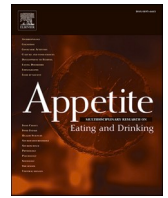




Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.



# Practicing social change during COVID-19: Ethical food consumption and activism pre- and post-outbreak

Michael Carolan

Associate Dean for Research and Faculty Development, College of Liberal Arts, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Practice theory  
Political consumption  
Conscientious consumption  
Coronavirus  
Partisanship  
Attitudes  
Values  
Motivations  
Food system  
Behavior

## ABSTRACT

In addition to upending nearly every segment of the economy, COVID-19 has uprooted social life as we know it and the innumerable discourses and practices therein contained. While a terrible event, it can also be approached as offering a once-in-a-lifetime (hopefully) natural experiment. This is certainly true as far as the global pandemic applies to how and what we eat, given how it has radically altered many everyday food-related practices, whether due to supply chain failures or state-mandates (e.g., shelter-in-place orders). This paper is based on data collected pre- and post-outbreak, triangulating survey and qualitative data, in an attempt to further interrogate the concepts of ethical consumption and activism broadly defined, including the idea of consumer activism. With conceptual assistance from social practice theory, the paper interrogates certain long-standing questions in the literature, such as ethical consumption's link to other forms of political action. It also poses new ones, such as by disentangling the various ways individuals *do* (and do not *do*) ethical consumption. Finally, the data suggest tentative empirical and conceptual paths forward as we contemplate ethical consumption and social activism more generally in the shadow of COVID-19.

## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 has upended the world. The extent of this disruption is only beginning to come into focus, with numerous areas continuing to remain opaque. This paper situates itself at the intersection of some of those less-than-obvious changes, with the hope of adding to our understanding of this devastating epidemic.

One area profoundly impacted by the global pandemic involves aspects of our food system. COVID-related lockdowns, which shuttered businesses and schools across the nation, resulted in, among other things, the euthanizing of livestock (e.g., [Corkery & Yaffe-Bellany, 2020](#)), dumping of milk (e.g., [Schneider, 2020](#)), and rotting of crops after being left unharvested in fields ([Kesling, 2020](#)). At the same time, consumers experienced irregular price hikes, if not outright shortages, of many of those same foods; to say nothing about how dangerous the situation has been for those working these risky environments, from retail workers (e.g., [Kinder, 2020](#)) to meat packing employees ([Ebbs, 2020](#)) and farm laborers ([Bogart, 2020](#)).

The pandemic has also created barriers to political and civic activism, due in part to stay-at-home orders, social distancing protocols, and government-mandated gathering limits. Through it all, however, shopping has been recognized as “essential,” even when one in five

people around the world were under lockdown ([Guardian, 2020](#)) and at least three in four Americans were following similar orders ([Lee, 2020](#)). Not only that, because of mobility restrictions, shopping has never been easier, as online platforms have expanded to increase the ease of purchasing from, and getting deliveries to, one's home (see e.g., [Bogost, 2020](#)).

This paper examines practices at the intersection of the above-mentioned happenings, focusing specifically on what it means to do food-based activism—consumer activism and otherwise—in the shadow of COVID. I am interested in assessing not only how these practices changed because of the pandemic, and why. Of interest, too, involves learning more about how people navigate change-oriented activities, or not, through the lens of this once-in-a-lifetime natural experiment.

A concept given particular attention in this paper is ethical consumption. Ethical consumption, also known as political consumption, conscientious consumption, or green consumption, speaks to a set of discourses and practices animated by “a desire to express or support political and ethical perspectives” ([Huddart Kennedy, Baumann, & Johnston, 2019](#), p. 382; [Shah et al., 2007](#), p. 217). One aspect of the concept that I empirically unpack centers on the “or” in the prior quote. Does it matter what side of that grammatical conjecture a bundle of discourses and practices fall on? Is it conceptually significant whether

E-mail address: [Michael.Carolan@colostate.edu](mailto:Michael.Carolan@colostate.edu).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2021.105206>

Received 17 October 2020; Received in revised form 21 January 2021; Accepted 12 March 2021

Available online 23 March 2021

0195-6663/© 2021 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

discourses and practices *express* ethical perspectives or reflect a *commitment* to consumerism as supporting social change?

In addition, this paper explores links between ethical consumption and social activism. One body of literature asserts that ethical consumption individualizes responsibility and therefore “crowds-out” action that goes beyond the premise of shopping for social change (e.g., Carrier 2008; Szasz, 2007). Other research demonstrates that individuals can practice ethical consumption while also engaging in activist-based social change. For example, Willis and Schor (2012), using two large datasets—the General Social Survey and a survey of approximately 2200 conscious consumers—“find that measures of conscious consumption are significantly and positively related to political action, even when controlling for political involvement in the past” (p. 160). Some scholars have gone as far to argue that ethical consumption “crowds-in” (i.e., encourages) social activism (e.g., Neilson & Paxton, 2010).

Ethical consumption scholarship is at its richest when interrogating questions relating explicitly to social class and gender (e.g., Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Cairns, Johnston, & MacKendrick, 2013; Johnston, Szabo, & Rodney, 2011). Yet questions remain. What else mediates, shapes, and animates ethical consumption? Moreover, as others note (e.g., Schoolman, 2016), there is a methodical tradition of studying, and thus drawing conclusions based on, self-identified ethical consumers. While useful for learning about this specific population, especially in earlier studies before terms like “ethical consumer,” “foodie,” and “consumer activism” were part of the popular lexicon, this practice introduces empirical, and by extension conceptual, blind spots. It also biases participant recruitment toward individuals who self-identify with these terms, missing an opportunity to hear, for example, from those who might have a more ambivalent attitude toward the concept. What does it mean for those who self-identify with the term? And what does it mean for those who do not? These, too, are questions I respond to below.

The paper’s empirics involve longitudinal data collected prior to the outbreak (November 2019 through February 2020) and again a few months later, post-outbreak (June through August 2020). Participants resided in the City of Denver, Colorado (USA), area. The aim of the research originally was to interrogate the relationship between ethical consumption and social activism. Then came COVID. Not long thereafter, I began to wonder if the findings would have looked any different had the research been conducted post-outbreak, which also led me to contemplate whether and to what extent COVID might prove a useful natural experiment to learn more about the social world. This ultimately sent me back “out” to resurvey and re-interview the original participants.

The paper proceeds by, first, reviewing the ethical consumption literature, with particular emphasis upon what we know about its drivers as well as its relationship to other forms of political action. Next, I introduce practice theory; the framework used to help conceptually contextualize and explain relationships observed. Practice theory rejects methodological individualism (e.g., reducing behaviors to antecedent attitudes). It also focuses on the embodied salience of routine while grasping the importance of having conventions disrupted, which COVID-related social distancing and lockdowns did like no other. I then turn to describing the study’s methods. The Findings section begins by reviewing and discussing observed relationships made visible by unpacking the concept of ethical consumption in novel ways. The section concludes with an attempt at explaining those relationships with the help of practice theory. The remainder of the paper discusses the study’s implications for how we think about and encourage “activism” in its various forms, especially in the shadow of the coronavirus.

## 2. Ethical consumption: a review

Marketplace activities (i.e., consumption) have emerged as a familiar form of political participation, through which individuals as consumers are said to exercise ideological beliefs and/or markers of distinction (e.

g., Johnston & Baumann, 2014; Schor, 2014; Shaw, Harrison, and Newholm 2005). The ethical consumer literature, one expression of so-called sustainable citizenship (e.g., Micheletti & Stolle, 2012), speaks at length to how these market-based forms of political participation act as expressions of distinction; a research tradition that builds off of earlier studies looking at, for instance, the historical rise of omnivorousness as an expression of status and class (e.g., Peterson, 2005; Peterson & Kern, 1996).

The empirical and conceptual picture to emerge from this scholarship is complicated, especially considering that low- and high-income households are known to participate in some of the same consumption practices (Carolan, 2020). As Guthman (2003, p. 45, my emphasis) wrote some twenty years ago, we need to “problematize the facile dichotomies between fast and slow, reflexive and compulsive, fat and thin, and, hence, good and bad eaters, to show where there is slippage and instability in these categories,” noting especially how these categories intersect with class and gender. For example, lower-income households, even those living below the poverty line (Cloke, May, & Williams, 2017), practice a variety of forms of ethical consumption, particularly now that organic, local, and humanely raised labels penetrate traditional supply chains at various price points (Beagan, Chapman, & Power, 2016). Evidence of this can be seen through, for instance, farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture platforms becoming more accessible (Wang, Qiu, & Swallow, 2014) and through such spaces as community gardens, seed libraries, and food cooperatives (Neo & Chua, 2017). Further complicating matters are observations that higher-income earners are increasingly engaging in so-called lower-status food culture, as evidenced by, for instance, the popularization of out-of-the-way “dives,” the rise of comfort foods (e.g., mac-*n*-cheese) at pricey restaurants, and the foodie fascination with certain state fair cuisine (e.g. deep-fried butter/Oreos/Pickle Dawgs) (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012), though, again, this tracks with long-standing trends showing omnivorousness to be positively correlated with household income (e.g., Peterson, 2005).

In an attempt to unpack such observations while also making a statement about the significance of class, I find especially powerful a study by Huddart Kennedy and colleagues (2018). Drawing from 828 completed surveys of food shoppers in Toronto, Canada, the study uses cluster analysis to arrive at four meaningful clusters. The paper describes these groupings as follows: “Those who held neither a foodie nor an ethical orientation (Cluster 1), foodies (Cluster 2), ethical consumers (Cluster 3), and those oriented towards both – ethical foodies (Cluster 4)” (p. 13). The authors report finding “strong and compelling evidence” (Huddart Kennedy 2018: 13) that Cluster 4—ethical foodies—possesses the highest socioeconomic status as defined by income, occupation, and educational attainment. Furthermore, ethical foodies were said to be most likely to purchase food from boutiques, specialized stores, or directly from smaller scale growers, while least likely to shop at large discount stores and eat at fast-food establishments. Note, too, that ethical consumption is not just expressed through what individuals buy (*buycotts*) but also through boycotts—what they expressly avoid purchasing in the spirit of being political actors. Research indicates, in fact, that boycotting and boycotting typically occur together among ethical consumers (Niva & Jallinoja, 2018).

There also appears to be a gendered component to ethical consumption, in part because women do most family shopping but also because of gendered household roles, especially when it comes to the role of caregiving (e.g., Atkinson, 2014; Hawkins, 2012). The “good mother” literature, for instance, speaks to the “intersecting ideals of motherhood and ethical food discourse, whereby ‘good’ mothers are those who preserve their children’s purity and protect the environment through conscientious food purchases” (Cairns et al., 2013, p. 97). This outlook places an asymmetrical burden on women in heterosexual households by making it their responsibility to procure “good food” for the household while also reinforcing neoliberal worldviews by emphasizing mothers’ individual responsibility for securing their child’s

wellbeing.

A largely separate set of literature looks at the question of whether ethical consumption holds potential for change, while also asking how consumer activism connects up with non-consumptive forms of political action. Willis and Schor (2012) provide an important intervention to how we think about these issues. First, they make the distinction between the “naïve aggregationist model” and the “sophisticated aggregationist model.” An example of the former would be the plant-a-tree-and-save-the-world discourse, which is familiar to many. It is naïve because it “fails to take into account concentrations of power, structural factors, or other obstacles, instead seeing consumer action like a tsunami that can roll over whatever is in its path” (Willis & Schor, 2012, p. 165). Alternatively, Willis and Schor note the influence of large, mostly unorganized on-line communities, coupled with research pointing to the power of decentralized networks. These phenomena have resulted in models of social change that “are hardly naïve in the way we have characterized the simple aggregationist approach” but are instead “extremely sophisticated and suggest ways in which individual actions, including market action, may lead to systemwide outcomes” (Willis & Schor, 2012, p. 165).

They then investigate the larger question of whether either of the aggregationist approaches crowd-out civic and collective action, as some have argued (e.g., Carrier 2008; Szasz, 2007). The “crowding-out” argument hinges on a belief that such individualistic, and individualizing, actions distract from collective activities that would have broader impacts—e.g., buying bottled water for one’s household makes one less likely to engage politically in activities directed at improving water quality and availability for everyone (Szasz, 2007, pp. 105-33). In contrast, others contend that ethical consumption can deepen awareness while providing alternative avenues for social activism (e.g., Schor, 2020). As noted earlier, Willis and Schor’s (2012) research supports the latter position, finding ethical consumption to be “significantly and positively related to political action” (p. 160). In other words, they find that opportunities to buy so-called ethical products offer people who are already politically engaged another venue to practice and/or express their politics.

Yet the question remains: to what degree do people who practice ethical consumption view those actions as a signal (e.g., “I believe in X therefore I buy Y!”) and to what degree are those actions animated by the belief that they are changing something (e.g., “I buy Y to make Z happen!”)? And secondly: what, if anything, is gained by such a line of inquiry?

### 3. Social practice theory

Practice theory holds an important place in the ethical consumption literature. Practice theory (also known as social practice theory [Reckwitz, 2002]) can be viewed as a response to numerous debates in social and behavioral theory. On one hand, it offers a needed intervention into how we tend to view the relationship between attitudes and behaviors, which generally sees the former preceding and animating the latter. On the other hand, practice theory offers an embodied, spatial response to the agency-structure debate.

There is a long tradition in social thought of viewing behavior as the outcome of a linear process by largely rational actors (e.g., Burgess, Harrison, & Filius, 1998; Hunter, 1927; Owens, 2000). One widely used model that draws a solid line from attitudes to behaviors is the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Following this model, behavior is the product of an interaction between one’s attitudes toward a behavior, beliefs about what others think about the behavior, and the amount of control thought to be had over the behavior. This model has gained popularity while scholarship continues to highlight that individuals are social creatures and therefore cannot be treated as existing in an asocial vacuum, as evidenced by, for instance, the aforementioned sociological scholarship into ethical consumption. In response to this research, the theory of planned behavior has sought to adapt by opening itself up to

additional variables, such as previous behaviors, self-identity, affective beliefs, and belief strength (e.g., Han & Stoel, 2017), though it continues to prioritize “the” individual.

Practice theory offers a counter to the individualistic and rationalist assumptions underlying traditional approaches to behavior. Specifically, the approach decenters the individual as an analytic unit, with their discrete attitudes and values, and focuses, instead, on the social, symbolic, embodied, and spatial elements that help afford the behaviors (i.e., practices) in questions. Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012) ask us to think about practices as comprised of three elements: materials (technologies, infrastructures etc.), meanings (symbolic understandings, aspirations etc.), and competences (skills, know-how, etc.). This situates practices as complex entities that shift as practitioners develop new skills; as new materials, tools, and technologies enter the picture; as contested meanings circulate through social networks; and/or as related practices evolve and change (Nash et al., 2017). To talk about “behavioral change” in the context of practice theory, then, requires that we think beyond individualized responses, such as through education, persuasion, or incentivizing/nudging. As Warde (2005, p. 140) explains, “the principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed behavior lie in the development of practices themselves.”

Practice theory has also been used to interrogate ethical consumption (e.g., Fonte, 2013; Huddart Kennedy, Cohen, & Krogman, 2015). Practice theory reminds us that consumption, whether “ethical” or not, generally “happens not through conscious decision making, but rather through routines that are tacit and unthinking” (Schoolman, 2016, p. 620). To therefore understand those practices requires an understanding of not only what people think. Also necessary is an investigation into the routines, social networks, expectations, and materialities that allow those thoughts to be thinkable and the resultant practices do-able.

### 4. Methods

The data for this paper were collected over two phases: November 2019 through February 2020 (pre-outbreak) and, again, involving the same individuals, June through August of 2020 (post-outbreak). Participants resided in the City of Denver, Colorado (USA), area. The aim of the research from the beginning was to study the relationship between ethical food consumption and social activism, while also interrogating how these concepts were understood and practiced. Not long after completing the first phase of data collection, COVID-related shutdowns began. With the world going through an unprecedented event, the decision was made to resume the project, leading to me reconnect with the original respondents. I was interested in how COVID might have changed discourses and practices earlier observed. But also, I saw in the pandemic an event that might prove be good to think with, particularly as it came to understanding phenomena related to food consumption and activism, broadly defined.

In November 2019, 500 postcards were distributed to adults living in Denver using a stratified sampling technique in order to obtain a sample population that reflected the City as a whole. The postcards directed individuals to a website and informed them that a \$5 gift card could be obtained in exchange for roughly 20 min of their time. The website described my research project and present individuals with a link to an online survey. After two weeks, a follow up postcard was sent to those who had yet to respond to the invitation. In total, 221 individuals completed the survey—a 44 percent response rate.

At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to share their email address if interested in participating further in the study, noting also that “they would be compensated further for their time if selected for this next phase of research.” I then began contacting individuals who shared this information, explaining the length and purpose of the face-to-face interviews that were to follow. Fifty-eight face-to-face interviews were conducted from January through February 2020. Each participant was provided a \$25 gift card for their time. Interviews, which lasted approximately 1 h, were recorded and then transcribed.

Shortly after concluding interviews COVID brought the US economy, as well as its schools and social gatherings, to a near-standstill. Animated by a desire to learn from the pandemic, another set of postcards, with instructions to an online survey, were redistributed in June (2020) to everyone who had completed the online instrument roughly seven months prior. This new survey contained many of the same questions, plus a few new ones related to COVID-19. Another \$5 gift card was offered to incentivize participation. A follow-up mailing came three weeks later to remind those who had not participated of the invitation. Of the original 221 respondents, 202 ended up returning this second survey—a very respectable 91 percent response rate. The demographic characteristics of those population, as well as those for the City of Denver, are depicted in Table 1.

I also re-interviewed those who had been interviewed earlier. In exchange for their time, a \$25 gift card was offered. All interviews occurred virtually, using whatever platform the respondents wanted—e.g., Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc. Interviews lasted, on average, a little over an hour. They were recorded and later transcribed. Fifty-seven of the original fifty-eight participants agreed to a second interview. Any names given to respondents in the section below are pseudonyms to protect their identities. Table 2 provides a description of this population.

### 5. Findings

The study’s findings are presented in two parts. The section begins with a description of relationships noted in the survey data, which I return to later when social practice theory is brought more explicitly into the argument. This is followed by engaging with the qualitative data. As data do not speak for themselves, I use respondents’ own words to help make sense of relationships noted through the surveys. The

**Table 1**  
Demographic characteristics of surveyed population (n = 202) and City of Denver, Time 2.

	Sample population	Denver
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White	66%	70%
Latinx/Hispanic	20%	18%
Black/African American	7%	5%
Asian Pacific Islander	2%	3%
Native American	0%	1%
Other	5%	3%
<b>Household income</b>		
Median	\$60,000 to \$79,999	\$68,400
Less than \$20,000	3%	NA
\$20,000 to \$39,999	15%	NA
\$40,000 to \$59,999	22%	NA
\$60,000 to \$79,999	14%	NA
\$80,000 to \$99,999	21%	NA
\$100,000 to \$119,999	13%	NA
\$120,000 to \$139,999	8%	NA
\$140,000 or more	4%	NA
<b>Age</b>		
Median	41–50	35
21 to 30	12%	NA
31 to 40	22%	NA
41 to 50	29%	NA
51 to 60	19%	NA
61 to 70	14%	NA
71 to 80	4%	NA
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	49%	50%
Female	50%	50%
Other	1%	NA
<b>Political affiliation</b>		
Democrat	45%	50%
Republican	24%	15%
Unaffiliated	30%	34%
Libertarian	>1%	1%
Other	>1%	>1%

**Table 2**  
Demographic characteristics of interview population (n = 57), Time 2.

	Interview population
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
White	56%
Latinx/Hispanic	25%
Black/African American	11%
Asian Pacific Islander	3%
Native American	0%
Other	5%
<b>Household income</b>	
Less than \$20,000	2%
\$20,000 to \$39,999	15%
\$40,000 to \$59,999	22%
\$60,000 to \$79,999	14%
\$80,000 to \$99,999	21%
\$100,000 to \$119,999	13%
\$120,000 to \$139,999	8%
\$140,000 or more	4%
<b>Age</b>	
Median	41–50
21 to 30	12%
31 to 40	22%
41 to 50	29%
51 to 60	19%
61 to 70	14%
71 to 80	4%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	49%
Female	50%
Other	1%
<b>Political affiliation</b>	
Democrat	45%
Republican	24%
Unaffiliated	30%
Libertarian	>1%
Other	>1%

qualitative data also proved useful in connecting with social practice theory, clarifying both (theory and data) in the process.

#### 5.1. A descriptive look at meanings and practices: survey insights

Table 3 presents select data generated by the survey at both T<sup>1</sup> (Time 1) and T<sup>2</sup> (Time 2). While painting a picture with broad strokes, which is the nature of descriptive data, we can begin to see in the table relationships that beg for further qualitative scrutiny.

The longitudinal element—pre- and post-outbreak—adds an especially important dimension to the data. The survey did not ask specifically about commitments to certain forms of ethical consumption, realizing the polysemous nature of the term. Rather, participants were asked about specific practices and beliefs. We can infer from Table 3 that some beliefs and practices lacked “stickiness,” which is to say, the perceived importance and purchasing frequency of certain products waned between T<sup>1</sup> and T<sup>2</sup>.

In almost every case, whether involving organic, Fair Trade, or particular expressions of buying locally, the pandemic reduced the importance ascribed to, and the purchases of, these items. This is picked up again further “down” in the table, with the questions about whether survey respondents “make food choices based on” concerns for the environment, workers, or animal welfare. On the whole, pre-outbreak responses expressed higher commitments to ethical consumption than those given post-outbreak. At the same time, commitments toward, and purchases directed at procuring, local food direct from farmers and other merchants (e.g., ranchers, dairies, bakers) increased in the wake of COVID. (To clarify one item from the table: an example of “buying local, retail” might be purchasing “local” food from Walmart or Wholefoods.) The survey also asked about sentiments and practices that, while not typifying ethical consumption, nevertheless exemplify highly individualized forms of political action, namely gardening and cooking. The data



**Table 3**  
Select descriptive statistics, T<sup>1</sup> and T<sup>2</sup> (n = 202).

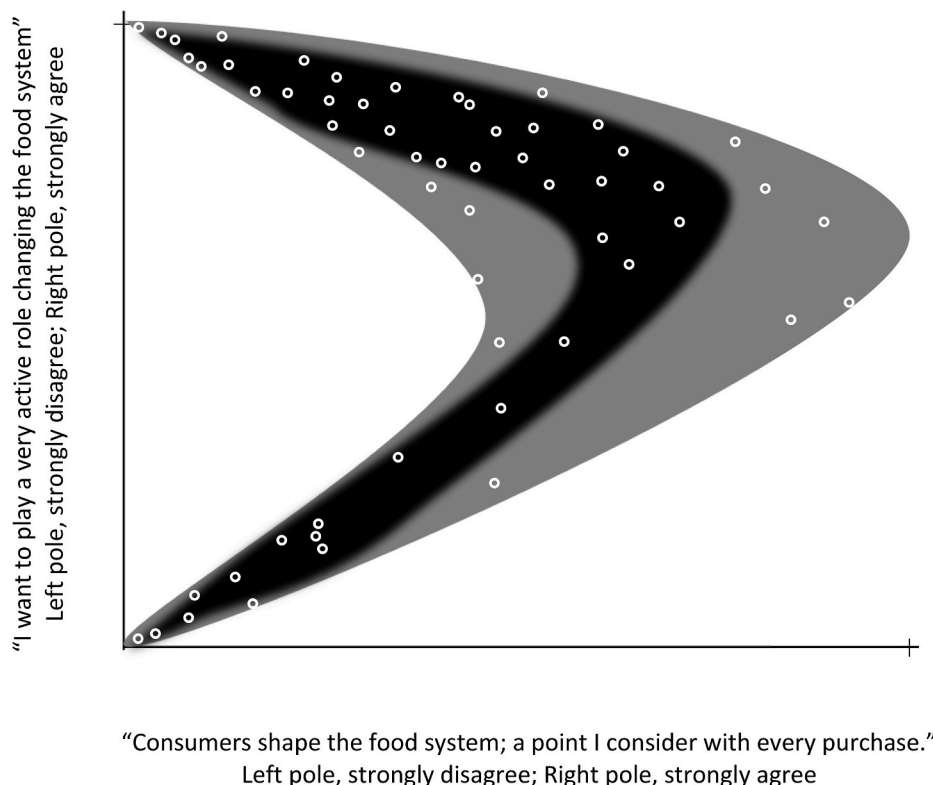
Variable	Coding	T <sup>1</sup> (mean/ std. dev)	T <sup>2</sup> (mean/ std. dev)
Importance of purchasing organic	1 (not) to 4 (very)	2.65/1.12	2.08/0.91
Importance of buying local, retail	1 (not) to 4 (very)	2.72/1.25	1.98/1.04
Importance of buying local, direct	1 (not) to 4 (very)	1.98/0.97	2.45/1.08
Importance of buying Fair Trade	1 (not) to 4 (very)	1.45/1.12	1.25/1.05
Purchases of organic compared to last yr.	1 (less), 2 (same), 3 (more)	2.21/0.55	1.54/0.66
Purchases of local food/last yr., retail	1 (less), 2 (same), 3 (more)	2.20/0.61	1.23/0.45
Purchases of local food/last yr., direct	1 (less), 2 (same), 3 (more)	2.08/0.71	2.65/0.40
Purchases of Fair Trade/last yr.	1 (less), 2 (same), 3 (more)	1.96/0.56	1.32/0.32
I want to be a better cook	1 (strong disagree) to 4 (strong agree)	2.28/1.33	3.13/1.01
Taken steps prior yr. to become better cook	1 (no) or 2 (yes)	1.17/0.18	1.64/0.24
I garden/have plans to start	1 (no) or 2 (yes)	1.56/0.41	1.72/0.38
Make food choices based on concern for environ.	1 (strong disagree) to 4 (strong agree)	2.98/1.33	2.23/1.21
Make food choices based on concern for workers	1 (strong disagree) to 4 (strong agree)	2.22/1.44	2.08/1.35
Make food choices based on animal welfare	1 (strong disagree) to 4 (strong agree)	1.90/1.56	1.80/1.54
Purchased food from Amazon in last month	1 (no) or 2 (yes)	1.09/0.10	1.88/0.11
Used grocery delivery service in last month	1 (no) or 2 (yes)	1.00/0.00	1.90/0.09
Could eat comfortably with food at home for ...	1 (one/two days) to 4 (month-plus)	1.90/1.21	2.98/1.35

suggest that COVID was positively correlated with people (1) wanting to be better cooks, (2) taking steps in recent past to become better cooks, and (3) engaging in gardening.

One benefit of respondents completing an online survey is it allowed for the incorporation of novel response techniques, which represent a refinement of numerical Likert-type scales. In this vein, participants were shown a continuum and asked to identify “the strength of their agreement/disagreement by locating a point on the line, where the left pole signifies ‘strongly disagree’ while the right signifies ‘strongly agree.’” Two such questions were: “I want to play a very active role changing the food system” and “Consumers shape the food system; a point I consider with every purchase.” The survey software then converted these two-dimensional data to numerical values; a process that was done for responses to both questions. Data were then aggregated and a heatmap generated, with one question’s responses plotted along the X-axis and the other question’s responses along the Y-axis. A heatmap is a graphical representation of data that visually illustrates response frequency. While scatter plots display a marker at the intersection of the values of an X variable and a Y variable, heatmaps divide the graph into rectangular (or hexagonal) bins and utilize colors or variations in shade to show the frequency of observations that fall in each (Kuhfled, 2017, p. 3). Fig. 1 is the product of this technique.

The total shaded figure accounts for 95 percent of XY values at T<sup>2</sup>—192 of 202 total values, in other words. The darker shade, meanwhile, accounts for approximately 70 percent of all XY values. Also highlighted in the figure are the XY values at T<sup>2</sup> attributed to the 57 individuals who were interviewed pre- and post-outbreak. I make note of these XY locations to convey the representativeness of the interview sample—“representativeness,” in this case, as evidenced by their distribution throughout the heatmap while also noting the greater concentration of interview subjects in the darker area.

I will be brief with my discussion of the data depicted on Fig. 1 in this subsection. There is a lot to unpack in the image. Yet without the qualitative data to aid in that unpacking, and without theory, discussions about what can be gleaned from the figure are only tentative and



**Fig. 1.** Heatmap depicting relationship between all survey responses (T<sup>2</sup>), with interviewees’ responses pinpointed.

descriptive. In fact, in many ways the figure raises more questions than it answers.

Drawing attention to the sideways-U relationship between the two axes: I find it especially curious that respondents' who "strongly disagreed" with the question, "Consumers shape the food system; a point I consider with every purchase" either registered "strongly disagreed" or "strongly agreed" with the Y-axis statement. Alternatively, moderate sentiments reported in one axis are correlated with moderate sentiments in the other axis. To make sense of what we are seeing in the figure, I now pivot to the qualitative data.

5.2. Unpacking ethical consumption: qualitative data

Let us return to those relationships depicted in Fig. 1, looking first at that aforementioned "curious" XY association. To begin, it is important to disentangle the very different sentiments lying behind responses plotted along the X-axis. Some respondents felt strongly about the efficacy of consumer activism: e.g., "I strongly agree, in that consumers have a huge say in deciding the shape of the food system" (Respondent #21). Others felt just as strongly that the concept of consumer sovereignty was a myth: e.g., "Consumer sovereignty is a lie; those two terms make no sense together" (Respondent #42). Whereas for others, to "strongly disagree" with the statement meant lacking reflexivity on the subject—e.g., "I said 'strongly disagree' but I'll be honest and say I don't think about it; about whether my actions as a consumer have an impact on anything beyond what I'm doing for my family" (Respondent #37).

Those located in the lower left-hand corner of the figure, in other words, described giving little thought to their consumption purchases, at least from the standpoint of whether their shopping habits impact anyone—or anything—further up the supply chain. Some representative quotes from this group include the following.

"I buy what my family needs. I think about price, what will get eaten, and whether I have room for it in the pantry at home. I don't base my

[purchasing] decisions on how I want the food system to look. No, I definitely don't." (Respondent #22)

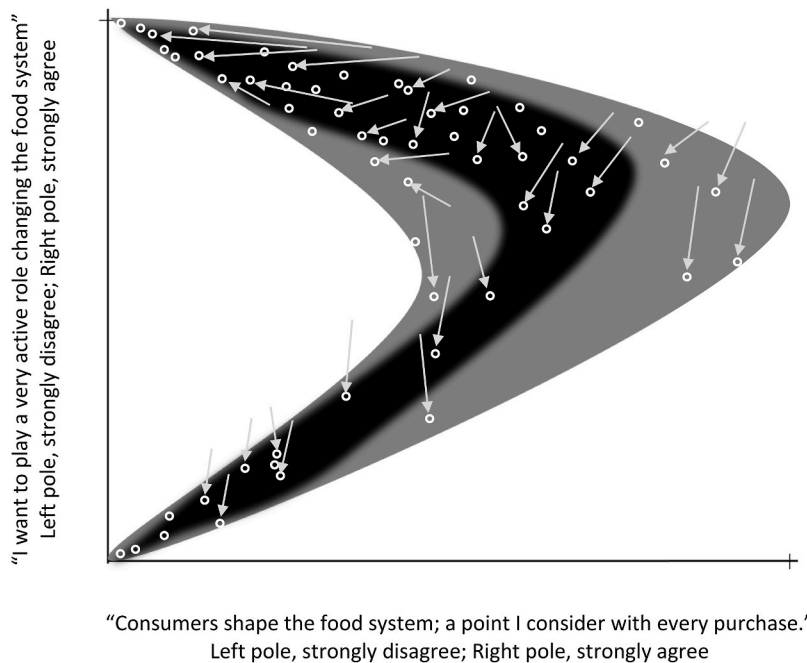
"I don't really think about how my purchases impact anything. [...]. I'm not sure they do or don't. But regardless, that isn't something that comes to the front of my mind when grocery shopping." (Respondent #11)

Meanwhile, respondents located in the top left-hand corner proved to be highly reflexive, not just in terms of their thinking about (individualized) consumption but also through their commitment to collective action more generally. Those in this group generally rejected the concept of "consumer activism," regularly identifying it as something akin to a misnomer, and though they practiced ethical consumption, as I later describe, it was not for reasons linked to engendering social change. Instead, they preferred, as far as doing activism was concerned, activities that leveraged networks and practices associated with working together.

"There's only so much you can do as a consumer and that isn't much. That's why I direct my actions elsewhere, when it comes to pushing for change. [...] There's no substitute for collective action." (Respondent #2)

"I don't put any stock in the idea that consumers vote with their pocketbook. That's BS. [...] The system privileges corporations and their shareholders. To break through all those interests, we gotta work together." (Respondent #13)

Fig. 2 adds a third variable: time. The arrows are meant as vectors, which denote XY value change from T<sup>1</sup> to T<sup>2</sup> among select interviewees by depicting direction as well as magnitude (i.e., degree of change). For purposes of readability, respondents whose values changed minimally do not have a vector associated with their XY value. "Minimally" in this case was defined by breaking each axis into ten segments, which divided the graph into squares. Each XY value at T<sup>1</sup> was enclosed with a circle



Note: Changes in deviation of less than "-----", which in the original format equaled 0.5 inches, were excluded from this exercise to improve the readability of the final image.

Fig. 2. Heatmap depicting relationship between all survey responses (T<sup>2</sup>), with interviewees' changes in XY values between T<sup>1</sup> and T<sup>2</sup> noted, showing both direction and degree.

whose radius equaled the length of one of those “segments.” If the XY value at  $T^2$  remained with that circle, an arrow was not assigned to the individual.

In the absence of qualitative data, it might be easy to attribute the changes depicted as normal variation in how individuals answer such questions over time, where they are asked to identify a spot on a continuum. The interviews, however, suggest otherwise.

Note, first, the patterned variation in the directionality of change. The figure’s upper left quadrant has a concentration of movement to the “left.” Alternatively, for the remainder of the figure, where change is recorded, the arrows generally point “down.” Let us spend some time unpacking what this means.

One group were those who had expressed at  $T^1$  a strong desire to be an agent of change while believing also in consumer-based social change. I am referencing specifically those noted in the previous paragraph as having moved “left.” The following is a representative quote from an individual in this group, taken from their  $T^1$  interview (the quote is “representative” in the sense of the ambivalence expressed toward the concept of consumer activism):

“I have mixed feels about what I can do as a consumer. On the one hand, I know the concept of consumer activism is an oxymoron—when you shop you’re sort of feeding the very system you claim to be resisting. But what if that store was a local mom and pop establishment? What if I choose to buy directly from farmer? Isn’t that different?” (Respondent #47)

When interviewed post-outbreak, however, these individuals were most likely to sour on the concept of consumer-based social change. Among other things, the pandemic highlighted the structural permanence of food systems, especially those elements attached to global and national supply chains. This led respondents to rethink their commitments to ideas based on consumer activism. To quote the same individual, this time post-outbreak:

“One lesson learned from COVID is how screwed certain [food system] actors are. I used to support local farmers and business owners by buying from them. But my wife lost her job and with that we lost a good chunk of our household income. So: I can’t anymore.” (Respondent #47)

On the subject of consumer activism, he added:

“I really question whether ‘the consumer’—making air quotes—“has any ability to create change. That CARES Act [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act] isn’t going to small farmers or local entrepreneurs.<sup>1</sup> And with restaurants closed and travel restricted, I feel like people are only become more dependent on conventional supply chains. [...] The system’s broken. Putting more money into something that’s busted isn’t going to help those who aren’t getting a fair shake.” (Respondent #47)

Let us look more closely at those “downward” pointing vectors and the lived experiences therein contained. As opposed to losing faith in the idea of consumer activism, these arrows signify a loss of commitment toward being agents of change. One mother with two toddler children talked about how COVID “made her realize what her priorities were” (Respondent #29). When asked to elaborate, she added the following:

“I was definitely more interested in wanting to make a difference before the pandemic—buying the right foods, donating to causes, occasionally volunteering. With COVID, I’m realizing those commitments were not as much a priority as I had thought. [...] I don’t find myself as interested in wanting to make a difference with my money and time. The craziness with COVID definitely had something to do with that.”

The “good mother” literature, mentioned earlier, highlights some of the gendered element associated with ethical consumption. This

scholarship emphasizes the pressures and discourses directed at mothers to embody certain (consumerist) ideals about what they—as good mothers—ought to buy (e.g., Cairns et al., 2013). Comments such as the above are illustrative of whether good mothering discourses and practices animate expressions and/or support of political and ethical perspectives. While perhaps helping to drive the procurement and consumption of certain so-called ethical food, the evidence is less strong that these gendered norms are fostering beliefs that consumerist practices will make any meaningful difference to supply chains, to say nothing about their ability to shape broader ethical foodscapes (Goodman, Maye, & Holloway, 2010).

This ambivalence to activism, of being willing to do it as long as it did not impede one’s ability to accomplish other individual-/family-centric goals, was not only expressed by those wanting to be “good mothers.” The following quote comes from a single male in his mid-60s who represents one of those “downward” arrows in Fig. 2. He put matters this way when asked about how the pandemic impacted his views on changing the food system and his waning desire to be active in that process.

“Before [COVID], it felt like I could be part of the solution without really trying, if that makes sense. I could more or less go about my day as usual. I bought foods that supported causes I believed in, supported my usual local haunts, stuff like that. [...] Now, [with COVID] it’s so much more work to do any of that; to do what used to be very easy. [...] I’ve got to focus on taking care of me and my own right now. This is a time where everyone needs to fend for themselves.” (Respondent #9)

Respondents were also asked during  $T^2$  qualitative interviews, “List all examples of activism, social protests, civil disobedience, and/or political resistance since the outbreak.” The question proved illustrative on a number of levels, especially when layered with earlier-described data. As detailed in Fig. 3, what it meant to do “activism” depended in part upon who you asked, though groupings are evident.

Note, first, how those located in the lower left corner offered no examples in response to the request. As one individual from this group put it, which speaks to sentiments representative for this grouping, “Activism isn’t something I’d ever associate myself with,” adding, “when it comes to food, I eat what I want, what my family wants, and what’s the best deal, end of story” (Respondent #4). Others cited COVID-19 to explain their inactivity: e.g., “Who has time for anything like that during a pandemic?” (Respondent #14). For purposes of creating analytic and conceptual categories that are good to think with, I propose calling this group “non-reflective” consumers. They neither expressed discourses nor did they engage in practices associated with what is conventionally defined as ethical consumption. Moreover, those in this group were least likely to express a desire to be agents of change.

The next grouping is what I choose to call “individualistic” consumers. When asked to list actual practices of activism, social protests, and the like since the outbreak, this subpopulation cited such things as taking up gardening (or expanding an existing garden), becoming more proficient at home-based food preparation practices (e.g., baking, cooking, canning, freezing), buying directly from local farmers, etc. A number of these individuals, interestingly, also reported refusing to wear face masks in public, which, to provide context to this response, was a well-known retort at the time among those on the political Right when it came to defying mask-wearing mandates (see e.g., Seipel, 2020). In sum, actions listed were individualistic; not activities that generally confronted institutions or unequal distributions of political and financial power. These practices align with acts of consumer activism, which has also been criticized for not engaging at a collective or institutional level (Maniates, 2001).

“More-than-individualistic” respondents cited many of the same individualistic examples noted in the previous paragraph (save, for whatever it is worth, the mask wearing example). Yet, they did that *while*



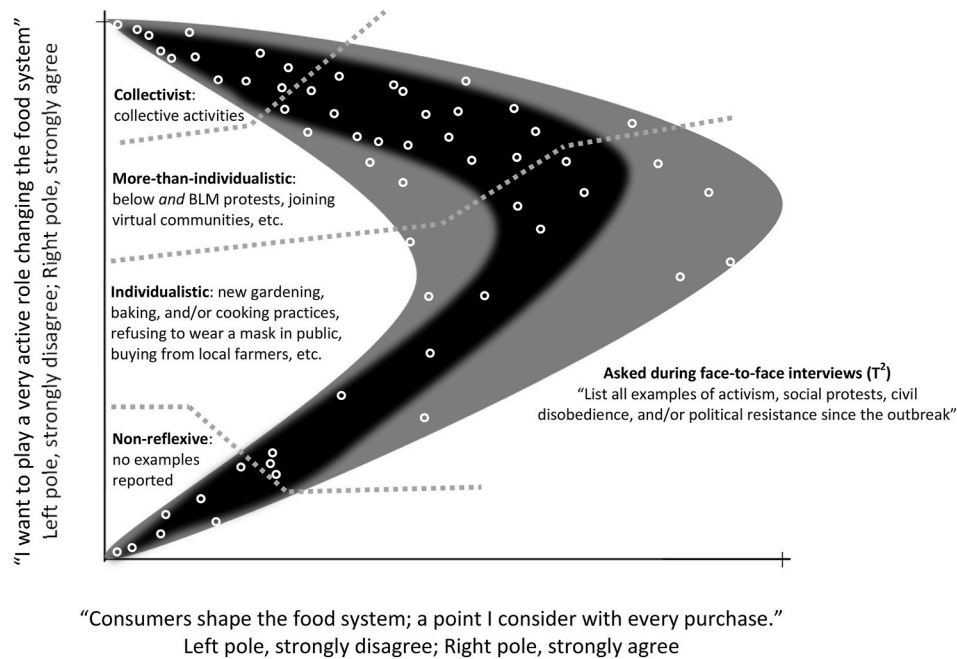


Fig. 3. Heatmap overlaid with stated examples of “activism” since COVID, T.<sup>2</sup>.

also mentioning practices with a collective component. The most frequently cited more-than-individualistic practice among this group involved engaging in Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests—these had spread across the nation during the summer after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on May 25, 2020. The second most cited example involved what I call “joining in virtual communities.” This proved an important way for this group to engage with others during a period where physical gatherings were not only difficult but, in many cases, illegal due to, first, a shelter in place order put in place by the Governor and then, later, by gathering restrictions.

These virtual communities took multiple forms, ranging from, for example, what was billed as a “gardening and food justice virtual hub” (Respondent #40). On this platform, which consisted of a communication and task management tool (namely, the well-known Slack software) and regular Zoom meetings, with occasional “breakout” sessions, participants shared gardening expertise, such as those involving “guerilla gardening” tactics—the practice of gardening on land that gardeners do not have legal rights to (e.g., abandoned urban sites). Participants also used the platform to organize physical protests, such as in one instance where they discussed organizing a BLM demonstration in a Denver suburb. Another virtual community mentioned was a self-organized group devoted to baking and pickling, where they shared recipes and knowledge; occasionally, this group even made food “together.” I was also told about an instance where this group organized its collective buying power to procure flour from an in-state wheat grower. This might not sound like a collective activity but instead an example of consumer activism. The discourses behind the action, however, tell a different story. There were clear concerns about, and understandings of, larger institutional and structural inequalities that plague conventional supply chains.

“Farmers face many of the same structural barriers as consumers. Individual consumers can’t change much with their individual purchases and farmers are just as powerless. [...] But by organizing our collective buyer power we become more than a consumer. When you do that, you change those power dynamics and can begin to do things outside what conventional supply chains allow.” (Respondent #33).

Finally, note the group located in the upper-left corner of the image—the “collectivists.” This group, when asked to identify acts of

protest and activism since the start of the pandemic, responded with only examples that were collective in nature. This group consisted of individuals who were among the most devoted to supporting local entrepreneurs (e.g., bakers, farmers, ranchers) while avoiding foods and firms they felt, as one (Respondent #3) put it, “were associated with evil practices”—Walmart and McDonalds were two mentioned by name more than once. Yet those from this group never associated their ethical consumption with activism. They took just the opposite stance, likening these practices to “window dressing, in the sense they look good and I don’t think they do any harm but I don’t for a minute think they’re going to change anything” (Respondent #50). This explains why they did not cite acts of consumption when asked to list instances of recent activism, even though they still engaged in what generally would be considered ethical consumption.

Part of what “held” these various groups together was their respective communities of practice—their in-groups in addition to their associations with others who practice similar habits and routines (e.g., Hudson, Beckie, Krogman, & Gow, 2019; Wenger, 1998). For an illustrative quote demonstrating the role played by identity coherence and community affiliation for animating what they do and why, take the following from a “collectivist.”

“At one level it’s about walking the walk. You can’t say one thing and do something else, even though I know that if I never eat at McDonald’s again, and I won’t, it’s not going to do anything to the company’s bottom line. [...] If I were honest about why I shop the way I do, after admitting to its limitations [as a vehicle for social change], I’d say I do it because that’s just what’s expected of me, by myself and by my peers.” (Respondent #40)

At one level, it is empirically tricky to document the claim that these groups (“non-reflective”, “individualistic”, “more-than-individualistic”, and “collectivist”) are held together as *communities of practices*. As the sample was random and representative, versus exhaustive, a social network analysis to document these connections is not feasible. Rather, I have to work with a proxy indicator when looking for such “communities.”

Political scientists have written about geographic sorting: the idea that people sort themselves into “like” communities. Granted, much of this literature defines “community” in geospatial terms, in terms of zip

codes and the like (e.g., Martin & Webster, 2018; Nall, 2015; Tam Cho, Gimpel, & Hui, 2013). I prefer thinking about the term sociologically, where “community” is equiviliant to social networks of “like” individuals inhabiting “like” practices. It is in fact a longstanding sociological principle that people tend to be drawn to others like themselves—the “birds of a feather flock together” phenomena, called homophily, meaning love of the same (Kandel, 1978; McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987).

Yet, thanks to the aforementioned political science scholarship, we have compelling evidence that partisanship, at least at the moment, is a powerful indicator of social practices. For instance, those with Left-leaning, politically speaking, tend to prefer living in walkable, diverse neighborhoods, while those on the Right express stronger preferences for communities with less residential density and with institutions (e.g., schools) that celebrate conservative values (e.g., Jones, 2020). Political leanings can therefore be quite suggestive when it comes to estimating certain communities of practice.

With this in mind, the survey measured a proxy indicator of these partisanship-based “communities”—trusted media/social media outlets (Boczkowski, Eugenia and Matassi 2018). The survey question asked was, “List your two most trusted media or social media outlets for news and commentary?” The query is suggestive of one’s communities of practice given how closely media affiliation tracks with ingroup affiliation, or what the literature has taken to calling our respective political tribes (Chua, 2018; Kornacki, 2018). A recent survey by Pew Research of American households, for instance, found that 93 percent “leaning” or “firmly” Republican reported Fox News as their “main political news source.” Alternatively, 79, 87, 91, and 95 percent of “leaning” or “firmly” Democrat households listed CNN, NPR, The New York Times, and MSNBC, respectively, as their “main political news source.” While ABC, NCB, and CBS were slightly favored by the latter group, the level of partisanship associated with viewership was not as stark (Grieco, 2020). Respondents were therefore “scored” according to their answer to the above question. Those listing Fox News or other expressly Right-leaning outlets (including BitChute, Gab, Parler, PragerU, or QubeTV, which are

well-known conservative substitutes for platforms like Twitter and YouTube [Andrews, 2021; Paul, 2020]) received 1 point with each mention. Conversely, each time CNN, NPR, The New York Times, MSNBC and/or self-identified Left-leaning publications (e.g., Huffington Post) were listed, a -1 was added to their score. Everything else—e.g., ABC, NBC, CBS, local news affiliates, Facebook, USA Today, etc.—received 0 points. The range of possible scores therefore ranged from -2 to 2. The outcome of this exercise, after layering it with data from the previous figure, is displayed in Fig. 4.

A couple relationship standout in the figure. First, those who most strongly ascribed to the idea of consumer activism also tended to obtained their information and news from conservative and conservative-leaning sources. While there is no correlation between the types of media/social media outlets trusted and what I am calling “non-reflexive” consumerism, those expressing strong desires of wanting to change food systems in ways other than through shopping (i.e., “collectivists”) were obtaining heavy amounts of their news and information from platforms associated with the Left.

The qualitative data backup the assertion that these news and information consumption practices and patterns tell us something about respondents’ social networks and the spaces and practices they inhabit. As one individual explained, talking specifically about his Fox News listening habits, “If I miss even one day of Hannity I wouldn’t be able to contribute to the conversation when playing cards with my buddies” (Respondent #51). The Sean Hannity Show is one of the most popular radio programs in US—Sean Hannity is also a vigorous Trump supporter. Or to take a quote from at the other end of the political spectrum: “I have to have my Morning Joe every morning”—a reference to the popular early-morning news programs on MSNB. She then added, “I can’t tell you how many times that show has been responsible for making conversation later in the day. Many of my friends watch the show religiously, usually when doing morning exercises or during their downtime before the kids wake-up” (Respondent #39).

While social networks matter, practice theory also reminds us that materialities shape what we do and how we process the world. For

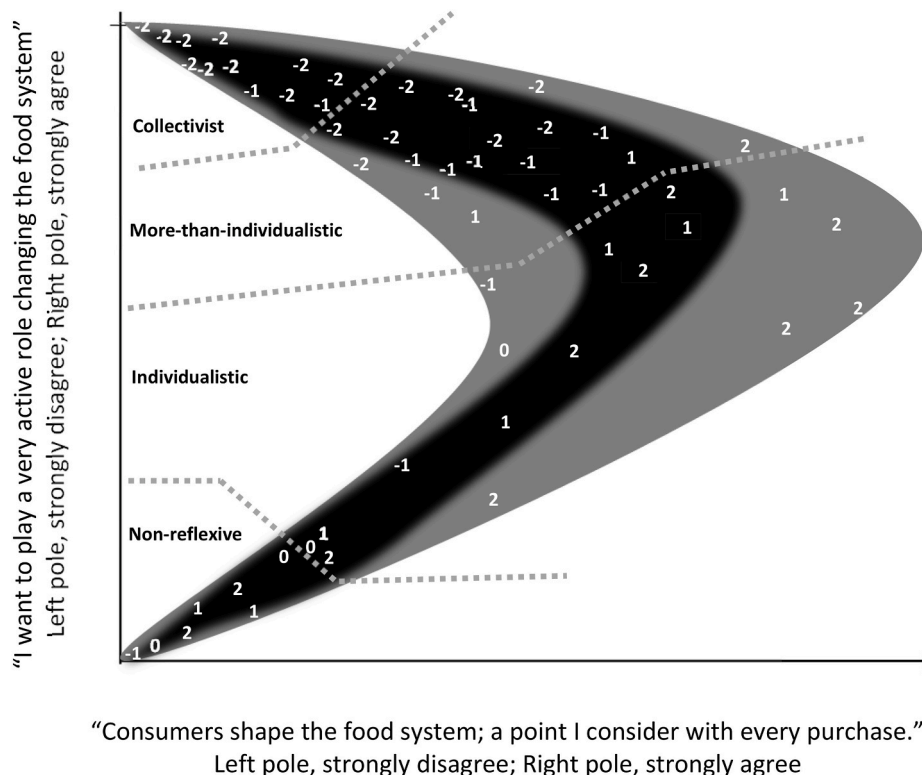


Fig. 4. Most trusted media/social media outlets, T<sup>2</sup>.

illustration, I return to the data in the previous figures, looking specifically at those whose commitments to food system change weakened from T<sup>1</sup> to T<sup>2</sup>. In addition to lacking strong ties (Granovetter, 1983) with those practicing collective-oriented forms of food activism, those in this camp spoke of certain material changes that had encouraged and rewarded particular practice pathways. These materialities are hinted at in the final three variables listed in the earlier-presented Table 3: “Purchased food from Amazon in last month;” “Used grocery delivery service in last month;” and “Could eat comfortably with food at home for ...”

Instacart, a 3rd-party grocery delivery service, experienced three years of projected growth in 21 days in early 2020, from March 10 to March 31st (Wiggers, 2020). To keep up with this unprecedented growth in from-home shopping demand, hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in home food delivery services post-outbreak; investments directed at scaling out infrastructure supporting various customer-facing apps, enterprise software, and coordinating platforms that enhanced interconnectivity between those placing the orders and in-store “assets” (i.e., shoppers) filing them (Chapman, 2020). This raises an important question: to what degree do these online shopping ecosystems impact ethical consumption?

While online shopping practice grew from T<sup>1</sup> to T<sup>2</sup>, as evidenced by the data reported in Table 3, the effects of these material investments were not felt evenly across the sample population. Among those with weaker food system-directed commitments (Y-axis), these investments proved most consequential.

“When I had to go to the store, I placed a visit to the local farmers’ market on equal footing. I could go to one or the other. In either case, I would be getting into my car and going somewhere and spending about an hour doing it. [...] Now that I can shop for literally anything I need from the comfort of my home, it is going make going to my local farmers’ market a lot less attractive.” (Respondent #24).

A few from the individualistic camp also brought up the practice of hoarding, which others note as something becoming more widespread post-outbreak (D’Innocenzio, 2020). The following conveys this sentiment, while pointing to certain materialities that have encouraged/reinforced this practice.

“I’m more interested at the moment in stocking up. You know—in case everything goes to hell. [...] I bought another deep freeze and converted a room in my basement into a fruit seller. With this extra space, I’ve got to fill it, which is priority number one at the moment.” (Respondent #9)

With this example, we see a clear instance, too, of how a consumerist “need”—i.e., demand—is driven by neither attitudes nor values—variables frequently cited as animating marketplace rationalities (Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991). Instead, such “choices” are inhabited heavily by the presence of materialities, which in the above case involves deep freezers and fruit sellers.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

A lot of territory, empirical as well as conceptual, has been covered. In the space that remains, I will briefly emphasize, organize, and summarize key themes that link back to questions posed at the paper’s beginning.

First, the data suggest a need to further disentangle ethical consumption as political *expression* from ethical consumption as political *action*. We know, too, that ethical consumption can occur among those identified previously as non-reflexive consumers—those for whom food procurement is driven heavily by habit and routine as opposed to ethical intentionality (see also Micheletti & Stolle, 2012). Future scholarship must therefore carefully consider the difference between those who self-identify with the term and those who do not, even while purchasing

foods often associated with ethical consumption.

We are reminded, too, by the data that ethical consumption is not only overdetermined but multiple. What ethical consumption is and what it feels like as a lived experience varies wildly. While Johnston and Szabo (2011) called for greater attention to “the lived experience of shopping for change” (p. 3) a decade ago, the focus on ethical consumption continues to overwhelmingly disaggregate “the” practice—again, as if something singular—in the search of antecedent variables, typically in the form of attitudes and/or values (see e.g., Szmigin & Piacentini, 2018). This needed “thick” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3–30) description could be achieved ethnographically. But I also encourage scholars to explore experimental methods, inductive theorizing, and novel data visualization techniques, as I have attempted above while triangulating survey and qualitative data.

As for the crowd-out vs. crowd-in debate: here, too, the picture is complex. Those in the collectivist grouping, for instance, engaged in both ethical consumption and political (collective) activism. They were also, however, quick to reject ethical consumption as a tool of meaningful social change and therefore reluctant to self-identify as an ethical consumer on principle—e.g., “I think of myself more as an ethical *activist* than an ethical consumer” (Respondent #6, intonation replicated with italics). Delving deeper into the data, one comes away with a conclusion that tempers Willis and Schor’s (2012) finding that ethical consumption crowds-in activities related to conventional political spheres.<sup>2</sup> The people *most* committed to practicing ethical consumption, in the sense of believing “consumers shape the food system” (to quote from the X-axis of the figures), appear to be largely *uninterested* in engaging in collective political action. Meanwhile, those most committed to activism (i.e., collectivists) were the least convinced that ethical consumption actually will make, on its own, any difference.

At the paper’s beginning, I also introduced the analytic distinguishing between discourses and practices that *express* ethical perspectives and those that reflect a *commitment* to consumerism as supporting social change. The data thus appear to support the theses that this distinction is good to think with. How we operationalize ethical consumption in this sense matters in terms of what we find. Those located in the top left of the figures (i.e., collectivists) admitted repeatedly to buying what they did because of what it signaled to peers—recall the quote from earlier, “At one level it’s about walking the walk [...] I do it because that’s just what’s expected of me, by myself and by my peers” (Respondent #40). They adamantly rejected, however, a commitment to consumerism as a legitimate pathway to social change. Theoretically, then, simply asking about/observing what people buy tells us little about their motivations and beliefs, whether about ethical consumption or political activism more broadly.

The data are also suggestive from the perspective of questions concerning what *elicits* behavioral change. What would motivate someone to practice (more) ethical consumption and political activism? While the issue still needs to be interrogated further, scholars might find the above groupings (“non-reflective”, “individualistic”, etc.) useful when thinking through the subject. For example, Soper (2008, p. 571; see also Soper, 2020) offers an intriguing argument concerning the merits of what she calls “alternative hedonism”, which references a “moral form of self-pleasuring”. Care must be taken, however, to understand the type of citizen we are motivating by playing upon actors’ inward-directed, hedonistic desires, which brings us back to those aforementioned groupings. Collectivists found pleasure in interacting and collaborating with others. Yet that self-gratification was achieved only because they were also “willing to put in the *hard work* that comes with being politically active” (Respondent #12; my emphasis). In other words, for collectivists any hedonism was circuitous—finding pleasure *because* of a degree of sacrifice and hard work rather than in spite of these altruistic motivations. Respondents most motivated by narratives directed at self-pleasuring arguably would have been the “individualistic” and “non-reflexive” consumers, who I have already identified as demonstrating less sticky ethical commitments in the face of crises (i.e.,

COVID-19), as evidenced by their “downward” vectors at T<sup>2</sup>.

The data are also worth pondering from the perspective of what impact, if any, the COVID-19 pandemic might have on long-term ethical consumption in the US and beyond. While it is impossible to say anything definitive about what the future holds, the data do provide clues that can help guide future research on the topic. Table 3 is an especially rich source for those looking to explore these themes further.

One element worth exploring in greater depth is whether the coronavirus further multiplied what it means to *do* ethical consumption. That is to say, does ethical consumption look and feel different depending on whether it is practiced in-person or virtually, especially in light of the widespread adoption of at-home shopping apps and home delivery platforms? The data also suggest that the pandemic has caused a swatch of eaters to become further disenfranchised with the idea of consumer sovereignty and consumer-based social change (i.e., those “leftward” arrows in Fig. 2), while others, who still hold out hope in retail politics, have lost interest in political activism (i.e., the “downward” arrows). This suggests a growing bifurcation is at play between self-identified ethical consumers and those committed to more-than-retail activism; realizing, too, it will become easier to do ethical consumption thanks to investments directed at making shopping generally more convenient—curb-side pick-up, at-home deliveries, enhancements to all online shopping platforms, etc.

I also see enough in my dataset documenting a growing prevalence in hoarding to be intrigued. These data parallel trends documented by others (e.g., C+C Research, 2020). A reporter for the *Washington Post* interviewed those in freezer sales and they described how COVID-19 sparked a rush in sales. “Now people who are single want freezers, and people in apartments think they need a freezer,” one explained, adding, “households who already have two refrigerators with freezers also want a separate freezer” (Koncius, 2020). The American Frozen Food Institute reported a sales increase of 94 percent in March 2020, compared to 2019 (Koncius, 2020). It is not just frozen foods. US grocery stores saw a surge in sales of dried grains and rice during that same period. Sales of dried beans rose by 63 percent, while sales of rice and chickpeas rose by 58 and 47 percent, respectively (PRNewswire, 2020). Does ethical hoarding (e.g., stocking up of so-called ethical foods) look and feel different from ethical consumption premised on higher-frequency, lower-volume shopping trips?

I have also seen industry data pointing to how “COVID-19 fuels growth in organic food options,” to quote one such article on the topic (Eckles, 2020). The Organic Trade Association (2020), the trade body for the industry in the US, reported a 50 percent increase in organic produce sales in the aftermath of the outbreak. In response to COVID-19, some consumers are focusing on food choices informed by warnings that the virus is especially dangerous to people with underlying health issues, which in many instances are associated with poor diets. I mention this because while the earlier-mentioned survey data (Table 3) indicate an overall decrease in organic food consumption those data need to be read in the context of other qualitative data. For a small subset of respondents, organic food consumption increased dramatically, greater than 100 percent in many of those instances, with one respondent (#52) going from buying “none” to buying “mostly” organic from T<sup>1</sup> to T<sup>2</sup>. The prevailing rationale driving the shift toward organic in those cases—health concerns (i.e., preexisting conditions) related to a member of the household. Whether these new (organic) habits will stick is anybody’s guess, though those from this group did find these food procurement and dietary changes pleasurable—e.g., “I feel better about myself after changing my diet [...] could see eating this way permanently” (Respondent #37).

In conclusion, COVID-19 represents what I hope is a once-in-a-lifetime natural experiment, which has radically altered many everyday food-related practices, whether due to supply chain failures or state-mandates (e.g., shelter-in-place orders). This paper is based on research conducted pre- and post-outbreak, triangulating survey and qualitative data, in an attempt to further interrogate the concept of

ethical consumption. The study explored certain long-standing questions in the literature, such as ethical consumption’s link to other forms of political action. It also posed new questions, such as by disentangling ethical consumption as an expression from those practices animated by commitments to consumer activism. Finally, it tentatively suggests novel research questions for those looking to study ethical consumption in a world uniquely impacted by COVID-19.

## Ethical statement

The procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 1983. This research was supported in part by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2016S1A3A2924243), the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA-COL00725), and the Office for the Vice President for Research, College of Liberal Arts, and Office of Engagement at Colorado State University.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act, was a US\$2.2 trillion economic stimulus bill passed and signed into law in March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank one of the external reviewers for pushing me to reflect on how these data complicate Willis and Schor’s (2012) findings.

## References

- Adams, M., & Raisborough, J. (2010). Making a difference: Ethical consumption and the everyday. *British Journal of Sociology*, 61(2), 256–274.
- Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50, 179–211.
- Andrews, T. (2021). *Gab, the social network that has welcomed Qanon and extremist figures, explained*. *The Washington Post* Jan 11<sup>th</sup>, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/11/gab-social-network/>.
- Atkinson, L. (2014). Green moms: The social construction of a green mothering identity via environmental advertising appeals. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 17(6), 553–572.
- Beagan, B. L., Chapman, G. E., & Power, E. M. (2016). Cultural and symbolic capital with and without economic constraint food shopping in low-income and high-income Canadian families. *Food, Culture and Society*, 19(1), 45–70.
- Boczkowski, P. J., Mitchelstein, E., & Matassi, M. (2018). “News comes across when I’m in a moment of leisure”: Understanding the practices of incidental news consumption on social media. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3523–3539.
- Bogart, N. (2020). Advocates demand Ontario shut down farms as COVID-19 cases soar among workers. *CTVNews* June <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/advocates-demand-ontario-shut-down-farms-as-covid-19-cases-soar-among-workers-1.5004897>, 29.
- Bogost, I. (2020). The supermarket after the pandemic. *The Atlantic* April 17<sup>th</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/04/how-youll-shop-for-groceries-after-the-pandemic/610135/>.
- Burgess, J., Harrison, C., & Filius, P. (1998). Environmental communication and the cultural politics of environmental citizenship. *Environment & Planning A*, 30, 1445–1460.
- C+C Research. (2020). *Changes in grocery shopping habits during COVID-19*. Chicago, IL: C+C Research. <https://www.ccresearch.com/coronavirus-shopping-habits>.
- Cairns, K., Johnston, J., & MacKendrick, N. (2013). Feeding the ‘organic child’: Mothering through ethical consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 13(2), 97–118.
- Carolan, M. (2020). Ethical eating as experienced by consumers and producers: When good food meets good farmers. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540519899967>
- Carrier, J. G., Wood, & Donald, C. (2008). Think locally, act globally: The political economy of ethical consumption. In *Hidden hands in the market: Ethnographies of fair trade, ethical consumption, and corporate social responsibility*. In G. De Neve, Luetchford, P. Peter, & Jeffrey (Eds.), *Research in economic anthropology*, ume 28 pp. 31–51. Bingley, UK: JAI.
- Chapman, L. (2020). Instacart valuation hits \$13.7 billion in pandemic investment. *Bloomberg* June, 11. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-11/instacart-valuation-hits-13-7-billion-in-pandemic-investment>.
- Chua, A. (2018). *Political tribes: Group instinct and the fate of nations*. New York: Penguin.
- Cloke, P., May, J., & Williams, A. (2017). The geographies of food banks in the meantime. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(6), 703–726.



- Corkery, M., & Yaffe-Bellany, D. (2020). Meat plant closures mean pigs are gassed or shot instead. *The New York Times* May 14 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/business/coronavirus-farmers-killing-pigs.html>.
- D'Innocenzo, A. (2020). Fear of coronavirus sends consumers into a grocery-hoarding frenzy. *Fortune* March, 6. <https://fortune.com/2020/03/06/fear-of-coronavirus-sends-consumers-into-a-grocery-hoarding-frenzy/>.
- Ebbs, S. (2020). Unions, advocates say Trump putting meat packing workers at risk. ABC News April 30 <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/unions-advocates-trump-putting-meat-packing-workers-risk/story?id=70404397>.
- Eckles, L. (2020). COVID-19 fuels growth in organic food options. *Modern Restaurant Management* August 31 <https://modernrestaurantmanagement.com/covid-19-fuels-growth-in-organic-food-options/>.
- Fonte, M. (2013). Food consumption as social practice: Solidarity purchasing groups in Rome, Italy. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 32, 230–239.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretative theory of culture. Pp. – in C. In Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 780
- Goodman, M. K., Maye, D., & Holloway, L. (2010). Ethical foodscapes?: Premises, promises, and possibilities. *Environment & Planning A*, 42, 1782–1796.
- Granovetter, M. (1983). The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological Theory*, 201–233.
- Grieco, E. (2020). Americans' main sources for political news vary by party and age. Pew Research April 1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/01/americans-main-sources-for-political-news-vary-by-party-and-age/>.
- Guardian, (2020). *Around 20% of global population under coronavirus lockdown*. The Guardian March 24th <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/nearly-20-of-global-population-under-coronavirus-lockdown>.
- Guthman, J. (2003). Fast food/organic food: Reflexive tastes and the making of yuppie chow. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 4(1), 45–58.
- Han, T. I., & Stoel, L. (2017). Explaining socially responsible consumer behavior: A meta-analytic review of theory of planned behavior. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 29(2), 91–103.
- Hawkins, R. (2012). Shopping to save lives: Gender and environment theories meet ethical consumption. *Geoforum*, 43(4), 750–759.
- Huddart Kennedy, E., Baumann, S., & Johnston, J. (2018). Eating for taste and eating for change. *Social Forces*, 98, 381–402.
- Huddart Kennedy, E., Baumann, S., & Johnston, J. (2019). Eating for taste and eating for change: Ethical consumption as a high-status practice. *Social Forces*, 98(1), 381–402.
- Huddart Kennedy, E., Cohen, M., & Krogman, N. (2015). Social practice theories and research on sustainable consumption. In E. H. Kennedy, M. J. Cohen, & N. Krogman (Eds.), *Putting sustainability into practice* (pp. 1–25). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Hudson, S., Beckie, M., Krogman, N., & Gow, G. (2019). Establishing sustainable food production communities of practice. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 8(4), 137–151.
- Hunter, W. (1927). *General psychology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnston, J., & Baumann, S. (2014). *Foodies: Democracy and distinction in the gourmet foodscape*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnston, J., & Szabo, M. (2011). Reflexivity and the whole foods market consumer: The lived experience of shopping for change. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 28(3), 303–319.
- Johnston, J., Szabo, M., & Rodney, A. (2011). Good food, good people: Understanding the cultural repertoire of ethical eating. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(3), 293–318.
- Jones, B. (2020). Big houses, small houses: Partisans continue to want different things in a community. *Pew Research Center* Feb 18 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/18/big-houses-small-houses-partisans-continue-to-want-different-things-in-a-community/>.
- Kandel, D. B. (1978). Homophily, selection, and socialization in adolescent friendships. *American Journal of Sociology*, 84(2), 427–436.
- Kesling, B. (2020). Coronavirus forces farmers to destroy their crops. *The Wall Street Journal* April 26 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-forces-farmers-to-destroy-their-crops-11587909600>.
- Kinder, M. (2020). *Grocery workers are keeping Americans alive during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Here's what they need *Brookings Institute* Washington DC. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/03/25/grocery-workers-are-keeping-americans-alive-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-heres-what-they-need/>.
- Koncius, J. (2020). Your guide to buying a stand-alone freezer — if you can find one. *The Washington Post* May 13 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/your-guide-to-buying-a-stand-alone-freezer-if-you-can-find-one/2020/05/12/64f7d466-88b2-11ea-ac8a-fe9b8088e101\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/home/your-guide-to-buying-a-stand-alone-freezer-if-you-can-find-one/2020/05/12/64f7d466-88b2-11ea-ac8a-fe9b8088e101_story.html).
- Kornacki, S. (2018). *The red and the blue: The 1990s and the birth of political tribalism*. New York: Ecco.
- Kuhfled, W. F. (2017). *Heat maps: Graphically displaying big data and small tables*. North Carolina: SAS Institute Inc.. White paper SAS1800-2017 <https://support.sas.com/resources/papers/proceedings17/0312-2017.pdf>.
- Lee, A. (2020). *These states have implemented stay-at-home orders. Here's what that means for you*. *CNN.com* April 7th <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/23/us/coronavirus-which-states-stay-at-home-order-trnd/index.html>.
- Maniates, M. F. (2001). Individualization: Plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world? *Global Environmental Politics*, 1(3), 31–52.
- Martin, G. J., & Webster, S. W. (2018). Does residential sorting explain geographic polarization? *Political Science Research and Methods*, 1–17.
- McPherson, J. M., & Smith-Lovin, L. (1987). Homophily in voluntary organizations: Status distance and the composition of face-to-face groups. *American Sociological Review*, 52(3), 370–379.
- Micheletti, M., & Stolle, D. (2012). Sustainable citizenship and the new politics of consumption. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644(1), 88–120.
- Naccarato, P., & LeBesco, K. (2012). *Culinary capital*. New York: Berg.
- Nall, C. (2015). The political consequences of spatial policies: How interstate highways facilitated geographic polarization. *The Journal of Politics*, 77(2), 394–406.
- Nash, N., Whitmarsh, L., Capstick, S., Hargreaves, T., Poortinga, W., Thomas, G., et al. (2017). Climate-relevant behavioral spillover and the potential contribution of social practice theory. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 8(6). <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.481>
- Neilson, L., & Paxton, P. (2010). Social capital and political consumerism: A multilevel analysis. *Social Problems*, 57(1), 5–24.
- Neo, H., & Chua, C. Y. (2017). Beyond inclusion and exclusion: Community gardens as spaces of responsibility. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 107(3), 666–681.
- Niva, M., & Jallinoja, P. (2018). Taking a stand through food choices? Characteristics of political food consumption and consumers in Finland. *Ecological Economics*, 154, 349–360.
- Organic Trade Association. (2020). *COVID-19 will shape organic industry in 2020 after banner year in 2019*. <https://ota.com/news/press-releases/21328>.
- Owens, S. (2000). Engaging the public: Information and deliberation in environmental policy. *Environment And Planning*, 1141–1148. A 32.
- Paul, K. (2020). Parler: The social network that's winning conservative recruits. *The Guardian* Nov, 13. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/nov/13/parler-conservative-social-network-free-speech>.
- Peterson, R. (2005). Problems in comparative research: The example of omnivorousness. *Poetics*, 33(5–6), 257–282.
- Peterson, R., & Kern, R. (1996). Changing highbrow taste: From snob to omnivore. *American Sociological Review*, 900–907.
- PRNewswire. (2020). *Dried grains & rice industry witnesses 386% growth during COVID-19 due to consumers' fears of strained supply chain*. PRNewswire April 28 <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/dried-grains-rice-industry-witnesses-386-growth-during-covid-19-due-to-consumers-fears-of-strained-supply-chain-301048550.html>.
- Reckwitz, A. (2002). Toward a theory of social practices: A development i culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5(2), 243–263.
- Schneider, L. (2020). *Dairy farmers dumping milk amid COVID-19: Pandemic's impact on the dairy industry*. ABC News April 21st <https://abcnews.go.com/US/dairy-farmers-dumping-milk-amid-covid-19-pandemics/story?id=70268302>.
- Schoolman, E. D. (2016). Completing the circuit: Routine, reflection, and ethical consumption. *Sociological Forum*, 31(3), 619–641.
- Schor, J. (2014). *Born to buy: The commercialized child and the new consumer cult*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Schor, J. (2020). *Consumerism and its discontents*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seipel, B. (2020). *Trump draws cheers after defending crowd at club as 'peaceful protest'*. The Hill August 7th <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/511140-trump-draws-cheers-after-defending-supporters-lack-of-masks-at-briefing-as>.
- Shah, D. V., McLeod Douglas, M., Kim, E., Young, L., Sun, Gotlieb Melissa, R., et al. (2007). "Political consumerism: How communication and consumption orientations drive 'lifestyle politics'". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611(1), 217–235.
- Shaw, D., Harrison, R., & Newholm, T. (Eds.). (2005). *The ethical consumer*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sheth, J. N., Newman, B. I., & Gross, B. L. (1991). Why we buy what we buy: A theory of consumption values. *Journal of Business Research*, 22(2), 159–170.
- Shove, E., Pantzar, M., & Watson, M. (2012). *The dynamics of social practice: Everyday life and how it changes*. London: Sage Publications.
- Soper, K. (2008). Alternative hedonism, cultural theory and the role of aesthetic revisioning. *Cultural Studies*, 22(5), 567–587.
- Soper, K. (2020). The trouble with consumption. *Places Journal* November. <https://placesjournal.org/article/alternative-hedonism-and-the-trouble-with-consumption/>.
- Szasz, A. (2007). *Shopping our way to safety: How we changed from protecting the environment to protecting ourselves*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Szmigin, I., & Piacentini, M. (2018). *Consumer behaviour*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tam Cho, W. K., Gimpel, J. G., & Hui, I. S. (2013). Voter migration and the geographic sorting of the American electorate. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103(4), 856–870.
- Wang, H., Qiu, F., & Swallow, B. (2014). Can community gardens and farmers' markets relieve food desert problems? *Applied Geography*, 55, 127–137.
- Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5, 131–153.
- Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems thinker*, 9(5), 2–12.
- Wiggers, K. (2020). *How Instacart remade its systems to handle a 500% jump in order volume*. *Venture Beat* May 21 <https://venturebeat.com/2020/05/21/how-instacart-remade-its-systems-to-handle-a-500-jump-in-order-volume/>.
- Willis, M., & Schor, J. (2012). Does changing a light bulb lead to changing the world? Political action and the conscious consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political*.