational-choice models, where consumers make informed decisions based on ethical and environmental values [4]. However, critiques point out that this individualistic framing overlooks structural and systemic barriers to sustainability, such as inequalities in resource distribution and the economic systems driving unsustainable practices [20,22].

The systemic perspective, by contrast, situates sustainable consumption within broader socio-economic and institutional frameworks. It highlights the need for transformative changes to economic systems, governance structures, and cultural norms that perpetuate consumption-driven growth models [25]. From this angle, addressing sustainability requires not only behavioral adjustments but also structural reforms that tackle the root causes of overconsumption, global inequalities, and ecological degradation [4].

Importantly, sustainable consumption frameworks often reflect a 'global North–South binarity' [4,6]. Developed countries that often dictate the global understanding of sustainability [26], tend to focus on addressing overconsumption and shifting consumer awareness, whereas developing countries prioritize equitable resource distribution and improving livelihoods, with environmental considerations frequently taking a secondary role [12,27], partly due to concerns about the availability and costs of green products [28]. These divergent priorities create global–local discursive tensions, where the meaning of sustainable consumption varies by context [29]. For instance, individuals in high-income countries may associate sustainability with eco-labels and ethical purchasing, while those in lower-income countries might emphasize religious beliefs, frugality, resource-sharing, and community resilience [7,30]. However, there is evidence that the demand for organic products is rising even in developing regions such as Latin America, particularly among millennials [31]. Similarly, studies in Indian and South Asian contexts reveal that younger generations, despite being raised in collectivistic cultures, increasingly emphasize individualistic and hedonistic motivations for sustainable consumption over collectivistic ones [14,32].

Previous research underscores that cultural, economic, and political structures shape both systemic and individual approaches to sustainability. This highlights the need to examine how sustainable consumption is interpreted and practiced across diverse socio-economic contexts, revealing variations in priorities, challenges, and solutions.

2.2. Social Representations Approach to Sustainable Consumption

The concept of social representations provides a useful lens for understanding how sustainable consumption is framed, interpreted, and practiced across diverse contexts [33]. Originating from Moscovici [34], social representations theory explores how shared beliefs, values, and ideas emerge within social groups, shaping meaning-making processes and guiding both thought and action [35,36]. Social representations function as collective frameworks that individuals use to make sense of abstract or unfamiliar concepts—such as sustainability—by linking them to culturally embedded knowledge and practices [37]. Representations operate along a continuum between transcendent representations—which are abstract, normative concepts detached from specific practices—and immanent representations, which are directly tied to concrete actions and behaviors [38]. For example, transcendent representations of sustainable consumption may include ideals like fairness,

environmental justice, or civic responsibility, while immanent representations manifest in actions such as recycling, ethical purchasing, or reducing food waste. This distinction is central to understanding how global sustainability frameworks, such as the SDGs, are localized into meaningful practices across different socio-cultural contexts.

By anchoring abstract sustainability ideals to culturally specific values, routines, and norms, social representations theory helps us explore how individuals and groups navigate complex sustainability discourses [34]. It also highlights the tensions that arise when global visions of sustainability conflict with local priorities, necessitating reinterpretation or resistance to achieve meaningful outcomes [29].

In the context of sustainable consumption, the interplay between transcendent and immanent representations offers insights into how abstract ideals are transformed into tangible behaviors. While transcendent representations, such as fair trade or environmental justice, can stimulate sustainable consumption practices, immanent representations often emerge through changes in concrete behaviors, like buying eco-labeled products or boycotting unsustainable brands [38]. The theory also underscores the non-linear pathways through which sustainability practices emerge. While transcendent representations may drive action by introducing normative ideals, immanent representations can also precede systemic shifts, as practical changes in consumption reshape broader sustainability discourses [38]. However, this process often involves tensions, as global visions of sustainability may conflict with local cultural values or needs, necessitating reinterpretation or resistance to achieve meaningful outcomes [29].

Social representations also operate as tools for navigating the cognitive complexity of sustainability, especially given the multiplicity of definitions—from eco-efficiency to mindful consumption and ethical responsibility—that often lead to ‘discursive confusion’ [29]. By anchoring abstract ideas to familiar values, routines, and narratives, these representations simplify complex sustainability discourses, enabling consumers to make sense of competing demands [39]. At the same time, social representations may reflect ‘cognitive polyphasia,’ where multiple, and at times conflicting, ways of thinking about sustainability coexist within the same cultural or social context [36].

Critically, social representations are shaped by cultural and socio-economic contexts, making them a valuable framework for cross-national comparisons [40]. They allow for examining how sustainability is interpreted differently across countries, influenced by economic development, environmental priorities, and political structures. For instance, while recycling may symbolize environmental responsibility in developed countries, in developing countries it may represent economic necessity—reflecting broader global–local tensions in sustainability discourse [4]. Additionally, representations reveal how systemic barriers, such as economic constraints and unequal access to resources, limit sustainable choices in less affluent regions [22].

By focusing on how shared values, ideas, and practices around sustainable consumption emerge and evolve, social representations theory enables an exploration of cross-cultural sustainability narratives, showing us how diverse socio-economic realities shape the meaning and practice of sustainable consumption.

2.3. Towards a Contextualized Understanding of Sustainable Consumption

Building on these theoretical foundations, we examined narratives and practices related to food purchasing and household consumption in 10 countries with varying levels of economic development and cultural backgrounds, including Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Australia, the United States, China, Malaysia, Iran, Chile, and Colombia. These countries offered a rich basis for comparison, as they represent different ecological footprints, income levels, and policy priorities [25,41]. Five countries in the sample (Australia, Austria,

Germany, Slovenia, and the United States) were high-income developed countries, while the remaining five countries (China, Chile, Colombia, Iran, and Malaysia) were developing countries, with Iran being a lower middle-income country and the rest being upper middle-income countries. These countries differ in terms of the ecological footprint they generate through household consumption; the most developed countries (the European countries and the United States and Australia) have a much larger ecological footprint in this respect.

By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, we explored the narratives, practices, and barriers associated with sustainable food consumption—a key domain within sustainable consumption and production goals [16,17]. Specifically, we aimed to understand the public representation of sustainable consumption and how it is generally viewed in the context of everyday practices. In analyzing our data, particular attention was paid to narratives (as a means of creating representations and as a framework for examining them) [42] and the organization of discourse [40] around sustainable consumption (i.e., categories that reflect understandings of sustainable consumption, explanations of practices and examples of reflection on sustainability in consumption practices), which gave us an idea of how representations are anchored. We also compared the findings in a cross-national context. The study focused on the following research questions: (1) How is sustainable consumption, particularly in the context of food purchasing and household practices, socially represented in countries with varying economic development and cultural backgrounds? (2) What elements define these social representations, including underlying values, norms, practices, and barriers to sustainable consumption? (3) To what extent do social representations of sustainable consumption reflect similarities or differences across countries?

3. Methodology

3.1. Focus Groups

The cross-sectional qualitative study used asynchronous online focus groups and open-source forum discussion platforms. We specifically chose to use this research format for three main reasons, all related to increasing the accessibility of the study. As this was a study conducted in different regions of the world, this approach offered flexibility and convenience, which can ensure higher participation and more thoughtful responses, reduce time pressure when reflecting about complex issues [43], and be cost effective. This is a popular approach in consumer research as it allows participants to participate anytime, anywhere and also to post text, photos, and videos with a high degree of anonymity [44]. Although anonymity can be a problem, as participants may represent other people, this problem was solved through the recruitment process. Participants were selected using a questionnaire about demographics and consumption behaviors. To ensure a diversity of perspectives on sustainable consumption, we purposively sampled individuals who reported engaging in sustainable practices. The 217 participants in ten countries (Table 1) represent a range of demographics and geography, urban/rural settings, and cultural contexts. This approach ensures a wide range of experiences and perspectives, reflecting the necessary diversity to explore sustainable food consumption across nations.

Data collection for the whole study took place in two phases and was coordinated remotely (online meetings, emails between researchers in the first round of data collection) and in person (the second round of data collection) to ensure consistency in the methodology. First, data were collected in Europe (Slovenia, Austria, and Germany). A few months later, one of the project researchers recruited postgraduates from different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds for additional data collection in their own countries (Australia, China, Colombia, Chile, the United States, Iran, and Malaysia). The discussions were conducted in national languages—Spanish, English, German, Slovenian, Malay, Farsi, and Mandarin—and lasted for five days. The transcripts of the non-English speaking focus

groups were translated into English for analysis while maintaining the authenticity of responses. Researchers from various disciplinary and cultural backgrounds facilitated data collection in their respective countries, ensuring the process was culturally appropriate and inclusive of diverse perspectives.

Table 1. Characteristics of the focus groups.

Country	Number of Participants	Average Age
Australia	15	29
Austria	27	43
Chile	15	31
China	17	31
Colombia	15	34
Germany	25	40
Iran	41	37
Malaysia	15	30
Slovenia	32	41
USA	15	28

The discussions began with introductory questions about themselves and their everyday practices in relation to shopping and consumption, followed by a discussion about the sustainability of consumption. Over the course of the days, participants discussed various topics (transport, food shopping, etc.), although in this study we restrict ourselves to the area of food shopping and consumption. We asked participants to interpret the meaning of sustainable food consumption through their everyday knowledge—mainly semantic, but also through narratives describing practices [40].

3.2. Data Coding and Analysis

The design of the study included six phases of data refinement and analysis, starting with a definition of the aspects and analysis questions (i.e., which aspects of sustainability related to consumption examples are discussed and problematized and which barriers to sustainable consumption are mentioned). This first step was followed by thematic analysis with several readings of the raw data (focus groups' transcriptions) to identify themes and categories. After discussion between researchers, a coding frame was developed, which was important to answer the questions at hand. A form of inter-rater reliability was sought by identifying the areas where the researchers agreed or disagreed in coding [45]. The segments were labeled with the defined categories. If new codes emerged, the transcripts were reread and revised to fit the new structure. After this process, codes were aggregated by combining similar codes. Before the data were analyzed and the results of the focus groups compared, these sub-categories were conceptualized into more general categories: knowledge and practices of sustainable consumption and barriers to sustainable consumption (Table 2).

The final part of our analysis involved CA, a multivariate statistical technique used to explore relationships between categorical variables and visualize their associations in a two-dimensional space. We designed two correspondence tables: one capturing frequencies of themes related to the general understanding of sustainable consumption and buying, and the other focused on barriers to sustainable consumption (see Appendix A). These two tables were then used as an input for CA. For showing the results of the CA, we used a plot of rows and column points with the aim of cross-country comparison and to detect any structural relations among the categorical variables. CA was performed with the XLSTAT 2022.4.1 Statistical Software for Excel.

Table 2. General categories and examples of empirical codes with sample quotes.

General Categories	Themes	Sample Quotes
Knowledge, understanding	Higher quality of life	‘I think that sustainable consumption is about improving the quality of life’ (Slovenia)
Practices	Respect local farmers	‘Every Saturday morning, I go to the market and buy veggies, eggs, meat and fruits from local farmers. ...’ (Austria)
Barriers	High price	‘Until there is an affordable sustainable alternative, many people just can’t make a different choice’ (USA)

The analysis was carried out in two main steps. First, the axes were interpreted based on the contributions of categorical variables, such as representations of sustainable consumption and barriers. Second, the proximities between countries and representations were examined to determine which representations were most prominent for specific countries in relative terms.

CA allowed us to uncover both shared and unique patterns in how sustainable consumption is represented across diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts. It provided critical insights into the interplay between global sustainability norms and local practices, addressing the study’s aim of exploring cross-national variations in sustainable consumption.

4. Results

4.1. Representations of Sustainable Consumption and Buying

At a very general level, the thematic analysis shows that the representations of sustainable consumption were contained in some familiar, mostly positive notions (i.e., general knowledge and reported practices) as well as in some doubts and barriers to the exercise of sustainable consumption, thus reflecting both positive and negative aspects.

4.1.1. General Knowledge and Practices

Overall, participants did not have a common understanding of sustainable consumption (and buying) of food in a broader sense and tended to use multidimensional definitions. In most focus groups, participants began to combine several ideas about sustainable consumption during the discussion to create a more holistic representation of sustainable consumption or to acknowledge its complexity. In some cases, such as the Chilean focus group, participants admitted that they did not even know the term sustainability before it came up in the focus group. However, they made the connection by explaining that they live very consciously, grow their own herbs and vegetables, buy open food from the street, and ‘avoid plastic wherever I can’ (Mr. C, Chile). Participants in the Iranian focus group were also unfamiliar with the term: ‘Sustainability is definitely good, but I don’t know much about it’ (Ms. F, Iran). However, they began to associate sustainability with ‘health’ and ‘hygiene’, with keeping nature clean and with cleanliness in general: ‘Our land and our health is the first choice’ (Mr. T, Iran). For example, supermarkets not only in Iran but also in Chile, where plastic packaging is a sign of better hygiene and quality, are perceived as ‘clean’ and selling higher-quality products. Health concerns were also part of sustainable consumption representations in China and to some extent in Malaysia. In relation to health, and in contrast to the above, German participants frequently mentioned the need to pay attention to ingredients and to buy and eat healthy food overall (‘When we eat meat, it’s from “happy animals”’ [Mr. D, Germany]).

Some of the themes that emerged in the discussions related to how and what to consume and whether to reduce consumption or buy more consciously, e.g., by buying higher quality products, supporting local production, buying organic products, recycling, etc. These themes, which reflect concrete views on purchasing practices and consumption, were mainly mentioned by participants from developed countries, as illustrated with a quote of one participant: ‘Sustainable for me also means that I buy eggs directly from the farmer and not in a store . . .’ (Ms. V, Slovenia). Recycling, for example, was the main topic in Australia and the USA (and also pretty much taken for granted in Europe), while it was not mentioned at all by the Chinese participants. In China, participants admitted that they do not usually think about sustainability and the environment in their consumption habits: ‘Sometimes I think of using my own bag, but not entirely because of sustainability considerations, but out of saving . . .’ (Ms. H, China).

In relation to these very concrete practices, it is interesting to note how the portrayal of a sustainable consumer generally differs between developed and developing countries. In developed countries, participants perceived not using plastic and buying bulk packaging as a ‘luxury’ in the sense of making a big effort. One participant from Germany mentioned that she feels very sustainable going to the butcher instead of buying packaged meat in the supermarket (Ms. S, Germany). In contrast, packaged products meant a real luxury for groups in South America compared to fruit markets and open products at market stalls, which are ‘normal’ for them. Nevertheless, the ‘general’ concern for the environment as a transcendent representation of sustainable consumption was quite pronounced in the focus groups in several countries, both developed (Australia, USA, Slovenia) and developing (Colombia and Chile). Among participants from Chile and the USA (and to some extent from Slovenia), fairness towards workers, no child labor, fair trade, and social sustainability in general were also discussed in the context of sustainable consumption.

Social awareness emerged in connection with sustainable consumption and was discussed by participants in all countries except Iran. However, the representations differed from country to country. In some cases, especially in focus groups from Central Europe (Austria, Germany, Slovenia), direct individual responsibility was discussed (‘I try to condition myself . . . I need to—otherwise I just feel responsible, but what am I doing at the end?’ [Mr. C, Austria]), while in some countries it was expressed in a very philosophical, transcendent way, such as by this participant from Colombia: ‘I can’t do everything the planet needs, but the planet needs everything I can do’ (Mr. P, Colombia). Participants from developed countries emphasized the need for critical thinking and creating mass awareness in order to achieve a change. Participants from Australia, the USA, and partly from Europe also put the responsibility on big businesses, while in China and South America, participants believed that sustainable consumption should be part of governmental regulation. Chinese participants spoke mainly of the need for technological solutions in this area.

Brand awareness was mentioned as an important concept in the focus groups in most developed countries, particularly strongly in Germany, Austria, and the United States. Participants from Germany and Austria talked a lot about different types of ‘labels’ and representations such as ‘ecological’, ‘organic’, or ‘bio’ that simultaneously stand for and guarantee sustainable consumption. In Australia, there was discussion about not buying certain non-sustainable brands. People felt less guilty or even ‘good’ if they did not buy products from brands that were considered unsustainable. In contrast, in the focus groups in Colombia or Chile, no brands or companies were mentioned directly, nor was the possibility of avoiding certain brands in order to be more sustainable (or even being aware of this possibility) considered.

4.1.2. Barriers

In the focus group discussions in all countries, negative aspects were also noted. There was much talk about the higher prices of sustainable products, which are seen as the main barrier. A participant from Colombia said: ‘All products that are labelled ‘green’ are part of an elite market’ (Mr. C, Colombia). Participants in the group in Chile accordingly said that green labelling or organic food would not make sense because nobody could afford it. This was also a problem in developed countries, as illustrated by this quote: ‘Until there is an affordable, sustainable alternative, many people just can’t make a different choice’ (Mr., USA). However, some participants indicated that they would be willing to buy such products if the price was not much higher.

A discussion about the prices on the ‘green’ labels provoked skepticism that was quite obvious especially among Chinese participants. A participant from China said, ‘I don’t care. I think the so-called ‘organic’ and ‘non-polluted’ are both gimmicks for merchants to raise prices . . . (Ms. Z, China). Similarly, consumers in Australia expressed concern about how green labels could be misused in advertising, and in Chile one of the participants used the scintillating term ‘ethical hijacking’ (Mr. P, Chile). Other issues that sometimes raised skepticism were not knowing exactly what ingredients are in the products, who the suppliers are, and what the working conditions are, as well as issues related to transport and storage. Other barriers were seen in the unwillingness of consumers to give up their previous consumption patterns (convenience, laziness), which was evident among participants from China, and in blaming capitalism (compulsion to consume), which was mainly mentioned by participants from Central Europe, Austria, and Germany.

In addition to the above-mentioned perception of high prices for sustainable products, structural barriers were also highlighted, in particular the lack of knowledge in all countries, although less so in developed countries (exception: Slovenia). In Iran, for example, it was mentioned that more ‘propaganda’ for a better lifestyle and sustainable consumption was needed, especially in the education and training of children.

4.2. Correspondence Analysis Results

4.2.1. General Knowledge and Practices

This section presents cross-country comparisons of representations of sustainable consumption using CA. Differences in representations were examined based on the frequencies of core categories derived from the coding procedure. The CA biplot visualizes the correspondence between countries and representations by measuring their relative distances.

The descriptive statistics for CA indicate a statistically significant dependence between rows and columns, with 153 degrees of freedom and a chi-square value of 370.02 ($p < 0.0001$). These results confirm significant differences between countries in terms of representations of sustainable consumption. The total inertia is explained by nine dimensions, with the first two dimensions accounting for 57.2% of the total inertia. While including additional dimensions would improve the explanatory power, we opted for a two-dimensional solution to enhance interpretability, aligning with the exploratory nature of the study [46].

The axes were interpreted based on contributions of each variable (i.e., categories of social representations) to the total inertia. Variables exceeding 5.56% (100/18) were classified as active contributors. The X-axis (Factor 1) reflects a continuum between transcendent and immanent representations. Transcendent representations, such as respect for local farmers, buying less, and caring for the environment, appear on the negative semi-axis. These representations reflect general understandings without necessarily linking to specific practices. Immanent representations, including recycling, organic (ecological) products, higher quality of life, and brand awareness, are tied to concrete consumption practices and are found on the positive semi-axis. The Y-axis (Factor 2) differentiates between other-

oriented and self-oriented representations. The positive semi-axis represents other-oriented perspectives, such as respect for local farmers, recycling, and organic products, while the negative semi-axis captures self-oriented perspectives, such as thoughtful shopping and health consciousness (Figure 1).

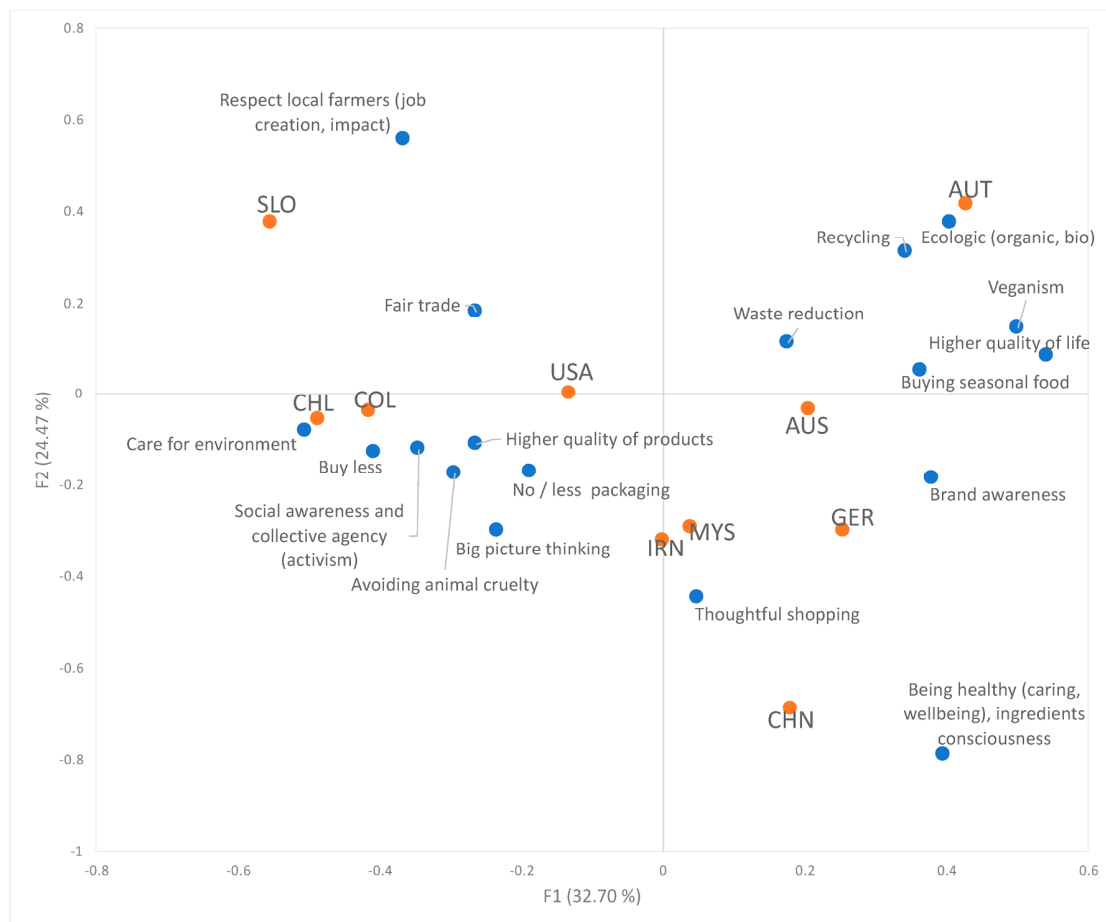


Figure 1. Correspondence analysis—cross-country differences in terms of general knowledge and practices of sustainable consumption.

Countries associated with transcendent representations include Chile (sq correlation = 0.628), Colombia (sq correlation = 0.626), and Slovenia (sq correlation = 0.559). Austria (sq correlation = 0.493) is linked more strongly to immanent representations. Germany (sq correlation = 0.244) and Australia (sq correlation = 0.172) also lean toward immanent representations, though less strongly. For other countries, the transcendent–immanent dichotomy does not define their representations, suggesting a need for higher-dimensional solutions. Regarding Factor 2, China (sq correlation = 0.593) exhibits strong associations with self-oriented representations, while Malaysia (sq correlation = 0.172) and Iran (sq correlation = 0.150) show weaker associations. Austria (sq correlation = 0.450) and Germany (sq correlation = 0.339) align more closely with other-oriented representations, whereas Slovenia (sq correlation = 0.253) demonstrates a weaker association. Other countries are less differentiated by this factor.

Analysis of residuals revealed clusters of similarity. Chile and Colombia form one cluster, and Iran and Malaysia form another. Germany aligns closely with Australia. Slovenia, Austria, and China emerge as distinct cases. The USA, positioned near the origin, shows minimal differentiation from other countries.

The relationship between representations and countries is defined by the distance of the label lines from the origin of the diagram and by the angle between these lines. Long

lines and small angles between them indicate a stronger relative connection. Slovenia, Austria, and China are the most distant compared to the other countries and are therefore most characterized by certain representations. Slovenia emphasizes respect for local farmers as a defining feature of sustainable consumption. Austria highlights practices like recycling, buying organic products, and veganism. China links sustainable consumption with health and thoughtful shopping, also resonating with Malaysia and Iran, albeit to a lesser extent. Australia associates sustainable consumption with seasonal food purchases and higher quality of life. Chile and Colombia focus on environmental protection, buying less, and social awareness. Germany connects sustainable consumption to health and brand awareness, with thoughtful shopping aligning it more closely with Asian countries. The USA, positioned near the origin of the graph, appears neutral, with no dominant representation standing out compared to other countries.

4.2.2. Barriers

The analysis of barriers revealed a statistically significant dependence between rows and columns, with 90 degrees of freedom and a chi-square value of 161.19 ($p < 0.0001$). The first two dimensions explain 51.7% of the total inertia. As in the previous analysis, a two-dimensional solution was selected for ease of interpretation. Active variables (barriers) with contributions exceeding 9.09% (100/11) were included in axis interpretations. The X-axis (Factor 1) reflects structural barriers. The negative semi-axis includes lack of knowledge, while the positive semi-axis highlights capitalism, time pressure, and stress. The Y-axis (Factor 2) captures cognitive barriers. The positive semi-axis represents barriers such as overlooking sustainable labels and convenience (laziness), while the negative semi-axis reflects perceptions of high costs (Figure 2).

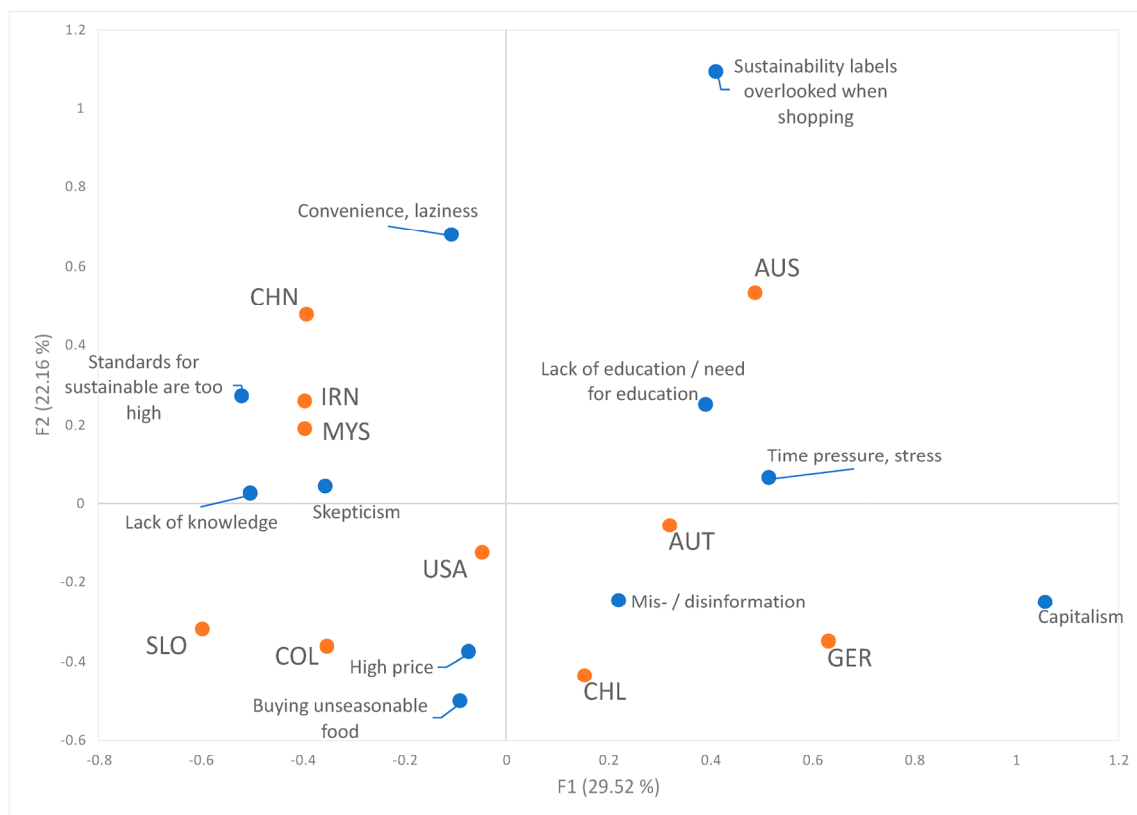


Figure 2. Correspondence analysis—cross-country differences in terms of barriers to sustainable consumption.

Structural barriers are strongest in Germany (sq correlation = 0.599) and present, though weaker, in Slovenia, Malaysia, Austria, and Australia (sq correlation = 0.317–0.366). Cognitive barriers are most relevant in Chile (sq correlation = 0.415), China (sq correlation = 0.402), and Austria (sq correlation = 0.369). Weaker associations are found in Colombia (sq correlation = 0.286) and Germany (sq correlation = 0.187). Countries furthest from the origin include Germany, Australia, Slovenia, and China, indicating stronger associations with specific barriers. The USA again remains near the origin, indicating minimal differentiation.

The analysis revealed specific barriers by country. In Germany, capitalism emerged as a primary structural barrier. In Australia, overlooking sustainability during shopping was identified as a key barrier. Slovenia highlighted lack of knowledge as a primary barrier, which was shared to a lesser extent with Iran and Malaysia. Chinese participants associated sustainable consumption barriers with convenience and laziness, while Chilean participants focused on misinformation and disinformation. Austria exhibited mixed barriers, including lack of education and capitalism, although it was less differentiated overall.

The analysis highlights how global sustainability norms are interpreted and adapted in local contexts, in line with the theoretical framework of social representations. The relationships revealed between countries and representations illustrate how socio-economic and cultural factors influence the way sustainability is understood and practiced. These findings emphasize the importance of viewing sustainable consumption as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of global frameworks and local realities.

5. Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine how sustainable consumption is represented in developed and developing countries, with a particular focus on food buying. The findings reveal that people across the countries studied draw on several shared categories when discussing sustainable food consumption, indicating a cross-cultural resonance of sustainability concerns related to consumption and purchasing behaviors. In nearly all countries, waste management, reduced packaging, recycling, and environmental care emerged as dominant themes, aligning with the global framing of sustainable consumption as an individual responsibility requiring lifestyle and behavioral changes [4]. These shared themes may be influenced by the global dissemination of sustainability norms through international agreements, social media, and global brands [27].

Despite these commonalities, the study also highlights notable differences in representations of sustainable consumption, which appear to be shaped by local contexts. This supports the argument that representations are ‘bound to the context of their production’ [39] (p. 128) and ‘articulated to the local conditions’ [37] (p. 257). For instance, CA shows that respect for local farmers is more prominent in Slovenia, while health consciousness is emphasized in China. These differences suggest that, while some representations of sustainability may have a global appeal, others remain more strongly rooted in specific cultural and economic contexts.

The analysis further demonstrates that participants in some countries, particularly in South America (but also in Slovenia and the USA), tend to discuss sustainable consumption in more transcendent terms, emphasizing moral, economic, and political considerations rather than concrete practices. Conversely, participants in countries that are sustainability frontrunners such as Austria, Germany, and Australia describe sustainable consumption in immanent terms, linking it directly to tangible actions, such as buying organic products and recycling. These distinctions echo findings from prior studies [23] that suggest sustainable consumption in developing contexts may reflect a way of life tied to traditions and common

sense, while in developed contexts and particularly in countries which are sustainability-progressive, it is often framed as a lifestyle choice or political statement.

Barriers to sustainable consumption also emerged as a critical aspect of the analysis. Across countries, high prices and lack of knowledge were identified as the most frequently mentioned obstacles, followed by skepticism and misinformation. The CA results further categorize these barriers into structural and cognitive types, revealing how structural constraints, such as capitalism and time pressure, interact with cultural factors to shape consumption practices. For instance, in Germany and Slovenia, structural barriers like systemic economic pressures are coupled with cultural norms that emphasize individual responsibility, potentially reinforcing stress on personal behavior change. Conversely, in China and Chile, cognitive barriers such as convenience and skepticism align with cultural values tied to pragmatism and cost-efficiency, highlighting how local cultures mediate structural challenges. These findings align with Sheoran and Kumar's [47] observations, which underscore the multifaceted nature of barriers to sustainable consumption. Furthermore, they illustrate how structural conditions, such as economic systems and infrastructure, intersect with cultural frameworks to shape both opportunities and constraints. For instance, in countries with strong traditions of communal living or respect for local farmers, such as Slovenia, structural challenges like high prices may be partially mitigated by cultural practices that prioritize local production and resourcefulness.

The similarities across countries can be attributed to the global spread of sustainability norms. However, differences in how sustainable consumption is represented stem from different socio-economic realities. In developing countries, economic necessity and limited access to green products often shape transcendent representations of sustainability that emphasize moral and social ideals. Conversely, developed countries benefit from greater consumer awareness and supportive infrastructure, enabling immanent representations tied to specific practices such as organic purchasing or ethical consumption.

Table 3 summarizes a systematic comparison of sustainable consumption representations and barriers across developed and developing countries that emerged from our qualitative and quantitative analysis. It shows how immanent representations, associated with concrete practices such as ethical purchasing, are more prevalent in developed countries, while transcendent representations, rooted in moral and social ideals, dominate in developing countries. Structural barriers, such as systemic problems and high product prices, are more prevalent in developed countries, while cognitive barriers, such as skepticism and convenience, are more prevalent in developing contexts. These findings underscore the need for tailored approaches that take into account both global sustainability frameworks and local socio-cultural and economic realities.

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it advances the application of social representations theory to sustainable consumption [33], demonstrating its utility in examining how sustainability is framed within different cultural and socio-economic contexts. The findings underscore the dual role of social representations as both transcendent and immanent, providing a framework to analyze how abstract sustainability ideals (e.g., fairness, health) can potentially be translated into concrete practices (e.g., recycling, organic food purchases) after time which might be the case in more progressive countries. This also confirms the value of social representations theory for capturing the dynamic interplay between global norms and local realities [38]. Since social representations are the product of communicative practices [39], the results of this study also point to the importance of considering the communication aspects of sustainable consumption, especially in terms of having the power to 'set the agenda' and communicate a certain version of reality or 'the right way of thinking' about sustainable consumption, since in the age of digital

and social media, the institutions and companies of the developed world have a greater chance to impose their vision of sustainable consumption worldwide.

Table 3. Representations and barriers to sustainable consumption across developed and developing countries.

Dimension	Developed Countries	Developing Countries
General knowledge and practices	Emphasis on immanent representations tied to concrete actions, such as: - Recycling (e.g., Australia, USA, Germany) - Buying eco-labeled or organic products (e.g., Austria, Germany) - Conscious purchasing of higher-quality or local products (e.g., Slovenia) - Ethical considerations like avoiding unsustainable brands (e.g., Australia, USA)	Dominance of transcendent representations focused on values and broader ideals, such as: - Environmental care and fairness (e.g., Colombia, Chile) - Connection to health and hygiene (e.g., Iran, China) - Social awareness, including worker fairness and collective well-being (e.g., Colombia, China)
Barriers	Structural barriers more prominent: - High prices of sustainable products (e.g., USA, Germany) - Systemic issues like capitalism as a barrier (e.g., Austria, Germany) - Lack of knowledge cited in specific contexts (e.g., Slovenia)	Cognitive barriers more pronounced: - Convenience and laziness limiting sustainable actions (e.g., China, Chile) - Skepticism about sustainability labels and greenwashing (e.g., China, Chile) - High costs cited as a key barrier across most countries (e.g., Colombia, Chile, Iran)
Transcendent vs. immanent representations	Stronger alignment with immanent representations, where sustainability ideals are tied to specific, tangible practices like ethical shopping or waste management (e.g., Austria, Germany)	Greater reliance on transcendent representations, where sustainability is seen through moral, social, or environmental ideals without necessarily linking to specific practices (e.g., Colombia, Iran)

Second, the study contributes to the literature on sustainable consumption by illustrating how multiple, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of sustainable consumption coexist within and across countries. For instance, the simultaneous emphasis on environmental care and personal health demonstrates how sustainability is constructed as both a moral obligation and a lifestyle preference. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing cognitive flexibility in sustainability discourses and suggest that future research should explore how such contradictions influence behavior.

Third, this research enhances understanding of the north–south divide in sustainable consumption practices, offering empirical support for prior claims [4]. While developed countries emphasize individualized, behavior-based solutions, developing countries reflect more community-oriented and systemic approaches. This dichotomy highlights the need to integrate both perspectives when designing policies and interventions aimed at promoting sustainable consumption globally.

Finally, the study contributes to barrier analysis by identifying structural and cognitive obstacles and showing how these barriers are embedded in broader socio-political and economic systems. This approach reinforces the necessity of addressing not only behavioral change but also systemic inequities that shape opportunities for sustainable practices.

In terms of practical implications, this study provides actionable insights into sustainable food consumption by highlighting the need for context-sensitive approaches. In developing countries, leveraging traditional practices such as resource-sharing and conservation can align sustainability goals with existing cultural norms, while emphasizing health and

hygiene benefits within sustainable consumption (e.g., reducing plastic packaging while maintaining cleanliness) can resonate with local priorities. Practical measures, such as integrating sustainability into community-based education programs and promoting affordable access to sustainable products can enhance adoption. In developed countries, consumer awareness campaigns should focus on expanding the adoption of eco-labeled products and supporting local production through incentives for farmers' markets and organic food systems. The use of artificial intelligence can support sustainable food consumption by optimizing supply chains to reduce food waste, providing personalized recommendations for eco-friendly purchases through smart applications, and enhancing transparency in labeling systems to help consumers identify sustainable products. Across all contexts, addressing structural and cognitive barriers—such as high costs, misinformation, and limited infrastructure—will be critical to fostering sustainable food consumption practices.

In developing countries, policies should prioritize equitable access to resources and community-based programs. In developed countries, they can focus on regulating over-consumption and incentivizing sustainable choices. In both contexts, governments need to address high costs and systemic issues. Introducing subsidies or tax incentives for sustainable products can increase affordability, and investing in infrastructure (e.g., recycling facilities) can make sustainable practices more accessible. Policies should include public education campaigns tailored to local contexts. In developing countries, such campaigns may emphasize sustainability and livelihoods or health, while in developed countries they may focus on reducing food waste and promoting green lifestyles. Given the growing demand for sustainable products among millennials in both developed and developing countries, policies should promote initiatives that align with their values, such as tech-based and artificial intelligence solutions or youth-led sustainability programs.

This study is not without limitations. The sample size was relatively small, and participants were drawn from limited regions within the selected countries. As such, the findings are not generalizable to entire populations but instead provide exploratory insights into how sustainable consumption is represented in everyday life. The participants in some countries (e.g., USA, Australia, China, Chile) were on average rather young and mostly urban. This bias could limit the generalizability of the findings, as younger, urban individuals may have different attitudes, knowledge, and practices related to sustainable food consumption than older or rural populations. Younger urbanites are more exposed to global sustainability trends and have greater access to sustainable food options, while older or rural individuals may rely more on traditional practices and face different barriers to sustainable consumption. Nonetheless, the results largely align with prior research and suggest patterns that may apply more broadly to middle-income consumers [14]. Future studies should expand the scope by including a larger number of participants and countries to facilitate more robust cross-cultural comparisons. Additionally, further research could examine the role of socio-economic status, gender, cultural values, and media influences in shaping sustainability representations. Incorporating other domains of sustainable consumption beyond food practices would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable consumption.

6. Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on sustainable consumption by providing insights into how sustainable food consumption is represented and practiced across cultures. It uses the social representations approach to highlight the contextual and cultural dimensions of sustainability, addressing the need for more localized and comparative studies [19]. While common themes exist globally, findings reveal several differences between developed and developing countries, reinforcing the north–south

differences identified in prior literature [4,10]. Developed countries emphasize immanent representations, focusing on individualistic approaches and concrete practices such as recycling and ethical purchasing. In contrast, developing countries often engage with transcendent representations rooted in collective ideals. This distinction reveals how global sustainability norms are interpreted and adapted in different contexts, providing insights that single-country studies often miss and highlighting the need for inclusive approaches to address disparities between developed and developing countries.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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Appendix A. Themes and Frequencies of Appearance in Thematic Analysis

	Slovenia	Austria	Germany	Australia	Malaysia	China	Colombia	Chile	USA	Iran
General knowledge, practices										
Respect local farmers (job creation, impact)	21	23	6	2	1	0	12	10	9	0
Buy less	12	4	10	3	2	5	10	6	8	2
Care for environment	11	2	5	10	5	1	9	12	10	5
Fair trade	8	11	4	4	4	1	11	5	4	2
No/less packaging	8	11	12	5	6	3	13	9	7	10
Recycling	8	27	6	13	9	1	2	1	9	3
Higher quality of products	8	2	9	7	0	2	7	2	7	2
Waste reduction	7	25	7	12	6	3	6	5	11	9
Social awareness and collective agency (activism)	7	5	3	2	7	4	8	4	5	0
Ecologic (organic, bio)	4	22	12	4	0	0	5	1	6	1
Higher quality of life	2	18	12	9	0	3	4	1	1	2
Thoughtful shopping	2	4	14	7	5	4	7	4	6	2
Buying seasonal food	1	4	5	5	0	0	1	0	4	0
Big picture thinking	1	0	7	2	1	0	4	2	9	0
Avoiding animal cruelty	0	3	2	3	1	1	7	4	2	1
Being healthy (caring, wellbeing), ingredients consciousness	0	4	12	3	5	6	2	1	1	4
Brand awareness	0	21	17	7	6	7	3	7	9	2
Veganism	0	10	5	2	2	1	2	1	3	0

	Slovenia	Austria	Germany	Australia	Malaysia	China	Colombia	Chile	USA	Iran
Barriers										
High price	10	11	6	4	2	5	9	8	3	1
Lack of knowledge	7	2	2	3	4	8	6	3	5	6
Buying unseasonable food	4	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Standards for sustainable are too high	4	2	0	2	1	4	1	0	0	0
Skepticism	3	3	1	1	2	7	2	4	1	1
Sustainability labels overlooked when shopping	1	0	0	6	0	1	0	0	0	1
Mis-/disinformation	0	4	2	3	0	2	4	5	2	1
Convenience, laziness	0	4	1	3	1	9	1	0	1	0
Time pressure, stress	0	3	4	6	1	2	1	3	4	0
Lack of education/need for education	0	9	3	4	2	3	0	1	1	2
Capitalism	0	4	5	3	0	0	0	2	0	0

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