Global Development Research Division

Choosing Survival, Not Sustainability: Analysing the UK's Cost-of-Living Crisis, the Purchase of Sustainable Foods and the Economy of Emotion

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May, 2023

Citing this paper: Smith, O and Goodman, M (2023). An Investigation into the Effect of the UK's Cost-of-Living Crisis on the Purchase of Sustainable Foods. *Global Development Research @ Reading*. Global Development Research Division: University of Reading, UK.

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Abstract

In August 2021, the United Kingdom (UK) entered a cost-of-living crisis, which has resulted in economic difficulties for many households across the UK. This paper investigates how the UK's cost-of-living crisis has impacted the purchase and consumption of sustainable food products, which are defined in this study as fair-trade, organic, local, and vegan/vegetarian food products. Using an online survey and semi-structured interviews, wider themes are also explored, considering how an inability to purchase sustainable goods emotionally impacts consumers, and questioning the broader notion of commodifying care and politics. This study found that economic constraints were the most common barrier to sustainable consumption, but that awareness, time, and product availability were also important factors which could inhibit sustainable food purchases. The role of emotions, especially consumer guilt, emerged to be a significant influence in consumer attitudes towards sustainability. Similar to previous research, the study concludes that the commodification of care through food consumption is problematic and excludes certain socio-economic groups from participating in the expression of care in this way, which is further entrenched in periods of economic difficulty, such as the cost-of-living crisis. Overall, this project highlights the issues associated with a reliance on consumers to incite market-mediated change, particularly throughout the cost-of-living crisis, and how the responsibilisation of individuals to consume sustainably creates disproportionate burdens across varying socio-economic demographics.

Keywords: Cost of Living Crisis, Sustainable Consumption, Commodification of Care, Responsibilisation of Consumer, Consumer Affect

Introduction

This research will investigate how the purchase of sustainable food items has been affected by the cost-of-living crisis (hereafter, CLC), which is defined by the Institute for Government (2022) as the "fall in real disposable incomes (…) that the UK has experienced since late 2021." Sustainable consumption is a topic that has received significant attention across existing literature, yet remains relatively poorly defined (Banbury et al., 2012). In this paper, reference to 'sustainable food' is indicative of food products with 'reduced' environmental consequences (e.g., organic and local produce) and with reduced social and ethical impacts (e.g., fair-trade products and/or vegan/vegetarian alternatives). Whilst this is not an exhaustive list of sustainable food categories and types, nor does it encompass the complexities of sustainable food consumption, these are the elements under investigation in this paper.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many inequalities across the UK, including income, mental health, and education inequalities (Blundell et al., 2022). These disparities were further entrenched by the economic ramifications of the CLC which are disproportionately affecting low-income families across the UK. Specifically, as *The Guardian* states, "some of the poorest in Britain are being forced to make tough choices between heating and eating" (Partington, 2022b). Despite being one of the most developed economies in the world (Shittu et al., 2022), it has been projected that by 2024, thirty million people in the UK will be unable to afford what is considered a decent standard of living (Elliott, 2022).

Sustainable consumption is considered a key element in creating a sustainable society; it contributes significantly to Sustainable Development Goal 12 (*UN,* n.d.) and in more conservative accounts, is often referred to as a key determinant of sustainable development (Quoquab and Mohammad, 2020). The drive to encourage consumption of sustainable goods can reduce the impact of consumption on both people and the planet. However, with people struggling to afford necessities during the CLC, sustainable purchases will likely be deprioritised and/or too expensive. Therefore, this study aims to assess how the CLC has affected the purchase of sustainable food products as a part of the strategies developed to create more sustainable societies.

Importantly, food products with sustainable or ethical certification, such as fair-trade or organic, contribute to the commodification and marketisation of care, which Robbins (2013) discusses in the context of fair-trade coffee. Whilst these items do allow consumers to engage with ethical movements, Bryant and Goodman (2014, p. 37) explain that the "politics of choice are historically and geographically contingent, and unequal and unpredictably voluntary". A vast array of literature discusses this issue, exploring the ways in which the commodification of care under neo-liberal capitalist markets excludes certain social groups from engaging with the purchase of sustainable items, especially due to the associated premium pricing (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Morris, 2022; Gobbo et al., 2022; Smith and Paladino, 2010). Previous research has identified an elasticity to the purchase of sustainable and ethical goods, particularly in times of economic crisis (Sharma and Sonwalkar, 2013). Thus, one of the areas under investigation in this current research project is how the current economic CLC in the UK may act to reduce the purchases of sustainable food products.

This study will also consider the wider context of the politics embedded (or not) in the consumption of sustainable foods. Neo-liberal capitalism has positioned 'care' and its relationalities as something that can be facilitated through the act of (sustainable) consumption through 'caring' markets. Yet, to engage with this form of care, participants/consumers/citizens must not only be *willing*, but also *able* to purchase these items without too many and/or constant barriers such as financial constraints or access difficulties (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). As research has shown, however, ethical consumption as a form of political expression is problematic, burdening lower income households with the responsibility of purchasing ethically, as well as serving to assuage the guilt of individual consumers whilst simultaneously allowing more structural injustices to continue (Mayes and Sassano, 2022). Access to sustainable goods is already significantly unequal due to premium pricing (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Smith and Paladino, 2010). Indeed, as will be shown in more detail below, this disparity has been further deepened by the CLC. Most broadly, then, this study seeks to question this neo-liberal premise that care should be commodified and marketised into (sustainable) goods to be chosen and purchased by conscious consumers.

The overarching question of this research is the following: If the commodification of care responsibilises people to express care through consumption, what happens when economic crises, such as the CLC, render consumers unable to afford these commodities and, by extension, unable to express this marketised form of care*?* This principal question is explored through the investigation of the sub-questions in *Table 1.*

Table 1: Research questions

Research Questions	**Justification**
Which (if any) sustainable food consumption habits have changed during the CLC?	Understanding the potential ways in which the CLC has specifically impacted sustainable food purchases will contribute to the wider conversations around access to sustainability and understandings of motivations and barriers to sustainable consumption. This research question aims to understand if the CLC has posed any barriers to sustainable food consumption which have resulted in changes to consumption behaviours.
In what ways (if any) has the CLC affected people's ability to express care through consumption?	With the purchase of sustainable goods frequently equated to an expression of care, it is important to understand the implications of being unable to purchase these sustainable items, and by proxy, being unable to express care through consumption. This research question seeks to investigate the underlying emotional impacts (if any) of a lack of access to sustainable consumption.
In what ways (if any) would consumers choose to change their purchasing habits if the CLC eased/ they were in improved financial positions?	To ascertain a deeper understanding of consumers' attitudes to sustainable consumption, this study aims to investigate not only purchasing behaviours during the CLC, but also purchasing intentions should the CLC ease, or their personal financial situation improve. This

	research question aims to establish a more thorough understanding of consumer attitudes towards sustainable food consumption, and the role of an economic crisis as a barrier to sustainable food consumption.

Background on the CLC

Discussion about sustainable consumption has grown rapidly in recent decades parallel to the unprecedented increase in global consumption levels (Diprose et al., 2019), informing the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 12 of "Responsible Consumption and Production" (UN, 2015). Many socio-economic factors affect access to sustainable consumption. With the CLC disproportionately affecting low-income households (ONS, 2021), this study aims to develop a deeper insight into how these economic inequalities have exacerbated disparate access to sustainable food options.

The UK has been experiencing a CLC officially since late 2021 (Hourston, 2022). As an ongoing situation, the full extent of the CLC's impacts currently cannot be gauged. Multiple factors contributed to the onset of the CLC, with the three most significant catalysts being Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Partington, 2022a), as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors contributing to the CLC and their associated impacts.

Event	Contribution to the CLC
Brexit	The UK withdrew from the European Union (EU) on 31st December 2020 (Walker, 2021) following a referendum held in June 2016 (Arnorsson and Zoega, 2018). As of December 2022, the British Pound had fallen 19% to become equivalent to the US Dollar, highlighting Brexit's significant contribution to the current economic struggles within the UK (Ziady, 2022). Brexit also increased the cost of food production due to logistical transport restrictions; these costs have been shifted to consumers (Holland, 2022), culminating in food prices increasing by 3% a year, (O'Carroll, 2022) further entrenching issues of food insecurity.

The COVID-19 Pandemic	The COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated lockdowns, resulted in job losses, reduced working hours, and many other factors, contributing to an economic crisis in the UK (Dempsey and Pautz, 2021). Brewer and Gardiner (2020) estimated that 67% of UK households experienced a fall in disposable income due to COVID-19: low-income households were disproportionately affected by this decline in income (Pautz and Dempsey, 2022), exacerbating pre-existing systemic inequalities in the UK. The lockdowns also created food access difficulties for those who were instructed to shelter in their homes. The increasing price of transport, alongside the impacts of the national lockdowns, generated new access-to-food difficulties for some social groups.
The Russian invasion of Ukraine	On 24th February 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian war intensified as Russia invaded Ukraine, displacing millions of Ukrainians (Kirby, 2022). Economic sanctions were implemented against Russia, leading to many international corporations ceasing operations or trade within Russia (Hourston, 2022). The Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred at a time when the UK was already officially experiencing a CLC, therefore, the cause of the crisis cannot be attributed to this event, but it is evident that the consequences of this war have exacerbated the impacts of the CLC in the UK, particularly on the price of oil/gas and some basic food commodities.

The CLC has disproportionately affected low-income regions (see Figure 1) and households (Rodrigues and Quinio, 2022) in the UK and resulted in alarming increases to food insecurity. Despite being one of the world's most developed countries, the UK's food system was substantially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to its pre-existing lack of resilience and issues with food insecurity

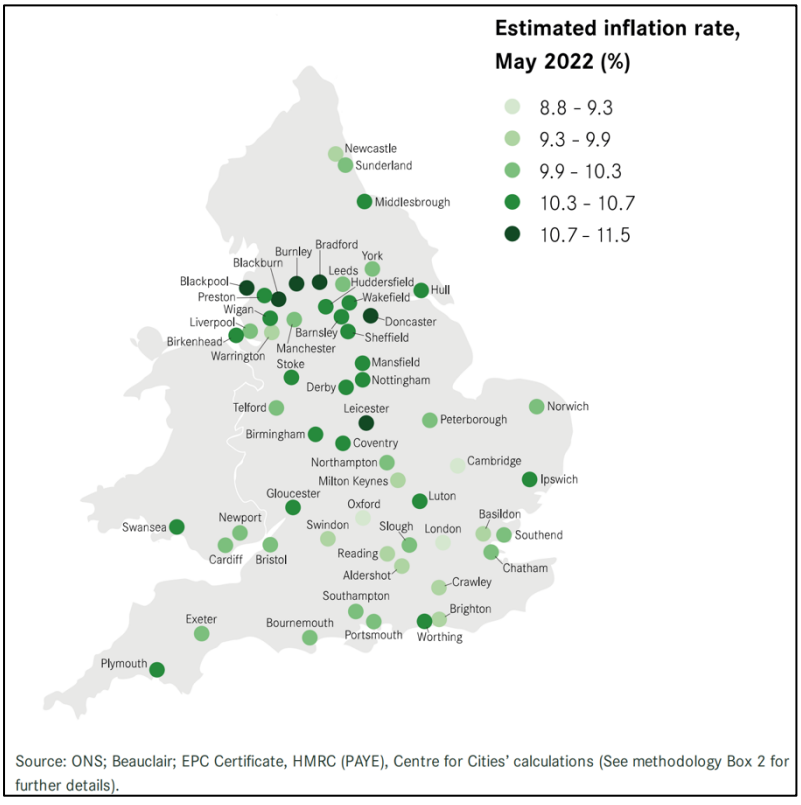

Figure 1: Map of England and Wales displaying the disparate effects of the inflation during the CLC (Rodrigues and Quinio, 2022).

(Shittu et al., 2022; Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland, 2021). The CLC has further exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in the UK and through this study, it is hoped that its impact on sustainable consumption can start to be understood.

Structure of the paper

This study will be organised around the following structure: Section 2 will comprise a review of existing literature pertaining to sustainable food consumption, the geographies of care and consumption, and the responsibilisation of the consumer. Section 3 will follow, explaining and justifying the use of surveys and interviews, and the methods of data analysis, before commenting on any ethical considerations and potential limitations of the study. The data collected will then be analysed thematically in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 will be an opportunity to situate the findings of this study within the existing literature, highlighting the most significant findings, and suggesting opportunities for further research.

Situating the Study: Sustainable Consumption, the Commodification of Care and the Responsibilisation of Consumer Choice

The CLC is severely affecting many households across the UK, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and extending food insecurity to previously unaffected social groups (FSA, 2020 cited in Pautz and Dempsey, 2022; Dempsey and Pautz, 2021). Whilst the topic of sustainable consumption has been extensively explored over recent decades, the CLC is a contemporary and evolving issue, so existing literature lacks research linking the CLC to sustainable food purchases. This literature review will contextualise this study by exploring previous research conducted on sustainable food purchasing and the motivations and barriers to doing so.

Sustainable Food Consumption

The definitions of sustainable and ethical food are ambiguous, with much of the existing literature offering varying definitions, as detailed in the key outputs highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3: Varying definitions of sustainable/ethical food across literature.

Study	Definition of Sustainable/Ethical Food

(Lang, 2010)	The term ‘ethical food’ comprises the set of ethical concerns raised by food, including means of production, its meaning, its implications, and its legacy.
(Dieterle, 2022)	This paper suggests that ethical food is a relative concept, defined by each individual consumer. Ethical consumerism operates with the intention that consumers incite market mediated change by dictating what is ‘ethical’ and salient to them and purchasing these items.
(Della Corte et al., 2018)	This study explores the similarities between what is defined as ‘ethical food’ in the literature and kosher certified foods, suggesting many of the requirements of kosher certification are similar to those of ethical certifications.
(Verain et al., 2012)	Describes sustainable food consumption as an issue which spans a wide variety of topics, including the environment, welfare, and fair-trade.
(O’Neill et al., 2019, p. 225)	Defines food sustainability as a “relative concept, contingent on time and place.”
(Diprose et al., 2019)	Suggests that engaging in boycotts, purchasing ethical products, and conserving energy are all forms of sustainable consumption.
(Carolan, 2022)	Highlights the contentious nature of defining ‘ethical food’. This paper acknowledges the default phrases associated with ethical food, such as ‘organic’ and ‘local’, but also draws light to the corporate powers often involved in the supply chains of these products, which would seemingly render these products less ethical.

In this study, the concept of ‘sustainable food’ has been informed by combined aspects of these definitions to include foods defined variously as organic, fair-trade, local, and/or vegan/vegetarian.

Motivations for Sustainable Food Consumption

The degree of difficulty which a consumer is willing to endure to engage in a certain behaviour is the "function of the individual's commitment to the goals associated with the behaviour" (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019, p.175). There are many barriers to sustainable consumption, making the motivations to purchase and consume sustainable foods important to consider. Motivations discussed in the literature commonly fall within the category of hedonistic or altruistic, with altruistic factors predominantly comprising care for others, animals, or the planet and hedonistic factors majorly focusing on self-fulfilment or personal health.

Hedonistic factors are some of the most cited reasons for consuming organic foods, including health consciousness (Gobbo et al., 2022; Kamboj and Kishor, 2022; Chinicci et al., 2002; Baggini, 2022; Lang, 2010; Della Corte et al., 2018) and superior taste (Gobbo et al., 2022; Padel and Foster, 2005). Many consumers also prioritise self-identity within their purchasing behaviours. e.g. purchasing foods with a price premium, such as organic produce, are often a social indicator of affluence (Tan et al., 2016; Kamboj and Kishor, 2022), affording consumers a "contemporary form of high cultural capital" (Huddart Kennedy et al., 2019, p.386). This social affluence could be regarded as a significant motivation for consumers to engage in ethical consumption choices.

Kamboj and Kishor (2022) also cite concern for the welfare of others as a motivating factor to consume sustainably: a dominant way in which consumers can act upon this concern is by purchasing fair-trade items (Lang, 2010; Verain, 2012; Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019), ensuring that producers receive a fair price for their products whilst consumers are able to access them at an affordable cost (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019). Whilst these factors motivate consumers to purchase sustainable foods, the following section discusses the barriers to doing so.

Barriers to Sustainable Food Consumption

Studies in which consumers self-report behaviour around sustainable purchasing can be subject to social-desirability bias (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019). However, inconsistencies

between attitudes and behaviours could also be explained by Campbell's (1963) paradigm in which, as Kaiser, et al. (2010, p.351) explain as "the root of the seeming inconsistency between attitude and behavior lies in disregard of behavioral costs." In the case of sustainable food purchasing, this paradigm could suggest that the attitude-behaviour gap is not explained by a social-desirability bias, but by behavioural inhibitors preventing consumers from accessing sustainable foods. Examples of these behavioural inhibitors have been speculated across literature as, i.e. lack of knowledge (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Diprose et al., 2019; Gleim et al., 2013; Hill and Lynchehaun, 2002), lack of availability (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Gobbo et al., 2022; Smith and Paladino, 2010), access difficulties/inconvenience (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Gobbo et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2016), lack of trust in sustainable product information (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Padel and Foster, 2005), poor product quality (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019), and premium pricing (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Morris, 2022; Gobbo et al., 2022; Gorton et al., 2010; Gleim et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2016; Smith and Paladino, 2010).

Gleim et al. (2013) posit that the social dilemma theory can influence a consumer's willingness to engage in sustainable behaviours, suggesting that consumers who do not feel their individual actions will have any impact are less likely to purchase sustainable goods. Kollmuss and Agyumen (2002, p.16) also discuss the barrier of feeling disconnected from the impacts of sustainable consumption, suggesting that consuming for environmental benefits is more difficult than for social impacts due to the "non-immediacy of ecological destruction", meaning that consumers are unable to instantly witness the impacts of their consumption choices on the environment.

Finally, an individual's attitudes towards purchasing sustainable foods may be affected by a negative relationship with green consumerism due to cynicism, or due to an undesirable perception of consumers who identify as 'green' (Tan et al., 2016). Diprose et al. (2019) discuss a cross-generational perspective within sustainable consumption, suggesting that individuals born in the same era will be more likely to share similar values and motivations. Perception of an individual's ability to perform an act can be affected by many of the aforementioned behavioural inhibitors. This research project aimed to understand if the

added burden of the UK CLC has affected these pre-existing barriers to sustainable food consumption.

Consumption and the Commodification of Care

The Rise of Ethical Consumption

Ethical consumption is a multi-faceted concept: there are various perspectives through which ethical food practices can be viewed, including welfare (Lang, 2010; Verain et al., 2012), environmental impact (Lang, 2010; Della Corte., 2018; Verain et al., 2012), healthy diets (Lang, 2010; Early, 2002), access to fairly priced food (Early, 2002; Verain et al., 2012), and waste (Lang, 2010).

Mäkiniemi et al., (2011, p.495) define ethical food consumption as "the conscious decision to make consumption choices for reasons having to do with moral beliefs". Conversely, Lang (2010) explains that market research companies define ethical foods as more specific markets such as organic and fair-trade items; this view of ethical consumption could be perceived as contentious, insinuating that any food products that are not widely available are, by default, ethical.

Ethical food comprises a degree of flexibility, encompassing a vast range of issues including animal welfare, fair-trade, and food waste (Lang, 2010); this fluidity adds to the appeal of ethical consumption. Dieterle (2022) furthers this concept of flexibility, suggesting that ethical consumerism involves individuals purchasing items that correspond with their values while refraining from purchasing items that contradict them, and, in doing so, transforming the market via consumer demand. However, reliance upon consumer behaviour is problematic, with Diprose et al., (2019) arguing that mundane everyday consumption, such as grocery shopping, is influenced more by habit and social norms as opposed to conscious choice[1].

[1] Mayes and Sassano (2022) further discuss the issues with ethical consumerism and the role of the consumer in defining what is ethically salient.

The Geographies and Commodification of Care

Expressing care through the purchase and consumption of food is a complex and multifaceted concept; it can include, but is not limited to, care for: oneself, one's family, animal welfare, the environment, and distant others (McEwan and Goodman, 2010; Cox, 2010; Barnett et al., 2005; Green and Lawson, 2011). Gender is a concept embedded in the discourse of food and consumption geographies: a gendered lens to expressing care through food is present in existing literature, suggesting that provision of healthy food is associated with the notion of being a good mother, and the tasks of acquiring, preparing, and cooking homemade meals for children are maternal acts (Monterrosa et al., 2020; Fox and Smith, 2011). Cairns and Johnston (2015) explore and critique this assertion, explaining that the responsibility of food planning, shopping, and cooking lies predominantly with women, generating a feminist perspective to the concept of food politics. Literature has critiqued existing ethical consumption discourse for neglecting the element of work required to engage in ethical consumption, failing to acknowledge the labour required to: inform a politically motivated diet, acquire sustainable foods often from multiple sources, and cook a sustainable meal from scratch (Cairns and Johnston, 2015). Care for oneself can also be expressed through consumption: the importance of healthy foods is commonly hedonistic, with Kamboj and Kishor (2022) explaining that the most prevalent reason for consuming organic food is for personal health.

McEwan and Goodman (2010) discuss Massey's (2004) concept of the politics of connectivity, in which consumers adopt the burden of collective responsibility for geographically distant producers due to the interconnected nature of space and place. This is supported by Cox (2010), who stipulates that ethical food certifications, such as fair-trade, exemplify the ability to care beyond the local. Cox (2010) also posits the idea that consumers can express care for non-human others; this could manifest through purchasing local or organic foods for environmental reasons, or boycotting animal products to protect animal welfare.

Ethical labelling, such as that of fair-trade, carries the notion that if consumers are aware of the consequences of their purchases, they will utilise collective purchasing power to enact systemic change. This simplistic assumption is criticised by Mayes and Sassano (2022) who

suggest that ethical labels imply that the solution to the problems of consumption is more consumption, whilst burdening consumers with the responsibility of systemic issues arising from food production. Another key issue of commodifying care is highlighted by Robichaud and Yu (2022), who indicate that higher incomes increase sustainable food behaviours. This is supported by the findings of Mayes and Sassano (2022) who report that, due to price premiums, individuals wishing to express care through the consumption of sustainable products must have the necessary income to do so. In this sense, the commodification of care, especially in the context of sustainable and ethical food items, can exclude lower income groups from expressing care in this way[2].

Consumption as Political Activism

Ethical consumerism is the notion that consumer purchases should be informed by consumers' values (Dieterle, 2022), effectively allowing consumers to vote for what they deem salient through their purchasing power. Kuehn (2017) submits that a significant issue with the idea of voting through consumption is its reliance upon the contentious assumption that everyone has equal access to the market: with every dollar equating to a vote, social groups with greater purchasing power will subsequently have greater influence in the market.

There are multiple examples in literature in which the acts of consumption are equated to participation in voting or political expression: Bryant and Goodman (2014, p.37) use the term "vote with their shopping carts", whilst Johnston (2008, p.229) discusses the concept of "voting with your dollar", and Dieterle (2022, p.4) evaluates the concept of "vote with your fork". These terms all exemplify the ways in which consumption is utilised as a form of political activism, which is criticised across existing literature (Mayes and Sassano, 2022; Dieterle, 2022; Kuehn, 2017; Lyon et al., 2014; Roff, 2007). Dieterle (2022, p.4) posits that for "vote with your fork" to be effective, consumers must make intentional choices and use autonomous agency when making purchasing and consumption decisions, however, many consumers do not have access to such autonomous agency in the context of food

[2] Green and Lawson (2011) further discuss the commodification of care and the relationship of caring across space.

consumption. This is further supported by Carolan (2011, p.143) who states that "voting with money only works if you have some" and Hudson and Hudson (2003, p. 426) who describe fair-trade as a "consumer movement of the reasonably wealthy." Whilst ethical consumerism allows individuals to cast votes through consumption, it also politicises the act of purchasing food and responsibilises consumers to enact systemic change (Bryant and Goodman, 2014).

Roff (2007) criticises the concept of 'vote with your fork' by suggesting that it facilitates the commodification of politics, creating opportunity for further profit, without inciting real change, supporting Kneafsey et al's., (2021) criticism of fair-trade for not challenging large-scale trading inequalities and institutional power imbalances. Roff (2007, p.516) goes on to depict environmental certification as "the latest weapon in the battle over consumers' stomachs", framing these certifications as a pursuit of profit as opposed to sustainable or ethical practices. Lyon et al., (2014) make a similar conclusion, implying that reliance upon individual behaviours inhibits systemic change by narrowing the focus of sustainable policy development to consumer choice.

Conversely, Barry and Macdonald (2018) defend the use of the market to enact change, suggesting that consumers need not appeal to the morals or ethics of companies, instead, they must appeal to the company's concern for their profits. The notion of ethical consumerism is also commonly defended in the case of lifestyles or self-identity movements; for example, Beck and Ladwig (2021) explain that in the case of adopting a vegan lifestyle, boycotting firms that sell animal products, compounded with engaging in vegan buycotts, can effectively convey the goals of consumers.

Consumer Responsibility

Consumer-Citizenship

Mayes and Sassano (2022) criticise ethical consumerism, arguing that it transforms citizens into consumers, diminishing political activism to the act of consumption; this renders consumer choice a determinant of accountability for unethical practices, rather than systemic change. Beck and Ladwig (2021) make the important distinction between citizen and consumer, explaining that citizens can influence politics through actions such as voting

and civil disobedience, whereas consumers utilise the act of consumption in attempts to influence political action. Mayes and Sassano (2022) further discuss this dichotomy, suggesting that citizens are members of a political community who hold moral obligations and rights and, contrarily, consumers have fewer duties and often serve private interests rather than engaging with broader issues. Banet-Weiser (2012) presents the concept of a consumer-citizen as someone who complies with the conflicting principles of both consumerism and citizenship. As such, consumerism is becoming increasingly assimilated with the role of citizenship[3].

The Responsibilisation of the Consumer

Robichaud and Yu (2022) discuss the idea that individuals who consume sustainably feel responsible for society, so are attempting to rectify the unethical actions of corporations. This is an example of what Luchs et al. (2015, p.1459) refer to as "responsibility as moral imperative", in which responsibility is concerned with others and is framed as a moral obligation. Luchs et al. (2015, p.1456) propose four dominant perspectives through which responsibility can be perceived, outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: The different consumer perspectives of responsibility, proposed by Luchs et al., (2015).

Perspective of Responsibility	**Influence on Consumer**
Responsibility as Cognition	This perspective suggests that consumers will purchase and consume in responsible ways if it eventually benefits them.
Responsibility as Emotion	Responsibility as emotion argues that cognitive conceptualisations of responsibility overlook the role of emotions, especially guilt, in understanding sustainable consumption. Guilt is highlighted as a particularly strong emotion which guides decision making and behaviours.

[3] See Spaargaren and Oosterveer (2010), Barr et al., (2011) and Foster (2014) for further discussion of the responsibilisation of the consumer and the concept of consumer-citizenship.

Responsibility as Moral Imperative	This perspective configures responsibility as other-oriented and less rational. It suggests that responsibility is conceived as a moral obligation.
Responsibility as Socioculturally Shaped	Because social issues such as climate change and public health access were not salient fifty years ago, this perspective suggests that responsibility is not inherent, but a sociocultural construct. In this sense, as consumers are made more aware of processes such as global value chains, they become more aware of the consequences of their actions.

Antonetti and Maklan (2014) submit that the feeling of guilt following consumption can responsibilise the consumer, inciting behaviour change. However, the transient nature of emotions means that they will not exert a homogeneous influence across individuals, which could argue that viewing responsibility through the role of emotion is problematic due to individual perceptions[4].

Research Methodology

This project utilised both surveys and interviews: the combined approach to data collection gathered a wide breadth of perspectives through an online survey and a greater depth of knowledge through a smaller number of interviews. Using both forms of data collection enabled triangulation of the data, ensuring the perspectives from the survey responses were fully understood and improving the reliability of claims (Peters, 2017c).

Designing and Distributing the Survey

An online survey was used for this study to facilitate the use of social media platforms for distribution, encouraging maximum engagement with the survey. The survey was designed to comprise of predominantly quantitative response questions, with some opportunities to expand further on the answers given. The predominant use of multiple-choice questions aimed to maximise engagement with the questionnaire and minimise the time required to

[4] Further discourse pertaining to the role of emotions within responsibilising the consumer is included in Betzler et al. (2021).

fill out the survey. The multiple-choice format was also selected with the intention of ensuring participants did not misconstrue questions.

The survey utilised two main types of question: attributes and behaviours. The survey began with simple demographic (attributes) questions to ascertain some contextual information, including the participant's age, gender, and household income. The following questions asked the participant more broadly about how they had been impacted by the CLC, before focusing on specific questions regarding sustainable consumption habits during the CLC (behaviours).

The survey was distributed using a convenience sampling approach.Convenience sampling entails recruiting participants based on criteria such as accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). The survey was created using Microsoft Forms to allow for digital distribution via social media platforms.

Designing and Conducting the Interviews

Following the collection of survey data, interviews were conducted to facilitate triangulation of the data, which, as Jick (1979, p. 604) states, serves "to enrich our understanding by allowing for new or deeper dimensions to emerge." Interview participants were recruited opportunistically (Farrugia, 2019), with survey participants volunteering to be interviewed by leaving their email address at the end of the questionnaire. Of the 81 survey respondents, 10 agreed to participate in an interview. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen to maintain a focus on the scope of sustainable food consumption in light of the CLC, whilst also allowing for some flexibility and natural flow in the conversation (Peters, 2017b; Carruthers, 1990).

Following initial analysis of the survey data, four predominant themes were identified within participants' answers:

- The involvement of emotions and care in sustainable ethical food purchases.
- The concept of reducing purchase of 'luxury' items vs 'necessary' items.
- Barriers to sustainable consumption, especially cost.
- Future intentions for sustainable purchasing.

Conducting the Interviews

Due to geographical constraints, some interviews were conducted online. This was beneficial as the participant was able to remain in the comfort and privacy of their own space, without feeling infringed upon. However, there was also the potential for a loss of rapport and intimacy established through in-person interviewing (Seitz, 2016), especially when asking questions regarding more sensitive topics, such as financial difficulties. The timetable of interviews and the key demographics of participants is detailed in *Table 7.*

Table 5: The timetable of interviews and key participant information.

Interview Number + Pseudonym	**Date of Interview**	**Gender**	**Employment Status**	**Household Income**	**Location of Interview**
1 Olivia	09/02/2023	Female	Student	Below £10,000	University of Reading Library
2 Emma	14/02/2023	Female	Full time employment	£20,001 to £30,000	Online Interview
3 Charlotte	16/02/2023	Female	Student	Below £10,000	Interviewee's House
4 Liam	17/02/2023	Male	Part time employment	£20,001 to £30,000	Online Interview
5 Noah	19/02/2023	Male	Full time employment	£70,000 and above	Online Interview
6 Amelia	19/02/2023	Female	Full time employment	£60,001 to £70,000	Online Interview
7 Ava	21/02/2023	Female	Student	£10,001 to £20,000	University of Reading Library
8 Sophia	21/02/2023	Female	Part time employment	£50,001 to £60,000	Interviewee's House
9 Isabella	28/02/2023	Female	Student	£10,001 to £20,000	Interviewee's House
10 Oliver	28/02/2023	Male	Student	Below £10,000	Interviewee's House

Data Analysis

This section presents the findings of the online survey and the interviews conducted. The first part of the analysis discusses the demographic information of the survey participants, followed by an explanation of how the key themes were identified in the survey data, and then and analysis of these key themes and findings.

Demographic Data

	Frequency	**Percentage (%)**
Gender		
Female	67	82.7
Male	13	16.1
Non-binary	1	1.2
Prefer not to say	0	0
Age Range		
Under 18	1	1.2
18-24	40	49.4
25-34	15	18.5
35-44	5	6.2
45-54	9	11.1
55+	11	13.6
Household Income		
Below £10,000	14	17.3
£10,001 to £20,000	12	14.8
£20,001 to £30,000	11	13.6
£30,001 to £40,000	6	7.4
£40,001 to £50,000	8	9.9
£50,001 to £60,000	8	9.9
£60,001 to £70,000	3	3.7
£70,001 and above	14	17.3
Prefer not to say	5	6.2
Are you the Person Who Does the Majority of the Shopping?		

Yes	48	59.3
No	33	40.7

Table 6: The demographic information of the survey participants.

Table 9 shows how those identifying as female participants in the survey contributed 82.7% of the survey data collected; this could be attributed to the gendered domestic division of labour, which has constructed the notion that the responsibilities of food acquisition and preparation lies with women (Monterrosa, 2020; Cairns and Johnston, 2015). Whilst the dominance of female participants is not necessarily unexpected, the potential skewing effects of this will be engaged throughout the data analysis.

The prevalence of 18–24-year-olds taking part in the survey (49.4.%) could be ascribed to the utilisation of youth-dominated social media platforms to recruit survey participants. It is likely that most participants within the category of 18-24-years-old will have fewer financial responsibilities, such as mortgages or financial dependents, which may influence their food purchasing decisions.

It should be acknowledged that the household income data collected in the survey neglects to acquire information pertaining to number of dependents or other financial responsibilities the participant may hold, therefore, it is unfeasible to ascertain the true financial position of participants.

Identification of the Key Analytical Themes

Through the analysis of the qualitative survey responses, multiple dominant themes emerged. Crang's (2005) sifting and sorting method was utilised, identifying patterns and repetitions in the participants' responses, and using these emic codes to form broader etic themes. This process of coding the data and defining themes is detailed in Table 10.

Table 7: The key themes emerging from the survey data, categorised by emic and etic codes.

Emerging Key Themes from the Survey Data

Etic Theme and Explanation	Emic Coding

<u>The Emotional Aspect of Consumption</u>
Initially, it was identified that many participants were not only discussing their inability to purchase sustainable goods but were also explaining how this made them feel. Through this, the theme of emotion as related to consumption emerged. Further analysis refined this theme into the broad categories of 'care' and 'guilt'.
	• Care
	  ○ Personal health
	  ○ Family
	  ○ Environment
	  ○ Planet
	  ○ Animal welfare
	• Guilt
	  ○ Empathy
	  ○ Responsibility
	  ○ Ethical

<u>The Concept of Luxuries and Necessities</u> When asked about changes to their food consumption during the CLC, many participants referred to a reduction in their purchase of 'luxuries' or similarly, only purchasing 'necessities'. This led to the emergence of the theme of luxury items, and the varying perceptions of 'luxuries.'	• Luxury • Treat • Need • Necessary • Essentials • Cheap • Necessities
<u>Barriers to Sustainable Food Consumption</u> When asked about what was preventing them from purchasing sustainable options, participants highlighted multiple different barriers which they felt were making it difficult to consume sustainable foods. The dominant barrier was affordability. Difficulties with time, availability, knowledge and awareness were also identified as inhibitors to sustainable food consumption. These factors all formed sub-themes under the broad theme of barriers to sustainable food consumption.	• Unaffordable • Budgeting • Planning • Cheaper • Discounts • Change supermarkets • Planning • Cooking from scratch • Batch cooking • Bulk buying • Food waste • Buying less food
<u>Future Intentions of Sustainable Consumption</u> Throughout the survey, participants alluded to wishing they were able to purchase more sustainable goods, which prompted the question: 'What will the future of sustainable food consumption look like?' This theme follows well from the barriers to sustainable	• Local food • Priority • More sustainable • Support local businesses • Fair-trade • Availability

consumption, investigating participants' purchase intentions should these barriers not exist.	• Time

Expressing Care Through Consumption

Consumption, especially in the form of grocery shopping, is commonly portrayed as mundane and habitual, with Diprose et al. (2019) going so far as to argue that these tasks are not subject to conscious choice. Many participants' responses were counterfactual to this, alluding to elements of thought and emotion within their food consumption, especially regarding the expression of care. The frequency of this type of response indicates that food purchasing habits encompass more emotion and deliberation than suggested in the reviewed literature. There is an evident decrease in the purchase of sustainable food products throughout the CLC, with 61.7% of survey participants reporting to have reduced the purchase of at least one type of sustainable food item. However, the common reference to emotive elements of food purchasing in this study suggests that this decrease in purchasing sustainable foods is not due to a lack of consideration or conscious choice but is a result of other inhibiting barriers. Participants referenced various forms of expressing care, which are expanded on below.

Expressing Care for Others

Products sold under a fair-trade label essentially allow consumers to purchase these benefits for distant others, commodifying the act of caring (Cox, 2010). Many participants suggested that fair-trade was an important factor in their food purchasing habits, with only 27.2% of survey participants reducing their purchase of fair-trade through the CLC. For example, ***Noah*** discusses the importance of knowing that producers are being paid a fair wage, stating "*I would much prefer to buy sustainable products and services that I know the providers of them are being properly paid for."* This awareness of the wellbeing of distant others supports the notion and geographical process posed by Massey (2004) of the politics of connectivity, in which people may feel responsible for geographically distant locations, despite not being directly connected to them. ***Noah's*** attitudes towards fair-trade products confirm the arguments developed in numerous papers which suggest that purchasing fair-trade goods allow consumers to express care for the welfare of others (e.g. Goodman, 2004; Lang, 2010; Verain et al., 2012; Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019).

Care for others is not only expressed over great distances; in many cases, care can be expressed in the home and community. A persistent theme amongst survey participant and interview responses in this study was the concern for supporting local businesses, supported by the interview quotes presented in Table 11.

Table 8: Key quotes from interview participants discussing a desire to consume local produce.

Participant Quotes Expressing a Desire to Consume Local Produce
"If I had more money, or the cost-of-living crisis was easing or whatever, I would definitely look at getting like local stuff as first priority. I know of a few like fruit and veg shops near me, and like a local farm share thing that does like vegetable delivery that I'd love to look into, but it is just significantly more expensive than doing a standard food shop at a standard supermarket." ***-Emma***
"I'd feel better about kind of putting my money into a smaller, independent business or something where I knew the profits were going to go back into paying for the operations of like a small, local, farm share or something, rather than going to like, Sainsburys shareholders or whoever with like a big national chain." ***-Emma***
"We live in a really small village in Wales, so, I would like to be able to support local businesses and buy more fresh produce from them, we literally have a grocers at the bottom of the road, which would be great to buy from, but it's so much cheaper to just go to Aldi or Asda and just buy the cheap alternatives." ***-Liam***
"Local ales I would probably buy on a weekly basis (before the CLC), supporting local businesses, independently run pubs and things like that, which I've had to reduce the frequency of." ***-Noah***
"I probably would quite like to be able to support local businesses and local produce, it's not always incredibly readily available."

-Amelia
"I wish I could buy more locally sourced food, yet with the cost-of-living crisis and tight finances, I have to prioritise cheap food which is not sustainable." ***-Ava***
"I definitely would shop at the local butchers, but that's just because my parents shop at the local butchers because they think it's better to give money to local families than to be paying into a CEO's pocket." ***-Isabella***

Most of the quotes in Table 11 relate to the idea of wanting to purchase local produce out of a desire to support local businesses or the community. This is particularly salient amongst interviewees who claim to live in small communities or near small businesses. For example, ***Liam*** discussed the village he resides in and his proximity to a grocer, explaining that he would love to buy from them, but it is just too expensive. Similarly, ***Emma*** described the multiple small businesses in her local area that she would like to support, but again, cites the inhibiting factor as cost, corroborating the claims that premium pricing is a significant barrier to sustainable consumption (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Morris, 2022; Gobbo et al., 2022; Gorton et al., 2010; Gleim et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2016; Smith and Paladino, 2010). ***Isabella*** also insinuated a generational influence in her attitude towards frequenting local businesses, supporting Diprose et al's., (2019) cross-generational perspective of attitudes towards sustainable consumption and Ajzen's (1991) use of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), in which the opinions of those close to an individual will influence the individual's behaviour. In this case, the opinions and attitudes of ***Isabella's*** parents have influenced her attitudes towards shopping locally and supporting local business.

The idea of expressing care for loved ones through consumption was briefly touched upon by ***Amelia*** who stated *"*(I would like to purchase*) organic, just because* (...) *you know that you're sort of providing better for your family."* This desire to provide healthy, nutritious food for family directly correlates with the gendered perspective of food provision (Cairns et al., 2010; Cairns and Johnston, 2015; Monterrossa et al., 2020), claiming that the acquisition and preparation of healthy food is constructed to be a maternal and feminine obligation. This statement is further supported by the survey participant responses when asked about

changes to food purchasing and preparation habits during the CLC: 38.8% of female respondents stated that they had started cooking meals from scratch as opposed to 23.1% of males, and 55.2% of females claimed they were planning meals more, with only 38.5% of males responding the same way. Whilst it should be acknowledged high concentration of female participants in the survey means these statistics may not be representative of a wider population, this gendered imbalance also supports the feminist perspective of the expression of care through food as a woman's burden (Monterrosa et al., 2020; Fox and Smith, 2011; Cairns and Johnson, 2015).

Expressing Care for Oneself

Kamboj and Kishor (2022) discuss the hedonistic motivations behind consuming organic produce, proposing that the most common reason for doing so is for personal health benefits. Yet, contrary to this, there were few mentions of personal health amongst participants; the hedonistic value of enjoying food was more common within participant responses. In her interview, ***Emma*** discussed the purchase of sustainable goods, explaining *"It just feels like a waste of money to some extent, even though my principles would dictate that I should buy the more expensive, more sustainable option, it just feels impractical."* Throughout the interview, ***Emma*** reiterated her moral principles regarding sustainability, and highlighted that cost is the predominant barrier to purchasing these items. However, she is later asked about her purchase of 'luxury' items, to which she replies, *"I will still buy Lurpak even though it's probably like two or three times more expensive."* These contradictory statements are implicative of a cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957, cited in Thøgersen, 2003): whilst ***Emma*** may be aware of the benefits of sustainable consumption, she is able to justify not purchasing them by blaming external factors like their price premium, despite justifying the price premium for 'luxury items'.

Sophia exhibited similar cognitive dissonance in her interview; initially, she explains that her environment-related degree "*opened up (*her*) eyes to the potential impacts to purchasing non-sustainable foods."* Although aware of the consequences of not purchasing sustainably, ***Sophia*** later disclosed, *"I would say I still purchase what I enjoy as opposed to what I think is sustainable*". This suggests that ***Sophia*** also prioritised hedonistic factors such as self-fulfilment and enjoyment of food over sustainability.

Emma and ***Sophia's*** responses highlight the issues with reliance upon market mediated change and responsibilising the consumer. When consumers prioritise hedonistic factors (Kamboj and Kishor, 2022) and consume to serve a private interest (Mayes and Sassano, 2022), issues such as sustainability are commonly neglected, supporting Lyon et al's., (2014) argument that individualising the responsibility of sustainability onto the consumer is insufficient to incite systemic change.

Expressing Care for the Planet

In this study, organic foods were the most frequently reduced sustainable purchase throughout the CLC, with survey data indicating that 53.1% of participants reduced their purchase of these items. Survey and interview responses implied that the impacts of purchasing organic produce had the lowest consumer awareness and the least amount of support, with many participants stating that they did not purchase organic foods prior to the CLC. Kamboj and Kishor (2022) assert that organic purchases are most frequently motivated by the belief that they are healthier. Participants of this study more commonly cited environmental impacts as incentive to purchase organic: ***Olivia*** stated, "*I particularly worry about when I buy produce that isn't organic (…) it's probably not farmed as sustainably and I'm sure it's not as good for the planet"* and ***Amelia*** suggested "*it's used less pesticides so it's better for the environment.*"

Both ***Olivia*** and ***Amelia*** provide environmental motivations to purchase organic produce, yet they do not purchase organic goods themselves. This is another example of Festinger's (1957, cited in Thøgersen, 2003) cognitive dissonance, in which the participants are aware of the benefits of purchasing organic goods, but do not engage in this behaviour. This supports Kollmuss and Agyemen's (2002, p.16) assertion that due to the "non-immediacy of ecological destruction, emotional involvement requires a certain degree of environmental knowledge and awareness." Contrary to the expression of care for the self, others, or animal welfare, care for the planet does not provide instant gratification, and the benefits may never be witnessed directly by the consumer. Therefore, education and awareness are paramount in encouraging purchases of organic produce.

Purchasing organic goods is not the sole way of expressing care for the planet through consumption, for example, ***Sean*** explained that *"I have bought less sustainable foods that are marketed that way, but instead bought foods which I know are low impact*." This survey participant highlights the element of marketing involved in sustainable goods and insinuates that the ethical labelling and commercialisation of sustainable consumption is more for performative effect than its claimed purpose of being sustainable. This supports Roff's (2007) criticism of the 'vote with your fork' movement to commodify politics and create further opportunity for profit, without accomplishing genuine change.

Expressing Care for Animal Welfare

Diprose et al. (2019) suggest that boycotting certain products is a form of sustainable consumption. Through this study, it has become evident that concern for animal welfare is the most salient factor to those who engaged with it prior to the CLC, with only 9.9% of survey participants reducing their purchase of vegan or vegetarian alternative products. There were also several participants who do not engage in vegan or vegetarian lifestyles, but still commented on the importance of animal welfare; these comments are presented in Table 12.

Table 9: Key quotes expressing consideration of animal welfare.

Participant Quotes Expressing Concern for Animal Welfare
"I would definitely buy more local products (…) and probably more organic food as well, as I know it comes from animals that have been treated well before buying it, which would reduce my amount of guilt that I experience when eating it." ***- Ava***
I'd like to go (…) vegetarian, I like the idea of doing that, for like the environment again, and like animal welfare, but at the minute, obviously with money, it's a bit harder, but I'm hoping to." ***- Charlotte***
"If I was to come into more money, I would definitely have alternatives such as oat milk as opposed to cow's milk, I would buy more expensive eggs, non-battery eggs, (…) when money is tight, I tend to go for the cheaper alternatives." ***- Sophia***

"I'm sure cheap meat isn't farmed as nicely or as sustainable. It's horrible not to feel like you have a choice anymore"

-Tony

Olivia, who follows a vegan diet, discussed the importance of animal welfare as reflected in her food purchasing habits, explaining her difficulties in affording what she perceives as luxuries, such as "*meat and dairy substitutes*" and instead she "*predominantly cook[ed] with cupboard staples*." The consequences of this change in her diet led her to explain, "*I don't enjoy my diet as much as I used to, but my main priority is not consuming animal products, and my budget is just something I have to work around*." This statement suggests that ***Olivia's*** moral hierarchy within food consumption is dominated by concerns around animal welfare, followed by budget restraints, with the hedonistic factor of personal enjoyment of food being last. This notion is counter to the findings of Mayes and Sassano (2022), who assert that consumers mainly purchase to serve a private interest. The concept of prioritising animal welfare supports Beck and Ladwig's (2021) defence of ethical consumerism in the case of adopting a vegan lifestyle, suggesting that the boycotting of firms that sell animal products can be an effective contributor to market-mediated change.

Isabella, who is pescatarian, offers a similar view***,*** "*I've definitely noticed that there is a higher price for vegetarian foods (…) so I definitely don't buy them as often."* ***Emma*** shares a similar view: *"I've been pescatarian for almost seven years now (…), so I still buy (…) meat alternative products".* All three of these participants hold analogous opinions regarding their diets: regardless of the price increases to meat alternative products, they do not resort back to consuming animal products. In this study, and in existing literature, there is an elasticity to the purchase of sustainable goods, especially in times of financial crisis (Sharma and Sonwalkar, 2013), with the purchase of fair-trade, organic, and local produce all experiencing significant reductions in this study. However, in the case of veganism and vegetarianism, rather than simply rescinding their commitment and purchasing animal products, participants substituted them with cheaper non-meat alternatives. This implies that concern for animal welfare through the commitment to a vegan and/or vegetarian diet is the most non-negotiable of the sustainable characterisitics investigated in this study. These findings support Beck and Ladwig's (2021, p.3) suggestion that veganism and

vegetarianism are a "lifestyle" where the purchase of sustainable goods involves more conscious thought that can still be achieved when barriers arise. In this, for those in this study, engaging in vegan and vegetarian lifestyles means a more inflexible stance on the purchase of animal-derived products even during the CLC.

Consumer Guilt

The theme of guilt emerged in multiple responses within the survey and was particularly prominent amongst interview participants, with 8 out of 10 interviewees acknowledging a sense of guilt when unable to purchase sustainable food products. This section explores how guilt is created by responsibilising consumer and how this guilt is experienced differently between consumers.

The Responsibilisation of the Consumer

Many interviewees indicated an assumed sense of responsibility to consume sustainably or alluded to the personal adoption of blame for the consequences of unsustainable consumption, as seen in Table 13.

Table 10: Key quotes from survey and interview participants indicating a sense of guilt.

Participant Quotes Displaying a Sense of Guilt for not Purchasing Sustainable Goods
"Say fair-trade, if I'm not buying that then there's people out there for the non-fair-trade things that are being treated kind of unfairly for the amount of work they do and the amount of money they get in return, I feel like it's not fair." - ***Charlotte***
"I particularly worry about when I buy produce that isn't organic, it's the cheapest option so the one I normally gravitate towards, but I do feel bad that it's probably not farmed as sustainably and I'm sure it's not as good for the planet or my health as organic items would be." - ***Olivia***
"It feels really rough (not being able to buy sustainable goods) because I'm essentially contributing towards all of the issues with climate change, and I really wish I wasn't." - ***Liam***

"I can relate to it in recent years (referring to a sense of guilt), because of the cost-of-living crisis and my degree opening up my eyes to the potential impacts to purchasing non-sustainable foods." - ***Sophia***
"I haven't been able to support locally produced food or get organic foods." - ***Penny (Below £10,000)***
"I used to buy good quality meat and free-range eggs, but now shamefully I try to go to Farm Foods and buy bulk frozen chicken etc, and who knows where that comes from." - ***Sally(£40,001 to £50,000)***

Charlotte discussed her sense of guilt, suggesting that there is a direct correlation with her inability to purchase fair-trade and the unjust treatment of producers. This adoption of personal responsibility for a negative outcome directly supports the claims of Antonetti and Maklan (2014) who explain how post-consumption guilt elicits a sense of responsibility for social issues. However, ***Charlotte*** also contradicted the assertions of Luchs et al., (2015) who suggest that the feeling of guilt is a transformative experience, encouraging the consumer to change their behaviours to act in a more pro-environmental manner. Whilst ***Charlotte*** claims that she experienced guilt, she does not have the financial means to absolve it. A similar perspective is seen in ***Liam's*** statement in Table 13. Both ***Charlotte*** and ***Liam's*** responses indicate a sense of individual guilt and responsibility for the consequences of not purchasing sustainable goods, supporting Luchs et al's., (2015, p.1456) theories of "responsibility as emotion" and "responsibility as moral imperative" (see above).

Emma also offers a different perspective of guilt, stating "*you hear about (…) people (…) having to choose between paying their bills and putting food on the table*" explaining that whilst she isn't in that position, she still must budget and choose the cheapest option. Because there are people in worse financial situations, ***Emma*** felt obliged to participate in the "collective responsibility" of ethical consumption (McEwan and Goodman, 2010, p.105), and whilst this aligns with her principles, she was unable to justify the cost of doing so. This suggests that economic constraints can act as a barrier to consumers expressing their morals in their consumption behaviours. This supports Mayes and Sassano's (2022)

arguments where they posit that even when consumers are aware of ethical labelling and are morally inclined to purchase these items, they must also have the financial capacity to engage with these purchases. The responsibilisation of the consumer and the commodification of care, therefore, places disproportionate burdens on lower-income households to consume ethically and can lead to these households experiencing consumer guilt.

Differential Experiences of Guilt

In concordance with the transient nature of emotions highlighted by Tarditi et al., (2020), not all participants shared the aforementioned feeling of guilt: when asked whether consumer guilt was something she could relate to, ***Isabella*** responded firmly with a "*no*", explaining "*I don't necessarily think about the farmers and producers of the products that I buy* (...) *it's not really something I hear about in the news to think about."* It is evident from this quote that ***Isabella*** does not give significant consideration to the impacts of her purchases and does not feel compelled to educate herself about these issues, referencing the lack of news coverage as a reason for why these issues are not salient in her purchases. ***Isabella*** mentions later that she would like to shop locally, as she feels it is important to support local businesses, but that ethical labelling, such as fair-trade and organic, is not a feature she seeks out in her food purchases. To an extent, this contradicts Massey's (2004) politics of connectivity, which suggests that consumers may feel a sense of responsibility for places to which they have no direct relation; ***Isabella*** feels it is important to support local businesses, an act of care which she would be geographically close to and could witness the impacts of first hand. However, she does not feel responsibility to purchase fair-trade goods, the impacts of which would be experienced in geographically distant places, suggesting that some consumers need to witness the effects of their consumption choices first-hand to incite a sense of responsibility.

Oliver's response to the question pertaining to guilt similarly suggests that he does not adopt a sense of responsibility for creating sustainable societies, explaining "*I don't feel guilty, but I think that's because I don't have enough knowledge on sustainable goods to feel guilty and I also think something needs to be done on a higher level, I don't think I'm going to have much impact."* This opinion supports Gleim et al's (2013) discussion of the 'social

dilemma' theory's influence on consumer behaviour: because ***Oliver*** does not feel his individual actions will have any impact, he is reluctant to engage in sustainable food purchasing. His suggestion of the need for action at a *"higher level"* contradicts the notion of the citizen-consumer constructed by ethical consumerism (Banet-Weiser, 2012), which relies on the consumer adopting and participating in a sense of collective responsibility (McEwan and Goodman, 2010). The problematic nature of reliance on collective responsibility is highlighted by ***Isabella*** and ***Oliver***, who do not feel their consumption is a form of 'voting' (Bryant and Goodman, 2014; Johnston, 2008; Dieterle, 2022) or inciting systemic change (Lyon et al., 2014) predominantly due to lack of knowledge and feelings of apathy and cynicism about the impacts of their actions (Gleim et al., 2013).

The Concept of 'Luxury'

Within the survey responses, many participants referenced a reduction in their purchase of 'luxury' items during the CLC, but very few clarified what they perceive as 'luxury'. The following sections explore the varying perceptions of luxury and the notion of autonomy and choice as a luxury.

The Perception of 'Luxury'

Whilst analysing the survey and interview responses, it became evident that the terms 'luxury' and 'necessity' were ambiguous and multi-faceted, with varying perceptions between participants. Table 14 exhibits some of the contexts in which these terms were referred to.

Table 11: Key quotes from participants displaying the varying perceptions of the concepts of luxury.

Participant Quotes Representing the Varying Perceptions of 'Luxury' and 'Necessity'
"To me, luxury items would be things I can get by and survive without, but I enjoy having them if I can work them into my budget." ***- Olivia***
"I don't shop at Waitrose or John Lewis or whatever. That's what I'd think of as more, like, luxury." ***- Emma***

"I'm definitely not buying as many luxury items as I was before, um, a lot of things we are buying now are unbranded and usually like mass produced things as opposed to local and organic produce." ***- Liam***
"Before the crisis, I would regularly buy from local companies, particularly products from local craft markets and um local breweries for example, local ales. That's what I'd class as luxury." ***- Noah***
"I do still buy luxury items now and then, but it is more as a treat now, it's not something that I buy every week. So, for example Nutella, it's not something I buy every week, but I prefer the branded one to the supermarket own." ***- Isabella***
"I am only buying essentials." ***- S27 (£20,001 to £30,000)***
"Cutting down on eating out and takeaways." ***- S20 (£60,001 to £70,000)***

The stark contrast between ***Olivia*** and ***Noah's*** definitions of 'luxury' exhibits the influence of income in the perception of luxury. Whilst ***Olivia*** (whose household income is below £10,000) deems anything non-essential to her survival as a luxury, ***Noah*** (whose household income is £70,000 and above) perceives luxury to be the ability to purchase from local craft markets and breweries. These dichotomous views are assimilated in the responses of survey participants ***S27*** and ***S20*** when asked about how the CLC has affected their food purchasing habits. These reported differential experiences of the CLC between households of varying incomes emphasises how the CLC has exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities within the UK (Rodrigues and Quinio, 2022).

When asked about what they constituted as 'luxury', multiple interviewees referred to foods such as local produce, vegan and vegetarian products, fair-trade, and organic. These

items, as discussed above, are all associated with an expression of care, but are also associated with price premiums (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019). Classifying these items as luxury suggests that the act of expressing care through consumption choice is a luxury. This reiterates Carolan's (2011, p.143) assertion that "voting with money only works if you have some" and supports the proposition that the price premiums associated with ethical products contribute to the exclusion of lower income groups in the expression of care (Mayes and Sassano, 2022; Robichaud and Yu, 2022; Hudson and Hudson, 2003).

The Luxury of Choice

Whilst the main focus in the 'luxury' discourse pertained to specific products, there were also several mentions of the luxury of choice. For example, ***Oliver*** stated "*I guess being able to shop sustainably would be a luxury but again I don't have the knowledge and I don't have the money.*" ***Oliver's*** reference to not having the knowledge or funds to shop sustainably highlights the multitude of barriers that consumers can face when attempting to engage in these behaviours and choices. ***Oliver*** implies that he would like the autonomy and ability to choose sustainable products should he wish to, supporting Dieterle's (2022) criticism of consumption as a form of voting, which explains that many consumers do not have autonomous agency regarding their food purchases. ***Oliver's*** inability to purchase sustainable food products also reinforces the issue highlighted by Kuehn (2017) in which ethical consumerism is based upon the assumption that every consumer has equal access to the market.

Survey participant ***S76*** articulated the issue of the lack of agency in their food purchases, stating *"it's horrible to not feel like you have a choice anymore."* This statement highlights the emotional burden associated with the CLC and emphasises its impacts on purchasing habits; this participant previously purchased sustainable goods but has been unable to do so during the CLC, implying that they no longer have the autonomy to purchase more sustainable or enjoyable foods.

Barriers to Sustainable Consumption

Survey participants were asked what they perceived to be their biggest barrier to sustainable consumption during the CLC, the results of this are displayed graphically in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5. These factors are discussed in more detail below.

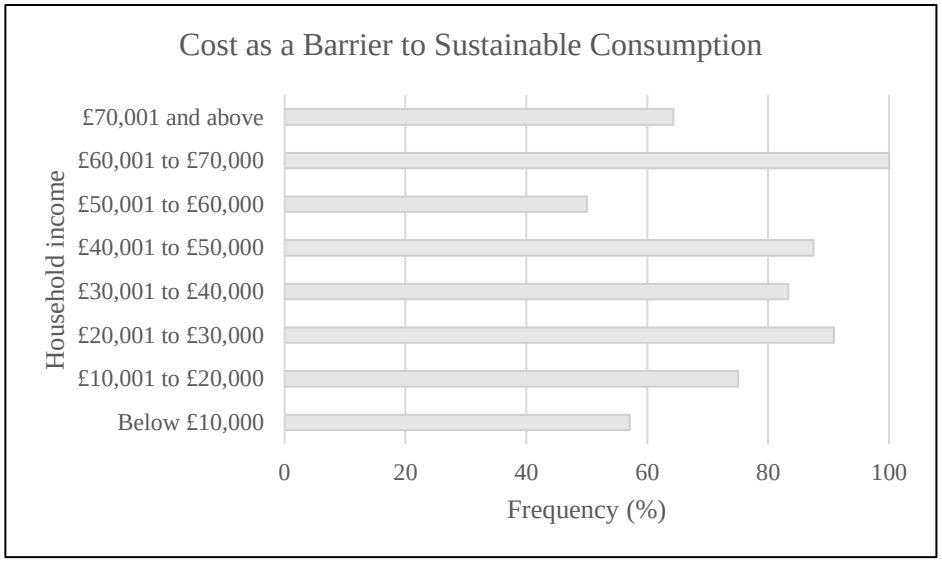

Figure 3: The frequency of cost as a barrier to sustainable food consumption.

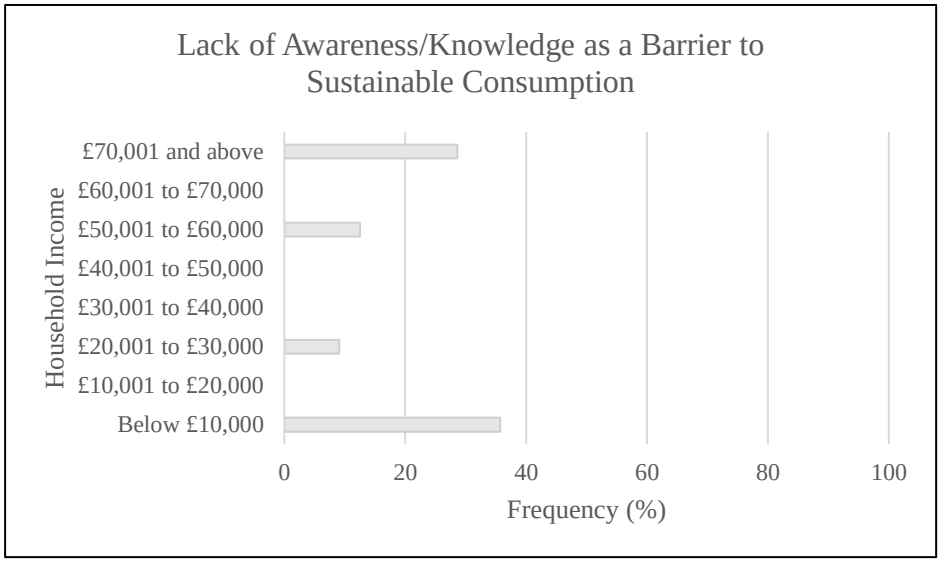

Figure 2: The frequency of lack of awareness/knowledge as a barrier to sustainable consumption.

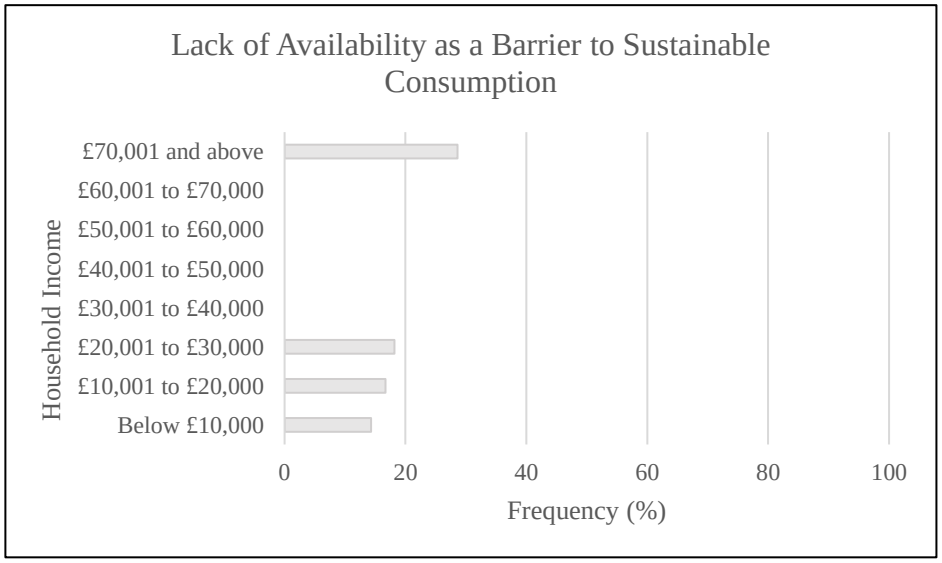

Figure 4: The frequency of lack of availability as a barrier to sustainable consumption.

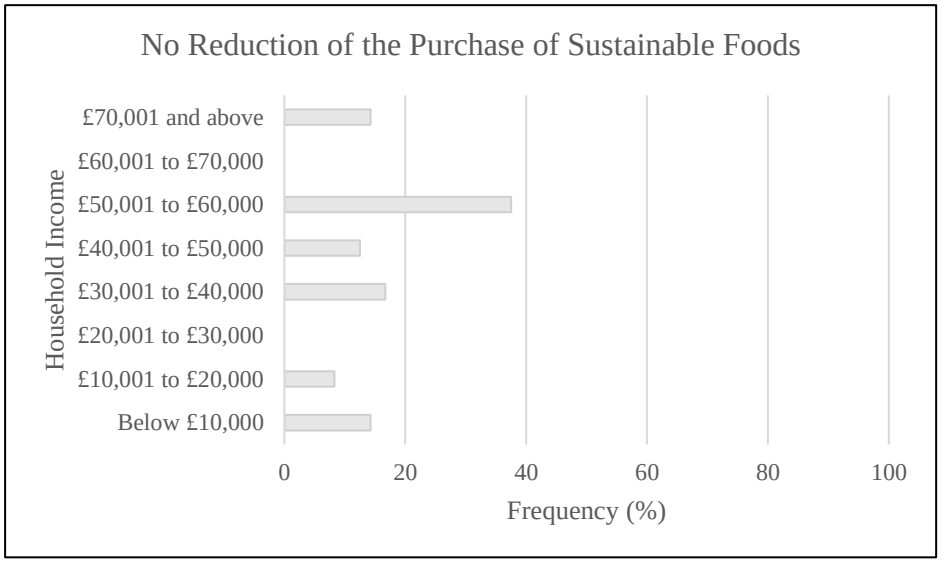

Figure 5: The frequency of 'no reduction of the purchase of sustainable foods.'

Affordability

An overwhelming majority of participants (72.8%) cited cost as the biggest barrier to sustainable food purchases (see Figure 2). This is supported in the qualitative responses of the survey and the interviews. Table 15 presents some of the key quotes in which cost is highlighted as a barrier to sustainable consumption.

Table 12: Key quotes from participants highlighting cost as a barrier to sustainable consumption.

Participant Quotes Highlighting Cost as a Barrier to Sustainable Consumption
"If I had more money (…) I would definitely look at getting, like, local stuff as first priority (…) but it is just significantly more expensive than doing a standard food shop at a standard supermarket." ***- Emma***
"When I had money before the cost-of-living crisis, I would always buy fair-trade chocolate and coffee, it's a really easy little change to make, but now it's standard 50p bars of chocolate." ***- Liam***
"I would much prefer to buy sustainable products (…) but obviously there's a price to be paid for those sorts of things, and since the financial crisis, I have to be more aware of where I'm spending my money and therefore, some of those choices probably aren't ones that I would like to from a moral and ethical point of view." ***- Noah***
"I've definitely reduced the amount of like local products I buy just due to finances, but that's something I wish I could buy more of." ***- Ava***
"I rarely buy any sustainable items anymore even though I feel bad about it as I will pretty much always choose the cheapest option." ***- S19 (Below £10,000)***
"I cannot afford to eat sustainable brands very often because they are too expensive and it is upsetting as it is something I'd like to do more often." (£20,001 to £30,000) ***- S46 (£20,001 to £30,000)***

"I have to choose products with the lowest price, which means I can't always purchase the most sustainable products." ***- S43 (£10,001 to £20,000)***

Not surprisingly, most of the extant literature depicts financial barriers to be the predominant inhibiting factor to sustainable consumption (e.g. Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Mayes and Sassano, 2022; Morris, 2022; Gleim et al., 2013). It is evident in many of the responses in Table 15 that consumers have a desire to purchase sustainable goods but are financially unable to; this is somewhat counterfactual to Padel and Foster's (2005) suggestions which state that consumers require an alternative justification for price premiums aside from the existing environmental and social benefits. Participant responses rarely mention a need for added hedonistic value, like improved taste, with many representing a more altruistic view, suggesting that they would purchase sustainable goods for their existing benefits to others and the planet if they had the funds to do so. This correlates with Luchs et al.'s (2015, p.1459) reference to the notion of "responsibility as moral imperative", in which responsibility is concerned with the wellbeing of others and is perceived as a moral obligation.

The prevalence of cost as the inhibiting factor to sustainable consumption further supports Kuehn's (2017) criticism of ethical consumerism, in which it is assumed that all consumers have equal access to the market. Participants of this study do not display equal access to the market, predominantly due to disparities in household income, but also due to other factors such as varying levels of knowledge and time constraints. These inhibiting factors further substantiate the arguments against using consumption to incite market-mediated change: some consumers experience a disproportionate number of barriers to sustainable consumption, meaning that consumers who can access the market will be disproportionately represented (Kuehn, 2017). This is particularly problematic as consumers dictate what is ethically salient (Mayes and Sassano, 2022; Dieterle, 2022), so those who are unable to 'cast their vote' through consumption, will be unable to contribute to the sustainable and ethical consumption narrative and their views will not be represented within the market.

Awareness and Knowledge of Sustainability

Yamoah and Acquaye (2019) suggest that distrust of information from ethical labelling organisations may be another barrier to the purchase of sustainable food products. However, this was not the case amongst most participants. For example, ***Noah*** discussed purchasing fair-trade coffee, stating that he "*knew the money was going back to the producers*", emphasising his trust in the fair-trade organisation to deliver their promises. Similarly, ***Sophia*** explained that prior to the CLC, she "*wouldn't even think twice about buying fair-trade to help out communities overseas*", reiterating the automatic trust placed into the label of fair-trade to support producing communities.

Rather than the distrust of ethical labelling suggested in the literature, a more frequently mentioned barrier in this study was a lack of knowledge or awareness. This is exemplified in ***Oliver's*** previously discussed statement about not feeling guilty due to a lack of awareness and the need for *"higher level"* action. Not only does ***Oliver*** mention his lack of understanding of the benefits of sustainable consumption, but he also articulated a sense of cynicism about the potential impacts of his individual actions. This strengthens the suggestions Gleim et al. (2013) make about perceived consumer effectiveness: due to his inability to see the impact his individual actions would make, ***Oliver*** does not actively engage in sustainable food consumption behaviours.

Time Constraints and Availability

Many participants discussed changes in food purchasing behaviours, such as changing supermarkets (or shopping at more than one), searching for offers, meal planning, and bulk buying. Whilst these behaviours may be beneficial in saving consumers money or minimising food waste, these measures are not viable for all consumers. Multiple participants referenced barriers regarding time constraints or a lack of availability of products, as seen in Table 16.

Table 13: Key quotes highlighting time/availability as a barrier to sustainable consumption.

Participant Quotes Suggesting that Time and Availability are Barriers to Sustainable Consumption

"I don't know if I'd necessarily go to a farm shop to buy my fruit and veg, (…) it's all about convenience, I don't have the time to go to a supermarket, a butcher, a fishmonger, and a farm shop." ***- Isabella***
"Definitely I would buy more organic and more local, if I had more funds available, and also probably more time, because sometimes it takes a little bit more time to seek those things out." ***- Amelia***
"I probably would quite like to be able to support local businesses and local produce, it's not always incredibly readily available." ***- Amelia***
"I would like to purchase more local stuff, but I'm a student and I don't have the transport or the time really to be shopping around in different places, that's the convenience of a supermarket I guess." ***- Sophia***
"I definitely have to plan more in terms of what I'm going to buy and meals for the week, my biggest issue is just finding the time to do this." ***- Olivia***

Ajzen's (1991, cited in Choi and Johnson, 2019) TPB incorporates the consumer's perceived ability to perform an act as a determinant of their behaviour. In this sense, the availability of products and the time required to acquire and/or prepare them is paramount in encouraging the purchase of sustainable goods. Smith and Paladino (2022) discuss the importance of convenience in the context of organic food purchases, which according to ***Isabella*** and ***Sophia's*** comments, is also a salient issue from the perspective of the consumer**.** Similarly, Padel and Foster (2005) contend that consumers do not want to exert excessive effort to purchase organic goods, supported by ***Amelia's*** statement that she would purchase more organic and local goods if she had more funds and "*more time to seek them out."*

Future Intentions for Sustainable Consumption

In both the survey and the interviews, participants were questioned about the future of their purchasing habits. This provoked discourse regarding the theme of frugality and affordability, with the frequent use of terms such as ‘cheaper’, ‘less’, ‘avoid’ and ‘reduce’, as seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6: The most frequently used words in response to question 10 of the survey.

As seen in Figure 6, participants frequently used terms that allude to intentions of continued frugal spending should inflation and the CLC continue, suggesting that the purchase of sustainable food products will continue to suffer. This is in line with Sharma and Sonwalkar’s (2013) assertion that sustainable purchasing patterns comprise an element of elasticity, which is particularly relevant in times of economic crisis and shown in detail here.

To further explore the future of sustainable food purchasing and its barriers, interviewees were asked which sustainable goods (if any) they would purchase if the CLC eased. Every interviewee named at least one type of sustainable food they would purchase if they were able to, with 8 out of 10 specifically mentioning a desire to shop locally. This, in parallel with the 72.8% of participants citing cost as the most significant inhibitor of their sustainable purchases, confirms that premium pricing is the central factor preventing most consumers

from engaging in sustainable consumption, correlating with the findings of existing literature (Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Mayes and Sassano, 2022; Morris, 2022; Gleim et al., 2013).

Analytical Overview

Considering all the gathered data, the central finding is that most consumers report a desire to engage in sustainable food consumption, but many are facing barriers inhibiting them from doing so. As discussed, multiple factors have contributed to declining purchases of sustainable foods, with cost as the most frequently mentioned barrier to sustainable food consumption. Therefore, data from this study suggests that whilst the CLC continues to prevail and sustainable food items maintain a price premium, it is unlikely that purchases of these goods will increase. The conclusions drawn from this research, and recommendations for further studies, are now discussed.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the ways in which the UK's CLC has affected the purchase of sustainable food products, whilst identifying the emotional implications of these effects for consumers. The study has also investigated the future intentions of consumers regarding sustainable purchasing and highlighted cost as the primary barrier to purchasing sustainable goods, emphasising the detrimental impact of economic crises, such as the CLC, on the sales of sustainable food products.

This concluding section will discuss the key findings of the research and highlight how these findings answer the proposed research questions, situating them within the wider literature. The chapter will finish with recommendations for further research to build upon the findings of this project.

Research Questions

This research project comprised of three predominant research questions, the main findings of which are detailed in Table 17.

Table 14: Research questions and corresponding findings

Which (if any) sustainable food consumption habits have changed during the CLC?
• Organic foods were reported to have been reduced the most of all sustainable categories throughout the CLC, with 53.1% of survey participants reporting to have reduced their purchase of these items. • Multiple participants highlighted a lack of awareness pertaining to the benefits of purchasing organic goods, and suggested that their premium pricing was unjustifiable, especially in times of economic hardship. • Purchase of vegan and/or vegetarian alternatives were reported to have been reduced the least (9.9%), with interviewees who engaged in a vegan/vegetarian diet indicating that their ethical choices around their diet took precedent over affordability, even during events such as the CLC. Where other types of sustainable foods were subject to the elasticity of purchasing patterns (Sharma and Sonwalkar, 2013), vegan and/or vegetarian diets were significantly less elastic, in line with Beck and Ladwig's (2021) suggestion of veganism and vegetarianism as a lifestyle. • Locally produced foods and fair-trade foods were reduced a similar amount (29.6% and 27.2% respectively). However, these two categories of sustainable food had the most positive reported attitudes towards them, with many participants reporting concern for human others, both locally and in geographically distant locations (Massey).
In what ways (if any) has the CLC affected people's ability to express care through consumption?
• Survey and interview responses displayed many instances of attitude-behaviour gaps in sustainable food consumption, as discussed in existing literature (e.g. Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019). However, these were discovered to be a result of behavioural barriers such as financial and time constraints, as opposed to the suggested social-desirability bias (Kaiser et al., 2010). The emotional impacts of this attitude-behaviour gap became evident through this study, with many participants reporting an inability to purchase in line with their morals. • Many participants reported a sense of consumption guilt for varying reasons: ○ Maternal guilt for not being able to provide nutritious meals for children (Monterrosa et al., 2020; Fox and Smith, 2011; Cairns and Johnston., 2015)

- Environmental guilt for not being able to purchase organic or local produce (contrary to the assertions of Kollmuss and Agyemen, 2002).
- Social factors were the most dominant cause of guilt, for not being able to support local businesses, or purchase fair-trade items to support distant others (Massey, 2004 cited in McEwan and Goodman, 2010; Kamboj and Kishor, 2022; Lang, 2010; Verain, 2012; Yamoah and Acquaye, 2019; Cox, 2010).

In what ways (if any) would consumers choose to change their food purchasing habits if the CLC eased/ they were in improved financial positions?

- Most survey participants displayed a positive attitude towards sustainable food consumption, even if they experienced barriers to engaging with this consumption. All interviewees expressed an intention to purchase at least one form of sustainable food product if the CLC were to ease, highlighting the pivotal role which financial crises, like the CLC, play in creating and exacerbating barriers to sustainable food consumption and contributing to the elasticity in sustainable food purchasing patterns (Sharma and Sonwalkar, 2013).
- The most prevalent response from interviewees pertaining to their future sustainable purchasing intentions was the desire to purchase local produce. Participants provided multiple justifications for this desire to consume local food products:
  - Expressing care for others by supporting local businesses (Kamboj and Kishor, 2022).
  - Expressing care for the planet by reducing the air miles of food.
  - Increased hedonistic value with improved quality or taste (Gobbo et al., 2022; Padel and Foster, 2005).
  - Parental Influence (Ajzen, 1991 cited in Choi and Johnson, 2019).

Concluding Thoughts

Over the course of this study, it has become evident that a reliance upon consumers to enact market-mediated change is problematic and insufficient. Participant responses highlight the issues with relying on individuals to consume as though they are casting a vote: especially in times of economic crisis, consumers deprioritise sustainability, in some cases

focusing on affording enough food, rather than what they deem ethically salient. In this sense, some consumers are forced to ***choose and vote for survival,*** not sustainability. This reiterates the issues associated with the marketisation and commodification of progressive politics: if consumers do not, or are unable to, make these purchases, then progressive consumer-linked politics will greatly suffer, and any kind of systemic change will not be 'signalled' to the market (Mayes and Sassano, 2022; Roff, 2007; Dieterle, 2022; Bryant and Goodman, 2014).

This study has also identified the notable role of guilt in consumers' attitudes towards sustainable consumption (Cf. Luchs et al., 2015). Whilst guilt may be transformative in encouraging the responsibilisation of the consumer, its influence on behaviour change is not as applicable in the context of economic crises and the CLC. Regardless of how much guilt consumers are burdened with, if they do not have the financial means to absolve it, they are unable to respond to their emotional burden. These findings emphasise the problematic nature of the responsibilisation of the consumer, especially throughout the CLC.

The notion of consumer-citizenship has also been questioned throughout this study: many survey and participant responses indicated that individuals can only be consumer-citizens if they can afford to be, and have the luxuries of time, access, and awareness of sustainable consumption (Kuehn, 2017; Mayes and Sassano, 2022; Lyon et al., 2014; Carolan, 2011; Dieterle, 2022; Hudson and Hudson, 2003). Due to this, individuals should not be asked to consume their way to citizenship, as this excludes those who are unable to access the market and further entrenches pre-existing inequalities.

Recommendations for Further Study

Finally, we offer some suggestions for scholars to build on these findings in future research. This study aimed to explore the impacts of the CLC on sustainable food purchases and, with these respondents, it was discovered that purchases of these items were reduced overall. Many participants also reported a feeling of guilt for doing so and all interviewees expressed a desire to purchase at least one sustainable food product. While addressed in the methodology, it should be reiterated that the sample size of the interviews (10 participants) and the skew in the demographics of the survey participants cannot be fully representative

of all socio-economic groups and perspectives and, therefore, the data acquired and presented in this study is not widely applicable. In order to produce more reliable results, it would be advisable that future research comprises a larger and more representative sample, ensuring sufficient representation of varying demographics.

This research began to investigate the influence of gender on sustainable purchases and consumption, however, due to the small sample size of male participants, this element of the research was not representative of a wider population. Further research could utilise a more evenly distributed pool of participants to investigate how (if at all) the CLC has affected the gendered distribution of labour regarding sustainable consumption, as discussed by Cairns and Johnson (2015).

This research has explored the influence of negative emotions, such as guilt, in the context of sustainable food consumption. Future studies could further develop the research of Luchs et al. (2015) by exploring the influence of positive emotions, such as pride, in encouraging sustainable food consumption. To further understand the implications of this study's findings, future studies could also address sustainable consumption beyond the specific lens of food purchasing; this would allow for a clearer assessment of the overall impact of the CLC on sustainable purchasing habits across all types of consumption.

Overall, as the CLC persists throughout the UK, it is essential that forthcoming research continues to explore the effect upon sustainable consumption to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the full extent of this economic crisis' impacts.

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