

# Firms enabling responsible consumption: a netnographic approach

Firms enabling responsible consumption

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study explores enablers that firms could use to motivate consumers toward responsible consumption behavior. Completing the loop of responsible consumption – linking firms and consumers – helps firms to attain responsible consumption targets as part of the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study uses netnography as the qualitative research methodology.

**Findings** – The important enablers of responsible consumption behavior are choice editing, design intervention, addressing consumers' environmental identity, brand assurance, promoting innovation mindset and consumer empowerment – at the level of consumers and at the crosslevel of interaction between firms and consumers. Such enablers can help the firms in nudging their consumers toward responsible consumption.

**Research limitations/implications** – Using the lens of the expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation, this study extends the theoretical domain of responsible consumption.

**Practical implications** – The enablers of responsible consumption behaviors found here serve as a useful guide for the strategies to attain the SDGs.

**Social implications** – The SDG goal 12 of responsible consumption is the focus of this study. The entire fabric of responsible consumption is woven around anthropocentric views, and hence the findings of this study have clear social implications.

**Originality/value** – This is a first study to explore how firms can facilitate consumers to consume responsibly, to attain the SDGs. This is also one of the first studies on responsible consumption, using netnography as the research methodology. Additionally, it also extends the applicability of the expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation to the context of responsible consumption behavior.

**Keywords** Responsible consumption, Netnography, Sustainable development goals, Co-creation, Choice-editing

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) announced by the United Nations have some critical implications for the businesses. With the SDGs, the fulcrum of accountability has tilted toward firms (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2016), compelling them to align their overall business strategies to the SDGs. One such important SDG goal (number 12) focuses on the issue of responsible consumption.

Responsible consumption is closely linked with the concept of sustainability. The overarching concept of “sustainability” – from the perspective of social, economic and environmental dimensions – is important for streamlining various stages of the consumption value chain (Jones *et al.*, 2008; Kumar and Dholakia, 2016). Proenvironment products – such as recyclable goods, energy-efficient appliances and organic food items (Grimmer *et al.*, 2017) – are gaining ground. Noncompliant behaviors – such as not using and responsibly disposing of the products – however reduce the degree of benefit that would otherwise accrue to the society and ecology (Midden *et al.*, 2007). The mere integration of ethical appeals with business sense aimed at changing the consumers' social and environmental behavior is not enough; indeed, firms need to ingrain such practices in consumers (Thieme *et al.*, 2015).



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Firms may innovate their production process in line with the SDGs and introduce sustainable products in their overall portfolio. Irresponsible consumption of such products, however, negates these efforts (Driscoll and Starik, 2004). The challenge is to create a synergy between firms' efforts to attain their sustainable development goal (SDG) of responsible consumption and their proper execution. To complete the loop of responsible consumption, firms also need to nudge their consumers toward responsible behaviors (Thøgersen and Zhou, 2012). Such behavior changes would enable consumers to complement the efforts of firms in implementing their SDG goals.

This study uses netnography as a methodological approach to explore some enablers that firms may adopt to help their consumers in moving toward responsible consumption behaviors. As per the Cambridge dictionary, we define enablers as "something or someone that makes it possible for a particular thing to happen or be done." The key enablers of behavior toward responsible consumption – conceptualized and mentioned in the theoretical framing in this study – help in understanding this complex aspect both at the consumer level and at the crosslevel of firm–consumer interaction. The proposed theoretical framing using the expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000) is exploratory, but it helps enhance theoretical and managerial insights on the subject.

The next section of this paper provides a literature review of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and responsible consumption behavior and identifies the research question. The subsequent sections discuss the theoretical underpinning, methodology and sampling, followed by a section on analysis and interpretation. Next, we discuss the theoretical contribution of this study in terms of the expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation. The paper concludes with the managerial and policy implications followed by the concluding observations, limitations and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review and research question

### 2.1 Sustainable development goals (SDGs)

Following the millennium development goals (MDGs), in 2014, the members of the United Nations proposed a comprehensive set of SDGs, with the timeframe of 2015–2030 (Le Blanc, 2015). There are 17 goals and 169 targets that set the agenda for sustainable development under the realm of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection (Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 2017). Sustainable development expects participation from various stakeholders and requires broadened perspectives with the idea of aligning similar and sometimes conflicting values and goals (Robert *et al.*, 2005). In an SDG, the focus on economic development and environmental protection was enhanced by including anthropocentric and ecocentric views encompassing social and human development (Robert *et al.*, 2005).

Some SDGs such as the goal 6 on clean water and sanitation and the goal 7 on affordable and clean energy focus directly on the environment and society. The SDG goal 12 addresses responsible consumption, the focus of this study.

### 2.2 Responsible consumption behavior

In this study, responsible consumption is conceptualized as the behavior exhibited by consumers "who purchase products and services perceived to have a positive (or less negative) influence on the environment or who patronize businesses that attempt to effect related positive social change (Roberts, 1993, p. 140)".

The concept of consumer responsibility (see, e.g. Quazi *et al.*, 2016) provides some valuable leads to understand responsible consumption behavior. Giesler and Veresiu (2014) link responsible consumption to increased awareness of the social and environmental issues related to the consumption decision. Aspects of responsible consumption include

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environmental activism (Dietz *et al.*, 1998), private or in-built behavior such as efficiency-related behavior (Black *et al.*, 1985), buying behavior for organic produce and recycling behavior (Dietz *et al.*, 1998), behavior related to financial sacrifices for environment (Stern *et al.*, 1999), sympathy for environmental concern (Allen and Ferrand, 1999), altruistic behavior (Kumar, 2016) and emotional affinity toward nature (Kals *et al.*, 1999). Research on the broad and specific enablers of consumers' behavior toward responsible consumption, however, is limited barring a few works like environmental behavior as manifestation of cultural bias (Kumar *et al.*, 2017) and emotional affinity toward nature (Kals *et al.*, 1999).

This study also delves into the behavior change theories and models that firms may use to enable their consumers to consume responsibly. These include the operant learning theory by Skinner (1953), the social cognitive theory by Bandura (1986) and the social ecology model by Stokols (1992). The literature review also probes anticonsumption literature to understand some other factors. Although the aspects of the anticonsumption behaviors emanate from the context-specific factors like consumer resistance (Penaloza and Price, 1993), brand avoidance (Thompson and Arsel, 2004) and voluntary simplicity (Shaw and Newholm, 2002), consumers' intrinsic motivation and subsequent decision-making process also play an important role in shaping such behaviors. Most of the research literature deals with understanding of the self-enabled proresponsible consumption behaviors. There is little or no focus on how *firms* may enable their consumers to change their behavior toward responsible consumption.

In understanding how firms may empower consumers toward responsible consumption behavior, the literature on cocreation holds some relevance. Cottam and Leadbeater (2004) note that cocreation takes place when consumers are involved at each level of the value chain. It is based on consumers getting involved and shaping their as well as firms' prospects. Cocreation could facilitate innovation via networks between firms and consumers (Cottam and Leadbeater, 2004). The involvement and expertise of the consumers could cocreate high-quality, unique experiences and products that provide a competitive edge to firms (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). There are rising instances of firms and consumers joining hands for cocreation of mutually beneficial activities (Cova *et al.*, 2011). Looking holistically, the realm of responsible consumption offers marketers a win-win situation wherein the value cocreation may attain the center stage as per the normative ethos of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The literature on cocreation of responsible consumption, however, is scant. Based on these literature streams and their gaps, we now turn to our core research question.

### 2.3 Research question

To address the research gaps noted so far, we seek to answer the following research question (RQ):

- RQ1. What are some enablers that firms may consider in facilitating their consumers toward responsible consumption behavior?

## 3. Theoretical underpinning

In this study, the theoretical underpinning of the enablers of behaviors toward responsible consumption is provided by the expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). This theory holds that, given the situational context, the personal belief about the ability to excel in a given scenario drives the individuals based on the value assigned by them (Atkinson, 1957).

According to Atkinson (1957), expectancies are the anticipations made by individuals about their performance, and value is the relative attractiveness of success or failure in a

context (Wigfield, 1994). Literature mentions that the expectancies for success, the related values and belief about the achievements act as mediating factors in a given scenario (Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). In a specific context, beliefs of individuals related to a task such as their ability, perceived level of difficulty in accomplishing the task, person-specific goals and affective memories do influence expectancies and values. In addition to such factors, the past experiences of the individuals and other socialization processes also act as influencers (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000).

In sustainability studies, there is an extensive use of this theory, e.g. sustainable consumption (Phipps *et al.*, 2013), understanding students' motivation to engage in sustainable engineering (McCormick *et al.*, 2015) and proenvironmental behavior of young travelers (Kiatkawsin and Han, 2017). Here, by focusing on firms' actions to nudge responsible consumer behavior, we extend the realm of the expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation.

## 4. Methodology and sampling

### 4.1 Methodology

We employed netnography to explore our research question. Netnography has increasingly been used as a significant qualitative research methodology in social science research (e.g. Maclaran and Catterall, 2002). “Netnography adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). This methodology relies on information available online in the public domain and interprets its meaning in the context under consideration (Kozinets, 2002).

Netnography helps in studying the online discourse in virtual communities comprising various actors who assert social power and discuss their viewpoints and narratives that carry broader meaning for the audience (Langer and Beckman, 2005). Netnography is faster and less costly in comparison to other methods (Kozinets, 2002). It primarily centers around the observation of textual data, and content analysis helps in the next stage in coding and the subsequent analysis (Langer and Beckman, 2005). As issues related to responsible consumption and sustainability are complex by nature – involving various actors – netnography may facilitate knowing their viewpoints and forming a holistic picture. Other qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, have some limitations like the reluctance of respondents to reveal everything (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Research methods involving verbatims such as netnography are useful in understanding the private nature of the experience of the respondents who may be reluctant in expressing themselves in interviews (Carù and Cova, 2008). As explicit online views preexist, netnography is an apt methodology for this study.

Issues of interest in this study were the enablers of consumer behaviors toward responsible consumption, facilitated by the firms. After the identification of candidate online communities, netnography requires the suitability of the forums and groups based on the criteria like presence of a segment, topic or group that is focused and oriented toward the relevant research question. The subsequent requirements of netnography include looking at the reasonable online traffic to ensure the sufficient number and range of postings of interest.

For this study, netnography provides an additional advantage: global forums exist where online communities interact worldwide and discuss issues like responsible consumption. As suggested by Kozinets (2002), our first step – the *entrée* – was driven by the specific research questions and the identification of the online forums and by the relevance of the discussions to the questions of interest.

### 4.2 Sampling and data collection

Our epistemic goal was to outline a digital netnographic field that is wide and varied. We set a decade-long time frame from January 2010 to August 2019. We selected online platforms such

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as websites, blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter handles, LinkedIn groups and other sites discussing the responsible consumption behavior. Keywords “responsible consumption”, “behavior for responsible consumption”, “drivers of behavior for responsible consumption”, “firm and responsible consumption”, “sustainable development” and “sustainability” were initially used for selecting the online platforms. As part of the guidelines, we looked at the relevant online platforms where participants not only posted on these topics but also provided comments (Kozinet, 2002). Nonavailability of comments resulted in exclusion of forums or sites. We also excluded sources that contained purely academic literature such as research papers. To include a source in the database, we strived to keep as many diverse views as possible, including firms’ points of view as well as the viewpoints related to consumers.

After a pilot sampling of many online platforms based on such exclusion/inclusion criteria, we arrived at the list of websites, online forums, blogs, LinkedIn groups, Twitter handles and Facebook pages to use in our study. The Table 1 provides details of the netnographic database.

## 5. Analysis and interpretation

The research steps include an analysis of netnographic text to understand and interpret some potential enablers that can be facilitated by firms to help their consumers in moving toward responsible consumption behavior.

We relooked at the data at each stage to examine emerging concepts and grouped them to form first-order categories through the open-coding procedure (Spiggle, 1994). The coded datasets were further explored for similarities and differences for clubbing and separating the emerging concepts as suggested by Spiggle (1994) and Kozinets (2002). Following Strauss and Corbin (1990), we used the axial coding to establish a relationship within and across first-order categories resulting into smaller number of second-order themes. The process was iterative and consisted of exploring the data set for emerging patterns, along with a backup from literature, to arrive at concrete conceptual themes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Kozinets, 2002).

We used the expertise of two independent coders who were not familiar with the study. To ensure consistency, we first briefed the coders on the entire process. Based on the instructions, both coders analyzed the netnographic text and prepared the coding frame. Our intercoder reliability ranged from 85% to 95%, which is acceptable in social science research (Holsti, 1969).

### 5.1 Enablers of behavior toward responsible consumption at the level of consumers

Personal as well as situational variables account for a variation in individual behaviors (Ward and Robertson, 1973). This also holds true in the context of behaviors toward responsible consumption. The Table A1 shown in the web appendix depicts the representative interpretive analysis of data to arrive at four aggregate theoretical dimensions that are identified as the enablers of consumer-level behavior toward responsible consumption.

*5.1.1 Choice editing.* The prospect theory introduced the notions of framing and editing in a choice process (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Framing consists of putting in place the acts, the contingencies and the potential outcomes in ways that guide the norms and probable expectancies of the decision maker toward particular choice options (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). Choice editing, on the other hand, deals with the cancellation of some of the components and the elimination of options.

In most consumption scenarios, consumers are flooded with options, often verging on choice overload. Whenever a choice set has options to influence responsible as well as irresponsible consumption behavior, the choice dilemma gets aggravated. An effective way

**Table 1.**  
Digital sample used in  
the netnographic study

Websites / Online Forums	Blogs	LinkedIn groups	Social media platforms Twitter handles	Facebook pages
<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk">http://www.guardian.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://www.theenvironmentalblog.org">http://www.theenvironmentalblog.org</a>	Behavior change for sustainability ( <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/groups/3527493">https://www.linkedin.com/groups/3527493</a> )	SDG challenge ( <a href="https://twitter.com/SDGchallenge">https://twitter.com/SDGchallenge</a> )	Society for Responsible Consumption ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/SRC.Romania/">https://www.facebook.com/SRC.Romania/</a> )
<a href="http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business">http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business</a>	<a href="https://www.forumforthefuture.org/blog">https://www.forumforthefuture.org/blog</a>	Society for Responsible Consumption ( <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8536210">https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8536210</a> )	Environmental info ( <a href="https://twitter.com/ein_greencareer">https://twitter.com/ein_greencareer</a> )	Earthwatch ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Earthwatch/">https://www.facebook.com/Earthwatch/</a> )
<a href="http://www.sustainablebrands.com">http://www.sustainablebrands.com</a>	<a href="http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/blog">http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/blog</a>	WBCSD – world business council for sustainable development ( <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/wbcscd/">https://www.linkedin.com/company/wbcscd/</a> )	SDG Fund ( <a href="https://twitter.com/jointSDGFund">https://twitter.com/jointSDGFund</a> )	B Corporation ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/bcorporation">https://www.facebook.com/bcorporation</a> )
<a href="http://www.forbes.com">www.forbes.com</a>	<a href="http://www.sustainability.com/blog">http://www.sustainability.com/blog</a>	Sustainability ( <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/groups/2069571/">https://www.linkedin.com/groups/2069571/</a> )	Sustainable Business ( <a href="https://twitter.com/sbphilala">https://twitter.com/sbphilala</a> )	SDG 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/meri360sdg12/">https://www.facebook.com/meri360sdg12/</a> )
<a href="https://www.greenbiz.com">https://www.greenbiz.com</a>	<a href="http://www.csrwire.com/blog">http://www.csrwire.com/blog</a>	The Responsible and Sustainable Business Lab ( <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12033377/">https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12033377/</a> )	Sustainable Development ( <a href="https://twitter.com/SustDev">https://twitter.com/SustDev</a> )	Global Goals for Sustainable Development ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/globalgoalsUN/">https://www.facebook.com/globalgoalsUN/</a> )
<a href="https://www.ketchum.com">https://www.ketchum.com</a>	<a href="https://www.participatelearning.com/blog/30-ways-to-practice-responsible-consumption/">https://www.participatelearning.com/blog/30-ways-to-practice-responsible-consumption/</a>	Responsible consuming ( <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/groups/4440540/">https://www.linkedin.com/groups/4440540/</a> )	Action for Sustainable Development ( <a href="https://twitter.com/Action4SD">https://twitter.com/Action4SD</a> )	UN Sustainable Development Platform ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/SustDev/">https://www.facebook.com/SustDev/</a> )
<a href="https://thefuturescentre.org/fos2019/">https://thefuturescentre.org/fos2019/</a>	<a href="https://planetgeoblog.wordpress.com/tag/sustainable-consumption/">https://planetgeoblog.wordpress.com/tag/sustainable-consumption/</a>	Sustainability welfare and responsible research ( <a href="https://www.linkedin.com/groups/4440540/">https://www.linkedin.com/groups/4440540/</a> )	Responsible Consumption and Production ( <a href="https://twitter.com/RCP2030">https://twitter.com/RCP2030</a> )	Responsible Consumption ( <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/333671340025188?epa=SEARCH_BOX">https://www.facebook.com/groups/333671340025188?epa=SEARCH_BOX</a> )
<a href="https://grf-spc.weebly.com/">https://grf-spc.weebly.com/</a>	<a href="https://www.manageteamz.com/blog/tag/responsible-consumption-production/">https://www.manageteamz.com/blog/tag/responsible-consumption-production/</a>	–	“Sustainable Consumption” ( <a href="https://twitter.com/SusCoF">https://twitter.com/SusCoF</a> )	–
<a href="https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/why-responsible-consumption-is-everyone-s-business/">https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/why-responsible-consumption-is-everyone-s-business/</a>	<a href="https://www.manageteamz.com/blog/tag/responsible-consumption-production/">https://www.manageteamz.com/blog/tag/responsible-consumption-production/</a>	–	–	–
<a href="https://www.fastcompany.com">https://www.fastcompany.com</a>	–	–	–	–

to enable the behavior toward responsible consumption is to edit the presented (evoked) choice set and retain only those products and services that help maintain proresponsible consumption behaviors. We found the following online comment illustrating the notion of choice editing quite interesting:

The citizen does not need to be engaged on every purchase or behavior, for that would be overwhelming, but we then need to accept the role of choice editing in making some decisions on behalf of the consumer. Ikea's recently launched sustainability strategy is a good case, committing to offering only LED lights and energy efficient induction stoves by 2016. [Krantz, an environmental commentator]

Choice editing may not only be effective in guiding the behavior toward responsible consumption but it may also be useful in measuring the impact of availability of products or services that may help toward responsible consumption behavior. One such argument captured in one of the blogs mentioned the following:

Behaviour change interventions also run from the direct (choice editing) to the indirect (persuasion). To reflect choice editing point - it's easier to measure the impact of selling only LED lights than to measure the impact of a campaign to switch those lights out when you leave a room. [Solitaire, a blogger on environmental issues]

A similar kind of notion was also captured in response to one of the online discussion threads:

We should certainly reduce choice - and reduce the onus on consumers to choose. Choice places a considerable cognitive load on us, which not only soaks up a lot of time . . . but it also makes you less open to appeals for altruism and pro social behavior. [GuyPChampriss, an environmental commentator].

The emerging advocacy of choice editing, among corporate players and activists, could become an important enabler of behaviors toward responsible consumption from consumers' perspective; and there is theoretical support for choice editing as a way to encourage prosociety choices.

*5.1.2 Design intervention.* Gradually, design – or more specifically sustainable design – has evolved as an effective intervention tool to channel behavior in desired directions. The earlier notion of sustainable design was built on the premises of energy efficiency, but the whole idea has now taken new directions, including a design's ability to alter the usage behavior (Tromp *et al.*, 2011).

Latour (1992) reflected on inscription vs prescription: “inscriptions” require users to act in accordance with intention of the designers, and “prescriptions” deal with the actions allowed by the product. Latour also discussed “subscriptions”, namely, how the users construe the prescription. There are several examples of prescriptions – e.g. speed breakers on roads for safe driving, LED bulbs for energy-efficient behavior and automatic sensors on water taps for minimizing water loss – that demonstrate the appropriate design intervention with a view to altering the behavior in a desired manner. One online blog on this aspect mentioned some intriguing arguments:

We will all realise that we must enable behavior change, rather than communicate it; empower rather than persuade; build value in people's lives, rather than plant messages in consumers' heads. Ultimately, we need to design products, services and environments, rather than craft messages, images and campaigns. [Johnson, a behavior change and sustainability professional]

Design intervention facilitates behavior change aided by the design of the product or the facility itself. We believe that there may be a thin-line difference in understanding when the design intervention is perceived synonymous with persuasion without the willingness of the consumers. Firms need to look at empowering the consumers even in the scenario of design intervention so that the consumers could take the onus on themselves. Vivek *et al.* (2014, p. 4)

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defined consumer engagement as “the intensity of an individual’s participation and connection with the organization’s offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organization”. Such a community feeling may generate closeness and inculcate a bonding between the consumer and the firm culminating into a sense of empowerment (Vivek *et al.*, 2014). Essentially, firms need to engage the consumers so that consumers could be empowered for whatever actions they take. This online posting underscores the importance of consumer engagement aided by design intervention in the context of responsible consumption:

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In the future, those brands that take the lead, engage the consumers and drive the growth will be those that understand sustainability as a design challenge, rather than a communications problem. [Johnson, a behavior change and sustainability professional]

Behavior can be discussed under the realm of collective and individual concerns. In the context of responsible consumption, a collective concern, for example, can be to use the environment-friendly public transport rather than the individual commuting systems. The individual concern, on the other hand, could be the comfort and convenience of commuting. A successful design may show its potential by bridging the gap between the two types of concerns, and that is where the acumen of the designer plays a vital role in addressing conflicting situations (Tromp *et al.*, 2011). Several online postings, such as this one, emphasized the important role played by design intervention in shaping consumers’ behavior toward responsible consumption:

People do not set out to “use energy” or “generate waste”. It’s a side effect of solving everyday problems, meeting needs for warmth, comfort, light, cooking, cleaning, entertainment, and so on. If we (as designers) can offer people solutions to these needs in ways which (1) are better for them in some way, and (2) do so sustainably, then I reckon it’s possible to replace the existing model through being better. [Locton, a columnist on sustainable design]

Such discussion clearly highlights the role of design intervention as a prominent enabler of behavior toward responsible consumption.

*5.1.3 Addressing consumers’ environmental identity.* Environment identity is defined as “the meanings that one attributes to the self as they relate to the environment” (Stets and Biga, 2003, p. 406). Extant research provides enough evidence that a person’s reflection of self-identity, for example environmental identity, plays a significant role in shaping particular behaviors, including the proenvironment behaviors such as recycling, green consumerism and environmental activism (e.g. Fielding *et al.*, 2008). One of the online postings opined:

The key to promoting meaningful changes in sustainable behavior – that do more than just pay lip service to tackling climate change – is to nurture and develop a sense of environmental identity or citizenship. [Corner, a sustainability and climate change expert]

As consumption choices evolve, and with ever-changing norms and values, the anchors of self-identity for consumers strive for new meanings amidst puzzling choices and prevailing sense of responsibilities (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004). This is observable in the following online posting:

Most people do not have a social network with sustainability at its core, but working to develop a group – rather than individual – sense of environmental responsibility and identity should be at the heart of any sustainability campaign. [Corner, a sustainability and climate change expert]

Consumers are often seeking “biographical solutions” to “systemic problems” that could align their self-identity to the consumption choices they make (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004). Addressing the environmental identity of the consumers by providing such opportunities using different marketing-mix elements may provide them a promising biographical solution to the problem of responsible consumption and also help the firms in closing the loop relevant to SDG on responsible consumption.

*5.1.4 Brand assurance.* Consumer actions typically have underlying costs that may be monetary, temporal and/or emotional in nature. The proresponsible consumption behaviors have many such costs, and consumers need assurance that they are making the correct trade-offs (Murray *et al.*, 2006). Consumers with a proclivity toward responsible consumption behavior may demand a sense of assurance for their actions. A few brands are already providing such a sense of assurance:

Some brands are already “leveraging” their power to change our behaviours. From Unilever’s work on shower behaviours to L’ORÉAL’s Hairdressers Against AIDS, Patagonia’s Don’t Buy This Jacket to Max Burger’s carbon labeled menu. There’s increasing proof that brands can shift consumer habits. [Shea, a sustainability communication expert]

In the overall ecosystem of marketer–consumer interactions, marketers need to show adequate evidence of visibility of their actions to support the behavior toward responsible consumption. Witness, for example, this online posting:

Brands influence our behaviours, our aspirations, our insecurities and even our definition of success and happiness . . . Bold, brave and compelling campaigns abound across platforms, proving how aligned companies are with the new environmental and pro-social values of millennials. [Townsend, a sustainability professional].

This again substantiates the larger sense of risk avoidance by the consumers, i.e., the rejection of particular actions could result in low self-esteem, aggravating the negative experience with such behaviors and leading to demotivation (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). In such situations, the firms owning the brand need to play a larger role. The need for such a role was mentioned – rather in a prescriptive tone – in the following:

Brands need to become “transformational” instead of “transactional” by selling “something of social value”. [Morgan, A CSR professional].

Waldman *et al.* (1990) noted that the degree of interaction gets enhanced in a transformational scenario because it increases the consciousness of the entities involved by acting beyond mere self-interest. This is also true to some extent in the context of responsible consumption. Moving beyond self-interest and providing a greater sense of assurance to the consumers striving to engage in responsible consumption behaviors may create a real difference. Such an assurance also requires marketers to communicate the essence of behavior change that was aptly captured in this posting:

In some ways, this is the easiest form of behaviour change for brands to engage in. All it requires is a brand to show sustainable behaviours (in the background) when advertising their mainstream product (in the foreground). [Shea, A sustainability communication expert]

The online digital field that we explored points to and emphasizes the role of brand assurance as an important factor at the level of consumers, potentially nudging them toward responsible consumption. If firms could assure and convey the true meaning of responsible consumption through their brands, mapping the brands as “responsible” in the mental positioning of consumers, responsible consumption would follow.

### *5.2 Enablers of behavior toward responsible consumption at the crosslevel of interaction*

In their quest for innovation and value creation, firms seek to identify and prioritize the right set of stakeholders (Tashman and Raelin, 2013). Consumers of course constitute one of the most important stakeholders for a firm. As businesses and consumers play various complementary roles, it makes sense to understand the requirements of each side of the firm–consumer interaction. Armed with multifarious opportunities and with a sense of greater control over consumer rights, contemporary consumers are welcomed by firms that seek

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consumers' opinions on many strategic business practices such as product design and distribution. Contemporary consumers participate with the firms to cocreate and coextract values, with a larger objective of creating an overall win-win situation for both entities (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

Despite noble intentions, however, it is quite challenging to create and sustain a culture in the firms that keeps the fabric of responsible consumption intact. Among many other barriers, lack of resources (e.g., capital, human resource, raw material) constrains the implementation and success of proresponsible consumption actions in firms. By pooling resources on a shared platform, cocreation can aid the transformation toward responsible consumption (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

Based on the literature and the netnographic data set, we found two further key enablers (see the Table A2 in web appendix) that may shape the behavior toward responsible consumption at the crosslevel interaction between firms and consumers.

*5.2.1 Promoting innovation mindset.* Innovation is an important constituent of the knowledge base within the firms, fueling and supporting many strategic actions (Nidumolu et al., 2009). Linked with organizational and technological innovations, sustainability and responsible consumption initiatives could yield significant bottom-line as well as top-line returns. The following post is illustrative:

Consumers are brands' ambassadors, co-creators of innovative products and active participants in their favorite companies. During the pre-fashion summit, the Sustainable Fashion Academy highlighted that the consumer has also become a producer, a supplier, a seller, a custodian and a style manager. Leveraging on this broadened role, the industry can motivate consumers to act more responsibly. [Pasquinelli, an ethical fashion consultant]

Innovation is also a potential tool to manage resources in adverse times (Nidumolu et al., 2009). Coinspired innovation becomes particularly important when competition intensifies, as the following attests:

When the name of the game is to be the first to bring the right innovation to market, co-creation is the solution that companies are increasingly turning to. [Pétavy, a C-level executive working on innovative brands]

Such interactions are not only good for firms but also good for the consumers seeking ways to achieve responsible consumption. As the following illustrates, firms too have started realizing the value of responsible consumption wherein innovation is at the core:

The good news is that there are ripples of profound innovation coming from the private sector, as companies recognize sustainable consumption is not only necessary given the finite resources available on our planet. [Yolles, a sustainability professional]

Putting innovation at the center stage, firms like GE, Microsoft and Unilever have gone the route of cocreation for responsible consumption in terms of providing customer solutions to many intriguing problems. Although it is difficult to identify the right talent among the diverse consumers that interact with the firms, innovative cocreation is nonetheless increasingly proving to be a risk reduction mechanism for firms in their quest for responsible consumption initiatives. Such initiatives also create a sense of fulfillment and importance among the consumers ultimately guiding them toward consuming in a responsible manner.

*5.2.2 Consumer empowerment.* With an increasing focus on cocreation, collaborative approaches are needed to ensure empowerment of consumers to maximize the value realization through limited resources:

No organisation can do this alone and collaborative approaches are needed to discover ways for businesses to empower consumers to do more with less, while also providing real value back to business. [Leonard, chief executive of a technology firm]

Focusing narrowly on consumption, with broad dissemination of knowledge and information, there are increasing instances of empowered consumers who seek to intervene in the conceptualization, design and marketing of products and services (Shaw *et al.*, 2006), as the following illustrates:

Consumers are no longer willing to accept “off the shelf” targeting and mass-market products; they demand engagement with the companies they purchase from. Consumer co-creation is increasingly being used as a way to engage consumers and meet their desire to influence products. [Friedman, a sustainability blogger]

Consumer empowerment provides a sense of involvement to the consumers in the decision-making process in a variety of scenarios, leading to better decision-making and greater satisfaction (Koriat *et al.*, 1980). Based on this study, it appears that cocreation – i.e. all forms of coactive crosslevel collaborations between firms and their consumers – resonates well with the empowerment that the consumers need to express their viewpoints on critical issues like responsible consumption. Cocreation could be a key requirement to foster sustainable behavior, as the following attests:

In cluttered times, people are seeking simplicity and guidance . . . . co-creation with customers – is needed if sustainable behaviour is to move into the mainstream and fundamentally change the way we live. [Davis, a brand consultant]

The online discourse on sustainable behavior leading to responsible consumption at the crosslevel of interaction between firms and consumers points to the increasing role of consumer voice and empowerment.

## 6. Theoretical contributions

We turn now to the theoretical lens of the expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). As per this theory, personal beliefs about ability to do well on a chosen activity and the extent of the value assigned to it drive the choice and performance in a specific situation (Atkinson, 1957; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). The expectancies and values affect the achievement choice of the individuals, which in turn get affected by task-specific beliefs, the perceived problem in undertaking the task, individuals’ goals and their affective memories (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). This theoretical lens helps explain some of the responsible consumption behaviors in this study.

Consumers do not undertake some consumption choices, such as responsible consumption, because they remain unsure about deriving the real value of it. Firms also usually do not have the mechanism to ensure their consumers to behave in a desired normative way. If firms could ensure a mechanism to facilitate their consumers in progressing toward responsible consumption, the entire responsible consumption value chain may get a boost. Enablers identified in this study – i.e. choice editing, design intervention, addressing consumers’ environmental identity, brand assurance, promoting innovation mindset and consumer empowerment – may help the firms in guiding their consumers toward responsible consumption by providing them a sense of reasonable belief about their actions. These enablers may reinforce the consumers’ belief about the efficacy of their efforts and may result in accruing expected positive values such as responsible consumption (Burgess, 1992). Using the enablers identified in this study, firms may facilitate the socialization process of their consumers to achieve the goal of responsible consumption behavior.

Arnould (2007) discussed that issues like sustainability and responsible consumption are class-based narratives, and there are scalability issues too. Arnould (2007) states that “successful, progressive practices of citizenship ‘should’ take place through market-mediated

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forms in our culture because these are templates for action and understanding available to most people (p. 10)". We also believe that some of the findings of this study, in the form of enablers of behavior toward responsible consumption, point toward market-mediated templates for actions on the overall issue of SDGs.

### **7. Managerial and policy implications**

The set of enablers identified in this study – both at the level of consumers and at the interactive crosslevel between firms and consumers – provides useful pointers to firms in devising their strategies to attain the goal of responsible consumption.

Consumers are crucial stakeholders. To attain SDGs, firms cannot detach themselves from consumers. The dyadic relationship between a firm and its consumers implies reciprocal expectations. The enablers of responsible consumption – i.e. choice editing, design intervention, addressing consumers' environmental identity and brand assurance – may also provide important cues to the firms in terms of their incorporation in a market-oriented strategy. Strategies for cocreation, for instance, could bestow a competitive edge to the firms that take initiatives like empowering the consumers and promoting the coinnovation mindset. We understand that implementation of the enablers like choice editing may evoke ethical issues in some specific cases; nonetheless it is an important enabler with the potential to alter the consumption behavior.

Some of the enablers of behavior toward responsible consumption such as consumer empowerment, promoting the innovation mindset and addressing the consumers' environmental identity also have significant public-policy implications. Just as firms can bring together different stakeholders such as managers and consumers via consumer empowerment, so can public policymakers. Via consumer empowerment, government agencies can engender trust and greater compliance. The enablers like choice editing at the level of consumers are more like imposing a behavioral policy guidance to adopt responsible consumption. If such a policy guidance works at the ground level, the overall utilization of the resources may turn to be more optimum.

### **8. Concluding observations, limitations and directions for future research**

Rachel Carson (1962) urged us to cultivate humility toward the awesome wonders of nature. Her views continue to be relevant, well into the 21st century. The concept of humility resonates with that of self-disciplined behavior, which the notion of responsible consumption demands, and expects, from all its stakeholders.

To be humble, this study has some limitations. First, websites, online forums, blogs and social media discourses constitute the source of data. Some protected online platforms (a minority) do not grant permission to access their data. There is the possibility of missing out some relevant information in such cases. Second, there are some useful knowledge resources on the subject of this study but with limited or no discussion, and such resources could not be considered for a netnographic study. Third, as in any netnographic study, researchers have to rely entirely on textual data; and nontextual and visual nuances are lost.

The study opens avenues for future research. The expectancy–value theory of achievement motivation discussed in this study, given the enablers identified, needs to be researched, tested and deepened further. The field of responsible consumption is multilayered, and the theoretical underpinning offered here is a mere start. There is a potential for building alternate, holistic theory frames that cover not just the enablers of behaviors toward responsible consumption from consumers' perspective but also from the viewpoint of other stakeholders. If the enablers of the behaviors at all levels – primary producers, makers and packagers, distributors, buyers and end consumers – could be

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understood in better ways, then public and private policy actions, as well as individual behaviors, could possibly be reshaped. It will also simultaneously provide overarching means to attain other SDGs.

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**Table A1.**  
Representative  
interpretive analysis to  
arrive at dimensions,  
themes, categories and  
data at the level of  
consumers

Second order themes and first order categories	
<p>(1) <i>Aggregate theoretical dimension: choice editing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>First-order category</i></li> </ul> <p>A. Limited option may force a needed behaviour</p>	<p>(1) <i>Second-order theme: limitation of choices and behavior</i></p> <p><i>Representative data</i></p> <p>A1. The citizen does not need to be engaged on every purchase or behavior, for that would be overwhelming, but we then need to accept the role of choice editing in making some decisions on behalf of the consumer. Ikea's recently launched sustainability strategy is a good case, committing to offering only LED lights and energy efficient induction stoves by 2016. [Krantz, an environmental commentator]</p> <p>A2. We should certainly reduce choice - and reduce the onus on consumers to choose. Choice places a considerable cognitive load on us, which not only soaks up a lot of time. .... but it also makes you less open to appeals for altruism and pro social behavior. [GuyPChampniss, an environmental commentator]</p> <p>B1. Behaviour change interventions also run from the direct (choice editing) to the indirect (persuasion). To reflect choice editing point - it's easier to measure the impact of selling only LED lights than to measure the impact of a campaign to switch those lights out when you leave a room. [Solitaire, a blogger on environmental issues]</p> <p>(2) <i>Second-order theme: design-aided behavior change</i></p> <p><i>Representative data</i></p> <p>A1. We will all realise that we must enable behavior change, rather than communicate it; empower rather than persuade; build value in people's lives, rather than plant messages in consumers' heads. Ultimately, we need to design products, services and environments, rather than craft messages, images and campaigns. [Johnson, a behavior change and sustainability professional]</p> <p>A2. Culturally, sustainability is still a scientific issue and all-too-often remains framed by implicit scientific concepts, if not explicit scientific terminology. [Johnson, a behavior change and sustainability professional]</p>
<p>B. Restricting the unnecessary choices may guide consumers toward a particular decision</p>	<p>(2) <i>Second-order theme: design-aided behavior change</i></p> <p><i>Representative data</i></p> <p>A. Scientifically design-based empowerment for behavior change</p>

*(continued)*

Second order themes and first order categories

- B. Design-based consumer engagement for sustainability behavior
- B1. In the future, those brands that take the lead, engage the consumers and drive the growth will be those that understand sustainability as a design challenge, rather than a communications problem. [Johnson, a behavior change and sustainability professional]
- B2. People do not set out to 'use energy' or 'generate waste'. It's a side effect of solving everyday problems, meeting needs for warmth, comfort, light, cooking, cleaning, entertainment, and so on. If we (as designers) can offer people solutions to these needs in ways which a) are better for them in some way, and b) do so sustainably, then I reckon it's possible to replace the existing model through being better. [Locton, a columnist on sustainable design]
- (3) *Second-order theme: environment as the reflection of self*
- Representative data*
- A1. The key to promoting meaningful changes in sustainable behavior – that do more than just pay lip service to tackling climate change – is to nurture and develop a sense of environmental identity or citizenship. [Corner, a sustainability and climate change expert]
- A2. If people begin to think of themselves as someone who does things for the environment, the chance that they will engage in other sustainable behaviours is much higher. [Corner, a sustainability and climate change expert]
- B1. Most people do not have a social network with sustainability at its core, but working to develop a group – rather than individual – sense of environmental responsibility and identity should be at the heart of any sustainability campaign. [Corner, a sustainability and climate change expert]
- (3) *Aggregate theoretical dimension: addressing consumers' environmental identity*
- *First-order category*
- A. Treating oneself in reciprocal relation with natural environment may affect sustainability behaviour
- B. Relating oneself with environment even at the group level may help in sustainability

(continued)

Firms enabling responsible consumption

Table A1.

Table A1.

Second order themes and first order categories	
<p>(4) <i>Aggregate theoretical dimension: brand assurance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>First-order category</i></li> </ul> <p>A. Brands can help consumers to transform and change their behavior</p>	<p>(4) <i>Second-order theme: Brands as a precursor of responsible consumption behavior</i></p> <p><i>Representative data</i></p> <p>A1. Brands need to become “transformational” instead of “transactional” by selling “something of social value”. [Morgan, A CSR professional]</p> <p>A2. Some brands are already “leveraging” their power to change our behaviours. From Unilever’s work on shower behaviours to L’ORÉAL’s Hairdressers. Against AIDS, Patagonia’s Don’t Buy This Jacket to Max Burger’s carbon labeled menu. There’s increasing proof that brands can shift consumer habits. [Shea, a sustainability communication expert]</p> <p>B1. Brands influence our behaviours, our aspirations, our insecurities and even our definition of success and happiness. . . . Bold, brave and compelling campaigns abound across platforms, proving how aligned companies are with the new environmental and pro-social values of millennials. [Townsend, a sustainability professional]</p> <p>B2. In some ways, this is the easiest form of behaviour change for brands to engage in. All it requires is a brand to show sustainable behaviours (in the background) when advertising their mainstream product (in the foreground) [Shea, A sustainability communication expert]</p>
<p>B. Brands may change the behavior with the right set of communication</p>	

(1) *Aggregate theoretical dimension: Promoting innovation mindset*

- *First-order category*

A. Innovation aided with cocreation could fuel the notion of responsible consumption

B. Innovation clubbed with consumers' participation could inspire responsible behavior change

(2) *Aggregate theoretical dimension: consumer empowerment*

- *First-order category*

A. Sustainability needs a collective approach wherein the role of individuals is central

B. Co-creation of sustainability requires sharing roles between consumers and the firms

(1) *Second-order theme: Innovation as the driver of responsible consumption behavior at the crosslevel of interaction*

*Representative data*

A1. When the name of the game is to be the first to bring the right innovation to market, co-creation is the solution that companies are increasingly turning to. [Pétavy, a C-level executive working on innovative brands]

A2. Consumers are brands' ambassadors, co-creators of innovative products and active participants in their favorite companies. During the pre-fashion summit, the Sustainable Fashion Academy highlighted that the consumer has also become a producer, a supplier, a seller, a custodian and a style manager. Leveraging on this broadened role, the industry can motivate consumers to act more responsibly. [Pasquinelli, an ethical fashion consultant]

B1. We saw Unilever, Heineken, and Sony each launch new online platforms designed to pull in outside expertise to solve challenges ranging from sustainable showering and greener packaging to inspiring consumer behavior change. [Drew, a blogger on sustainability and responsible consumption]

B2. The good news is that there are ripples of profound innovation coming from the private sector, as companies recognize sustainable consumption is not only necessary given the finite resources available on our planet. [Yolles, a sustainability professional]

(2) *Second-order theme: Sharing the burden of sustainability by empowering individuals/consumers*

*Representative data*

A1. Let us take that collective leadership for sustainability is the capacity of a group of leaders (business, government, NGO), influential people or even ordinary people to jointly and collaboratively deliver their part for a more sustainable future – while putting high priority on the common good over their particular (national, organisational, business, personal) interest. [Kuenkel, A senior executive with views on leadership]

A2. Consumers are no longer willing to accept “off the shelf” targeting and mass-market products; they demand engagement with the companies they purchase from. Consumer co-creation is increasingly being used as a way to engage consumers and meet their desire to influence products. [Friedman, a sustainability blogger]

B1. In cluttered times, people are seeking simplicity and guidance . . . . co-creation with customers – is needed if sustainable behaviour is to move into the mainstream and fundamentally change the way we live. [Davis, a brand consultant]

B2. No organisation can do this alone and collaborative approaches are needed to discover ways for businesses to empower consumers to do more with less, while also providing real value back to business. [Leonard, chief executive of a technology firm]

**Table A2.** Representative interpretive analysis to arrive at dimensions, themes, categories and data at the crosslevel of interaction between firms and consumers