Research Report

# Sustainable Consumption as a Status Symbol? Drivers and Barriers of Sustainable Consumption and the Use of Car Sharing

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## **Abstract**

In today's society, especially among Millennials and GenZ, there is a growing trend towards sustainable consumption. Companies are reacting to this with a wide range of sustainable products and services, such as sharing offers like car sharing. This qualitative study examines the drivers and barriers of sustainable consumption behavior and the use of car sharing as well as personal status symbols among the tribe of sustainable students. A special focus is placed on the question of whether status-related motives represent incentives for sustainable consumption and the use of car sharing or whether these can serve as status symbols. The results show that motives for sustainable consumption are primarily ecological and functional in nature. Car sharing is primarily used for functional reasons. Neither sustainable consumption behavior nor car sharing are seen as status symbols among sustainable students; a potential status gain through sustainable consumption or sharing use cannot be identified as a motive. However, the study also provides indications that this could change in coming years.

Keywords: Sustainable Consumption; Conspicuous Consumption; Status Symbol; Car Sharing

# 1. Introduction

The burden to the environment and the use of natural resources is equally attributable to producers and consumers (Umweltbundesamt, 2021). Companies respond with products to the corresponding demand of consumers. However, this is also how a greater supply of sustainable products can be achieved through an increase in demand, as is the case with green electricity and organic products. Increasing importance is also being attached to the collaborative consumption of goods and services, primarily with a view to achieving a positive ecological effect (Witzke, 2016). This sharing economy is particularly popular among the young and educated (PwC, 2018). For young people, the focus is on quality of life instead of material status symbols or wealth.

There are various influencing factors that affect sustainable consumption: Intrapersonal factors (socio-demographic factors & psychographic factors), interpersonal factors (social norms & symbolic motives) and other factors such as the availability of products and services (Herbes, 2021). In the case of the interpersonal factors, the symbolic motives show up in the form of conspicuous consumption or demonstrative consumption. In this case, people behave in a prosocial or environmentally friendly manner in order to increase their status.

In the study by the GfK organization (Süptitz, 2021; GfK, 2021), customers of sustainable products were divided into five different customer segments. The largest segment is made up of the so-called glamour greens. For this type of customer, green is a status symbol, and they are keen to show their environmentally friendly behavior. Here, the need to belong is driven by image awareness. This segment also includes an above-average number of students. The glamour greens are characterized by the need for an active and mobile lifestyle, which is compatible with car sharing.

Car sharing is a form of shared car use where only access is shared, not ownership, and usage intervals are relatively short (Riegler et al., 2016). There are various forms of car sharing, such as conventional and private car sharing. In this paper, conventional car sharing, in which the vehicles are provided by companies via an online platform, is considered. Car sharing has seen a steady increase in the number of users in recent years in Germany, accompanied by a rise in the number of car sharing vehicles offered (Bundesverband CarSharing, 2022).

The object of investigation in this paper is based on the question whether car sharing can be seen as a status symbol for sustainability or not. In order to answer the research question, eight in-depth interviews were conducted. The focus group consists of sustainable students. Sustainable students are those who are aware of their actions and their impact on the environment, and who try to adapt their consumption habits to environmentally friendly behavior. On the one hand, the focus group seems suitable because, as mentioned earlier in the text, the sharing economy is particularly popular among the young and educated, and there are also an above-average number of students among the glamour greens. On the other hand, it was found in own observations that students with an affinity to the topic of sustainability exchange a lot in this regard, as well as live out their sustainable behavior openly.

The next chapter discusses the methods used to answer the research question. Followed by an analysis of the in-depth interviews and the elaboration of the resulting findings. Finally, the results are discussed, and important findings are highlighted, as well as recommendations for further research are derived.

### 2. Materials and Methods

To be able to answer the research question, a qualitative research was conducted. The purpose was to investigate whether and to what extent there is a connection between sustainable consumption and conspicuous consumption. In particular, car sharing will be investigated. In order to discover a connection, the method of in-depth interviews is chosen in the context of the qualitative research.

Eight interviews were conducted with interview partners from the researchers' personal environment. The interviewees had to be students, who demonstrably show sustainable consumption behavior in their everyday lives. The sample consists of 50 % female and 50 % male participants with an average age of 25.5 years. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online video conferencing tools.

In order to gain insights with the in-depth interview, the research question is broken down into its components. This results in the following three relevant components: sustainability, status symbols, and carsharing. These form the starting point for the further research and form the basis for the structure of the in-depth interview. Each component forms a block, which build on each other. The blocks contain a total of 34 open questions that arose in a group discussion and are intended to cover different perspectives on the topics.

The first block deals with the topic of sustainability and environmental awareness. On the one hand, this block serves to ensure that the interview partner belongs to the tribe of the environmentally conscious student. On the other hand, it is intended to develop a better understanding of sustainable behaviors. The second block, possessions and status symbols, is intended to capture the perspective and relevance of the previously defined tribe on this topic. In addition, a relationship between sustainability and status symbols will be established here. The last block contains general questions about car sharing and usage behavior at the beginning, while the three components are brought together in the form of further questions at the end.

For the evaluation, the individual in-depth interviews are transcribed and searched for statements that are potentially relevant to the research question. Based on this, these statements are inductively transferred into subcategories. Finally, the subcategories form the basis for thematic main categories, on the basis of which the frequency analysis and evaluation follows. Numerical values in the tables below refer to how many individuals have mentioned the aspect and are then summed up

in the main categories. Categorization and coding were carried out and compared by all researchers to increase inter-coder reliability.

### 3. Results

Based on the interviews and the categorised quotes on the topic of sustainability, overlaps in the answers of the interviewees become clear. First, a block of topics could be isolated, which deals with the barriers to sustainable action.

For example, six out of eight respondents feel that a sustainable lifestyle is too expensive and therefore refrain from pursuing it consistently (cf. A1, A2, C1, C2, M1 and M2). Referring to that M1 says: "Finanziell ist es leider oft teurer sich einen nachhaltigen Lebensstil zu finanzieren. Als Beispiel unverpackt-Läden, Bio-Läden etc." A special case is one of the interviewees, who in principle rejects sustainable products, which would be significantly more expensive than conventional products due to their sustainability (cf. C1). C1 says: "bei manchen anderen Dingen ist es tatsächlich auch ein Prinzipien-Ding, wenn nachhaltige Dinge einfach teurer sind bzw. unverhältnismäßig teuer sind, dann sehe ich das teilweise nicht ein, dass ich dafür nur mehr bezahle, weil es angeblich nachhaltiger ist." In addition, all respondents state that they are not consistent in their sustainable behaviour either out of laziness, convenience, habit or for reasons of independence. A1 says for example: "Aufwand und Zeit, dass man sich damit beschäftigen müsste." Other barriers are availability (cf. A1 and C2), the effort required to obtain information (cf. A1 and J1) and the time required (cf. M1 and J1). In addition, some respondents say they are not always aware of the consequences of their actions (cf. M1 and J1). M1: "vielleicht auch, dass man sich trotz eines gewissen Bewusstseins nicht zu jedem Zeitpunkt zu 100% der Folgen bewusst ist, die das Handeln nach sich zieht."

The next section deals with the overlaps regarding the drivers of sustainable behaviour. Here, too, the interviewees reveal strong commonalities.

The interviewees all state that they try to behave sustainably in order to protect the environment, animals and/or resources (cf. A1, A2, C1, C2, M1, M2, J1 and J2). J2 states: "dass ich probiere, relativ umweltbewusst, also meine Umwelt wahrzunehmen und zu gucken, welches Verhalten von mir welchen Einfluss auf die Umwelt hat, auch wenn er jetzt nur relativ klein ist." Three out of six respondents also state that they wanted to work for a "liveable tomorrow" (cf. A1, M1 and J1) and for the same number, intrinsic motivation or their own conviction plays a major role in their choice of sustainable actions (cf. A1, M1 and J1). Furthermore, for some of the respondents, the environment plays a role in their decisions; among others, two people state that they want to be a role model for others and therefore behave more sustainably (cf. M1 and J2). J2: "Man kann, denke ich, auch sehr viel nur selber für sich im Kleinen tun und hoffen, dass andere Menschen einem gleichtun." The motivations "fun" (cf. M1) and "making someone else happy" (cf. A1) are also mentioned, as well as financial benefits through the use of second-hand offers (cf. M2), and the more efficient use of time when travelling by train (cf. C1), convenience (cf. C1), and health through cycling or walking (cf. C2).

Table 1: Barriers of Sustainable Consumption Behaviour

Too expensive	6	Financial barriers	7	Barriers	
Eco-Tax (principle)	1				
Lack of availability	2	Availability	3		
Lack of alternative products	1				
Expenditure of time	2	Effort	5		30
Expenditure of time to collect	2				
information	2				
Lack of compatibility with the job	1				
Lack of information	2	Lack of information			
Lack of awareness of the consequences	5 2		4		
of one's own actions					

Laziness	3			
Convenience	5	Behaviour pattern	11	
Habituality	1		11	
Independence	2			

Table 2: Drivers of Sustainable Consumption Behaviour

1				
1	Hedonism	2		
1			Drivers	
3	Future-oriented motivation	3		
6	п	10		
2				28
2	consciousness			
1	External influences	4		
1				
1				
2				
3	Intrinsic motivation	3		
2	Financial motives	2		
1	Functional motives	4		
1				
1		4		
1				
	1 3 6 2 2 1 1 2 3	Hedonism  Future-oriented motivation  Environmental consciousness  External influences  Intrinsic motivation  Financial motives	Hedonism 2  Future-oriented 3 motivation 3  Environmental consciousness 10  External influences 4  Intrinsic motivation 3  Financial motives 2  Intrinsic motivation 3	Hedonism 2  Future-oriented 3 motivation 3  Environmental consciousness 10  External influences 4  Intrinsic motivation 3  Financial motives 2  Intrinsic motivation 3

As can be seen in the tables, the individual aspects mentioned can be combined into categories and finally divided into barriers and drivers.

Barriers include financial resources, which are made up of the aspects "too expensive" and the refusal of an eco-tax. Almost all interviewees agree that more sustainable products come with higher prices and therefore they cannot behave as sustainable as they would like. Availability is also a problem. Both the non-existence of alternatives and the poor availability of existing alternatives in some regions are mentioned here. The effort associated with a more sustainable lifestyle is also criticised several times by the interviewees. Both the procurement of information and the actual purchase take time and are thus not always compatible with the job, according to the opinion of one interviewee. The renunciation of sustainability is also not always intentional; lack of information forms another category in the frequency analysis. Together with financial barriers, behavioural patterns form the most significant category in the analysis. Habits, laziness, convenience and independence are due to familiar behavioural patterns of the interviewees, which they find difficult to break away from.

The biggest driver of sustainable behaviour is environmental awareness. This consists of environmental protection, animal welfare and saving resources. All interviewees address at least one of these points in their answers. The personal environment, the influence of demonstrations and movements, as well as the urge to act as a role model for others can be summarised as external influences, which together with the functional motives convenience, efficient use of time, protection from Covid infection and health are the second most important categories. Other categories are hedonism, financial motivation, future-oriented motivation and intrinsic motivation.

The answers regarding the use of car sharing can be categorised and evaluated in the same way as the answers relating to sustainability. Here, too, drivers and barriers could be isolated. In the following, the similarities but also the differences between the drivers and barriers of sustainability and the use of car sharing are compared.

With regard to the drivers, it can be clearly stated that the largest share for car sharing is due to the purely functional motives, such as the need of a large vehicle for transport (cf. A1, C2, M1 and M2). M2 says: "Ich nutze Carsharing, wenn ich etwas transportieren muss, was ich weder mit dem ÖPNV, noch zu Fuß oder mit dem Fahrrad transportieren kann." These functional motives play a subordinate role in sustainability, whereas here the environmental awareness of the interviewees plays a significantly more important role. Hedonism and moral motives are equally mentioned, while it is striking that external influences make a major contribution to sustainable behaviour and are not mentioned once in relation to car sharing. Overall, significantly fewer drivers are named for the topic of car sharing than for the general questions on sustainability.

In terms of barriers, car sharing and sustainable behaviour are similar in many of the interviewees' answers. Financial barriers are one of the biggest barriers. Both the purchase of sustainable products and the use of car sharing are perceived as too expensive by almost all interviewees. In the case of car sharing, this is compounded by opaque insurance costs (cf. C1). C1: "Wenn man jetzt einen Unfall hat mit einem Carsharing-Wagen, ist das meistens nicht Vollkasko und die Selbstbeteiligung ist auch noch recht hoch." The lack of information is also criticised by more than half of the interviewees (cf. A1, A2, C2, M2 and J2). Also, according to the interviews, availability is not always given (cf. A1, C1, C2, M1 and J2), similar to sustainable alternative products. C2 states: "Auch generell sollte der ländliche Raum besser erschlossen werden." Only the behavioural patterns that are often mentioned by the interviewees in relation to a sustainable lifestyle do not come up as a barrier in the case of car sharing. These are mostly found here as functional motives as drivers.

Table 3: Barriers of the Use of Car Sharing

Availability	5	Availability	6		
Too expensive	5	Financial barriers	6		
Insurance costs	1				
Low public awareness	3			Barriers	20
Lack of transparency about prices	1	Lack of information	7		
Insufficient explanation of use	3				
Lack of flexibility	2	Lack of flexibility	2		

Table 4: Drivers of the Use of Car Sharing

Tuble 1, Billier of the Ose of Cur Silving					
Lack of availability of own car	1				
Transportation of larger	4		15		
items/shopping	4			Drivers	
Flexibility	3	Functional motives			23
Protection against infection (Covid)	2				
Low effort	1				
Convenience	4				
Space-saving (revegetation)	1	Environmental	3		
Reduction of CO2 emissions	2	consciousness			
Moral aspect	1	Moral motives	2		
Convey values to the outside world	1				
Curiosity/interest	1	Hedonism	1		
Low costs	1	Financial motives	2		
Free parking	1				

The following section is about the evaluation and development of status symbols. The structure is as follows: First, classic status symbols are shown that are named by the interview participants.

Then, their personal status symbols are highlighted and a development is derived from this. Finally, the special case of whether sustainability can be seen as a status symbol is examined.

As classic status symbols, six out of eight respondents count the car (cf. A1, A2, C1, C2, M1 and M2). In addition to the fact that so many participants associate cars with status symbols, the following statement underscores the importance of the car as a status symbol. Interview participant C1 says that when he thinks of status symbols, he thinks of the Germans' status symbol par excellence: the car: "Wenn man von Status spricht, denkt man natürlich an das Statussymbol schlechthin der Deutschen, nämlich das Auto." Five of the interviewees count clothing and jewellery among the classic status symbols (cf. A1, A2, C1, C2 and M2). This is followed by technical equipment for three of the respondents (cf. A1, C2 and J1) and real estate, with apartments and houses mentioned (cf. A1, A2 and C1). Watches (cf. A1 and J1) and family (cf. A1 and C1) are mentioned twice each. Less important are expensive hobbies (cf. A2), social media (cf. C1), travel (cf. C1) and money (cf. M1). All in all, a certain pattern can be discerned here, because with the exception of family, all the status symbols mentioned represent material objects.

The question now is whether these material status symbols are also seen as personal status symbols for the respondents. It is noticeable that very few material objects are listed as personal status symbols. Only one respondent mentions technical devices (iPhone and Macbook) as status symbols (cf. A2) and another respondent mentions a watch (Rolex) as a personal status symbol (cf. J2). Otherwise, the status symbols listed are immaterial in nature. It is striking that the personal status symbols mentioned differ in terms of their design, but are comparable in nature, in their immaterial character. Based on the answers, success is mentioned two times (cf. A1 and C1), education one time (cf. M1) and social recognition one time (cf. M1). For example, respondent A1 says that for him success in what you do is considered an important status symbol: "Erfolg in dem was man tut, ob es Studium ist, im Job, beim Sport, überall." In a similar direction, one respondent (cf. A1) says that it is important for him to be fully ambitious in sports and at university: "Beim Sport ist es mir wichtig, dass ich gut bin und meinen vollen Ehrgeiz einbringe, in der Uni auch." Here the idea of success can also be identified.

Other mentions for personal status symbols are leisure time (cf. M1 and M2). Especially in times when many people suffer from burn-out and the boundaries between work and free time can become blurred due to the home office, conscious free time is seen as a status symbol. This is also confirmed by respondent M1, who says that there are many people, who have to work a lot: "...viele Menschen gibt, die sehr viel arbeiten müssen." Furthermore, friends and family are mentioned as a status symbol (cf. A1), teeth (cf. M2) and also bicycle (cf. M2). Two respondents say of themselves that they do not see anything as a status symbol (cf. C1 and C2).

At first glance, a difference can be identified. Many respondents list material objects as classic status symbols, such as cars, real estate, clothing and jewelry, as well as technical devices. In contrast, these items are not among their personal status symbols. These include intangible items, such as success, education and leisure. This possible difference and a possible generational theme are also addressed by some respondents. Referring to the car, respondent A1 says that the car was an important status symbol 20 or 30 years ago, not so today: "Tendenziell war früher das Auto auch echt ein wichtiges Statussymbol und wenn man es vergleicht mit vor 20-30 Jahren, dann ist das nicht mehr so richtig." Respondent C2 also confirms this for the older generation: "Das Auto ist für die ältere Generation auf jeden Fall noch ein Statussymbol." Respondent M1 also recognizes a social change in which the car is losing importance: "Ich glaube, dass ein langsamer gesellschaftlicher Wandel einsetzt, der die Bedeutung des Autos als Statussymbol reduziert." It can therefore be deduced that the car is losing importance as a status symbol.

In the case of personal and, in our case, mainly intangible objects, the aspect of environmental protection or sustainability is not mentioned at all. The next part is about whether sustainability can also be seen as a status symbol. Here, the subjects agree that it is not a status symbol for them personally (cf. A1, A2, C1, C2, M2 and J1). However, they also agree that it can already be a status symbol for some other people. There are even reports of acquaintances who want to distinguish

themselves with sustainable products, A1 reports among a circle of acquaintances that they show each other their sustainable products: "wie viele tolle Produkte sie haben, die nachhaltig sind." Furthermore, interview participants agree that the aspect of sustainability and environmental protection could continue to gain importance as a status symbol in the future. Respondent A2 says that sustainability could become a status symbol, especially among the younger ones who prefer second-hand, etc: "in kommenden Generationen zum Statussymbol."

Last but not least, another conspicuous feature should be noted here: There could be an attitude-behaviour gap. As shown in the previous explanations, the respondents are aware of sustainable activities, but do not implement them at all due to the barriers described, for example financial hurdles. It may also play a role here that they do not want to break out of their habits due to laziness, convenience, etc. The interview participants also agree that they could be more environmentally aware (cf. C1, C2, A1).

### 4. Discussion

In the following, the results of the qualitative analysis, practical implications as well as limitations of the study and prospects for future research will be discussed.

The results show that for the tribe of sustainable students, there is a wide variety of drivers for sustainable consumption behavior. The main drivers for sustainable consumption in general include environmental awareness, external influences, and functional motives, while the motive for the use of car sharing as the particular sustainable consumption behavior under investigation primarily lies in its functional benefits. Status-related motives were not found to be a motive for sustainable consumption, neither generally nor for the use of car sharing. This result contradicts empirical studies that find that conspicuous motives have a positive effect on sustainable consumption (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010; Dastrup et al., 2012; Sexton & Sexton, 2014). However, it is in line with the finding that environmental protection and sustainability are not seen as personal status symbols among sustainable students. The glamour greens customer segment that sees sustainable behavior as a status symbol and is eager to demonstrate its environmentally friendly behavior (Süptitz, 2021; GfK, 2021) cannot be found in this sample of sustainable students. As demonstrated in this study, sustainable students express status through other intangible items such as education, leisure and success in university or in the job. Compared to the classic status symbols valued by older generations, this indicates a shift away from materialistically expressed status symbols. However, the mentioned intangible status symbols still follow the same mechanism of classic status symbols: They can all be seen as an expression of success. From this point of view, it is questionable whether sustainable consumption could follow this mechanism and thus serve as a status symbol. However, the results indicate that a more narrowly defined tribe of very sustainable and committed people might see sustainable consumption behavior as a status symbol and that its importance as a status symbol is expected to rise in the future. This could indicate that in the future, there might develop other factors through which people gain status.

Car sharing is also found not to be a status symbol for sustainable students. For this sample, the fact that sustainable consumption behavior is not seen as a status symbol, and the corresponding explanations given above, can certainly also help explain this finding. In addition, the declining importance of cars as status symbols among young adolescents may play a role. As demonstrated in empirical studies, and also shown in this study, cars are no longer a status symbol for the majority of young people between 16 and 29 years (Anzenhofer, 2019). This tendency does not seem to be influenced any sustainability-related status benefits gained by car sharing. Even among the people for whom cars are still a status symbol, the car sharing concept might not enhance status. Classical status goods need to be exclusive in order to function as conspicuous consumption goods (Hammad et al., 2019). Car sharing, however, is not exclusive as it is easily accessible, and providers mostly offer average car brands.

Practitioners can conclude from the results that in promoting car sharing among students, they should emphasize the functional benefits of car sharing like flexibility, availability, and affordability.

There is no evidence from this study that there is an advantage in addressing this target group by emphasizing the environmental benefits of car sharing or by using status-related appeals in advertising.

When considering the results, it should be noted that this is a qualitative study with small sample size, which was subject to unavoidable selection bias. Objectivity of the experimental procedure was limited since the researchers questioned their self-selected interview partners. Even though we had the participants' sustainable consumption behavior confirmed by questions at the beginning of the questionnaire, the sample was a relatively heterogenous with regard to the scope of sustainable behavior. This allowed us, in an explorative manner, to identify a tendency for the broader tribe that should be confirmed by quantitative studies. However, to find out more about the potential status effect of sustainable consumption behavior in general and car sharing in particular, as well as about its mechanisms, a more narrowly defined tribe should be examined in future research. Nevertheless, it makes sense to conduct quantitative surveys in the future as well as surveys with more heterogeneous subjects.

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