

The standard form under pressure?

Interview with Eltje Gajewski and Simon Schrör

By Caroline Tomalka

Whether when shopping online, in the supermarket or the drugstore: ecologically sustainable products appear to become an integral part of everyday consumption. Especially *green* start-ups and their products play an important role in this area.

In their article, Eltje Gajewski from University Duisburg-Essen and Weizenbaum Researcher Simon Schrör examine how providers incorporate ecological sustainability as a product feature in order to enrich their products with values and justify them against the increasing criticism of mass consumption. They refer to qualitative case studies of ecologically sustainable suppliers and reconstruct different strategies of sustainable enrichment based on the concept of "enrichment" by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2018).

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Could you provide insight into your academic backgrounds and research interests and how they relate to the subject matter of the article?

Schrör: As sociologists, we actually research in empirically quite different fields. While Eltje Gajewski deals extensively with the "new green spirit of capitalism", the phenomenon of ecopreneurs and their products, I do research on digitalisation, e-commerce and questions of intellectual property and regulation.

Our joint work came about as part of a fellowship with Eltje Gajewski at the Weizenbaum Institute in Berlin. We observed that an increasing number of new start-ups are trying to market sustainable alternatives to products that are avoidably harmful to the environment, particularly via digital distribution channels. We took this as a starting point to delve deeper into the matter.

What was the puzzle you encountered when looking more closely at the marketing strategies of those start-ups?

Gajewski: As part of my research on ecopreneurship, I conducted interviews with 21 founders of ecologically sustainable start-ups. In order to contextualise these interviews, I also examined their respective start-ups, business models and products. I observed that in many cases, the same strategies were used repeatedly to measure the sustainable equivalents against their non-sustainable competitors. A particularly striking observation was the tendency to directly compare sustainable products with conventional products at the level of consumption qualities. This comparison revealed that many sustainable consumables, according to the manufacturers, taste at least as good, have a particularly long shelf life

or are processed to a higher quality than the 'originals', while also protecting the climate. Furthermore, many suppliers compare the CO2 emissions of their products with those of conventional products on the market. Finally, we frequently encounter narratives that elucidate the production conditions of the products in question, particularly those of marginalised groups such as producers from the Global South. These narratives serve to differentiate the products in question from their conventional competitors on the market, whose production conditions are often not well-documented. In essence, the initial question that emerged during this research process was: "How do manufacturers attempt to discursively produce ecologically sustainable consumption without *fundamentally* questioning the socially established mode of mass consumption?"

And what drove your decision to apply Boltanski & Esquerre's framework on enrichments of luxury products to tackle this question? Could you elaborate on the parallels between luxury and sustainable goods, and discuss the suitability of this framework for your study?

Schrör: With "Enrichment - a critique of commodities", Boltanski and Esquerre have presented an important analytical scheme for understanding the luxury industry in contemporary capitalism. One of their most important findings is that a commodity economy that seeks more than a price-based race to the bottom in times of standardised mass production must construct its value differently. The luxury industry is so successful because it has managed to create a value from the history of things, ideas, places and aesthetics for which people are willing to pay high prices. However, this can be justified in different ways. The great strength of "Enrichment" lies in the differentiation between analytical and narrative enrichment.

Do I buy the Bauhaus armchair for five thousand euros because I want to participate in the history inscribed in the object? Do I feel like an aesthetics-interested connoisseur of design history? Live like Mies van der Rohe! Then I accept narrative enrichment. Or do I buy a Picasso for five million euros, put it in a storage safe and hope that I can sell it for twice that amount in ten years' time? Then I look at the development of value on the art market analytically. In both cases, it is the history of the objects that constructs the value. Regardless of whether I *feel it* or *calculate it*.

If you look at sustainable alternatives to everyday consumables, the first thing you notice - as in the luxury industry - is the often significantly higher price. Nevertheless, the products seem to be successful in offering an alternative to the standard form. We asked ourselves how exactly these alternatives construct their value and realised that this works in a very similar way to the luxury industry. The key difference is that it is not the history of things that acts as the central source of value, but a more present- and future-focused engagement with ecological crises such as climate change, pollution and exploitation. As we show, however, the actual logics of value attribution remain largely intact.

Could you elaborate how this research builds upon or challenges existing literature?

Gajewski: It is evident that this meticulously critical perspective has hitherto been underrepresented in the extant literature on ecologically sustainable consumption. A significant number of studies are ultimately based on the manufacturers' own interpretations and analyse their sustainability strategies as if they were de facto already contributing to sustainable transitions. In contrast, we consider this a priori assumption to be at least questionable. For this reason, our study has focused on the ways in which value is created in the field of sustainable consumables, regardless of their actual influence on sustainable developments, which we are unable to determine in a qualified manner.

You already briefly touched upon the main concepts of analytic and narrative enrichments. Could you delve a bit deeper into their meaning and their relation to the metaprize – the third of the central concepts in your article?

Gajewski: The term 'ecological enrichment' refers to the strategies employed by suppliers of sustainable products to justify their consumables over their conventional equivalents on the market. The objective of such products is to appeal to as large a target group as possible in order to anchor sustainable consumption in the centre of society. In order to achieve this, these sustainable equivalents imitate their conventional competitors as faithfully as possible. However, this is accompanied by the problem of communicating the special value of sustainable alternatives to the target group, in particular when addressing mainstream markets whose consumers are not a priori interested in sustainability. This is where the discursive strategies of ecological enrichment become relevant. They place particular emphasis on those characteristics that distinguish sustainable alternatives from conventional standard products.

Analytic enrichment comprises the presentation of quantifiable statements about the sustainability characteristics of the products. For instance, the lower CO₂ emissions of these products in comparison to standard products are highlighted and, in many cases, substantiated with certificates. In contrast, narrative ecological enrichment is concerned with the presentation of product features and manufacturing conditions that are designed to foster an emotional bond between the consumer and the product. Linguistic and visual narratives, such as images of pristine forests in which the raw materials are extracted and whose careful extraction is guaranteed by the suppliers, are employed to facilitate consumers' comprehension of the ecological value of the products. In conclusion, the ecological meta-price represents a strategy that involves providers exerting direct influence on societal awareness regarding sustainability. Furthermore, it involves granting the biosphere more rights within production and consumption. In this process, the pricing of the provider is fully itemised and compared to that of conventional providers. It is argued that the typically significantly higher price results from the inclusion of environmental costs, such as reforestation and water treatment, in contrast to conventional providers who externalise these

costs onto the biosphere and, consequently, the human community. This exploitation of ecological resources is argued to be unilateral and to result in the costs for future generations without the corresponding costs being borne by the current generation. Consequently, sustainable providers not only seek to justify their own market prices and exert pressure on conventional providers but also aim to foster societal awareness of the true cost of a particular product, including all production costs. This societal conception of an ecologically and socially fairer price, which does not result from exploitation, is termed the ecological meta-price.

What are the methods utilised in your research, as well as your approach to data selection and gathering?

Schrör: We chose a comparative and contrastive case study design. For case selection, we employed theoretical sampling, which allowed us to alternate between case selection, analysis, and theory building in a circular process until theoretical saturation was achieved. We gathered primary data from the external presentation documents of 26 ecopreneurship start-ups. These documents included websites, online shops, social media profiles, crowdfunding campaigns, and video clips.

To evaluate these documents, we used internet ethnography and content-analytical document analysis. Additionally, we conducted ethnographic field visits to physical shops when available, which provided valuable field notes that informed our case studies. Eltje Gajewski also conducted problem-focused interviews with the founders of selected start-ups to deepen our findings. These interviews focused on the founders' expertise regarding the presentation and valuation of their products.

Our data analysis was guided by qualitative content analysis and the formulating interpretation step of the documentary method. Through these methods, we created detailed case studies for each start-up, comparing and synthesising the practices found across the individual cases. This comprehensive approach allowed us to thoroughly investigate and document the publicly communicated characteristics and narratives of the sustainable products offered by these start-ups.

Can you discuss any challenges you encountered during the research process and how you addressed them?

Gajewski: The most significant challenge in conducting research on sustainable startups and their products is the anonymisation of the cases. Although ecological sustainability is becoming increasingly prevalent as a product feature, the majority of providers of such products remain pioneers in this field. Their business models and products are typically distinctive in nature, rendering them readily identifiable based solely on the product description, even in the absence of the name. However, as our study also relies on interviews, we are of course

concerned about protecting the identity of our contacts. Consequently, we were required to strike a delicate balance between anonymising and disguising the cases, on the one hand, and disclosing the necessary information about the products and business models, on the other, which are directly relevant to our generalisations. Consequently, we enlisted the assistance of student assistants who were unfamiliar with our cases and had them meticulously verify the possibility of traceability based on our case descriptions in several rounds. This process enabled us to identify the specific information that provided key insights into the particular startup.

What were some of the key findings?

Schrör: Our study shows how environmental sustainability adds value to consumables and pressures conventional products through various enrichment strategies. We identified five key strategies of ecological enrichment that justify higher prices by making sustainability a crucial evaluation criterion. This shift is part of a broader trend towards a "green" spirit of capitalism.

Entrepreneurs play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of product quality and price through their justifications, influencing social consumption patterns. We extended the conventionalist approach of Boltanski and Esquerre beyond luxury goods to mainstream markets, showing that sustainability narratives now add value to everyday products. These narratives focus on future-oriented goals like saving the planet and emphasise production context and marginalised individuals.

We found that the market's response to environmental criticism involves deep-seated social and cultural dynamics, not just advertising. However, the widespread use of *sustainability* has led to ambiguities and challenges in defining and implementing it. Terms like "climate neutral" and "sustainable" often lack clear definitions, complicating efforts to establish objective criteria.

Were there any surprising or unexpected discoveries?

Gajewski: Comparative analyses of document analysis and interviews frequently yield insights that are unexpected. The documents under examination reflect the external presentation of the respective providers, namely how they present themselves, their business model, and their products to their target audience. Conversely, interviews and their analysis also permit inferences to be drawn about the concrete practices of the founders. In the field of psychological research on ecological sustainability, the phenomenon of the Attitude-Behaviour Gap is now well documented. This phenomenon occurs when human subjects engage in behaviours that differ from their stated attitudes due to social desirability. The results of our analysis also indicate a similar pattern of findings. For instance, we conducted an interview with the founder of a sustainable fashion label who reported that he and his team employed different strategies for showcasing their products on various crowdfunding platforms. On Kickstarter, a

platform primarily dedicated to funding technological innovations, the team emphasised the consumer qualities of their products. Conversely, on the socially and ecologically specialised German platform Startnext, they promoted the sustainable aspects of their products. Although not included in our analysis, these findings demonstrate that ecological enrichment is also a performative concept that aligns with the target audience. The extent to which ecological sustainability is mobilised as a product feature to enhance the product's value, however, depends on whether ecological sustainability is already recognised as a value in the relevant target market or plays no role at all.

What do your results tell us about the suitability of sustainable production to counter current ecological crises? Is it ultimately a case of capitalist co-optation of ecological critique that works on a purely discursive level?

Schrör: How strong the effect of sustainable consumer goods is on ecological crises is a highly complex question that sociology alone cannot answer. It is therefore difficult to say to what extent this is a purely discursive processing of ecological issues. What can be said, however, is that the standard form of many goods is now coming under pressure, as consumption and purchasing decisions increasingly require ecological justification. We show the strategies with which suppliers of such sustainable products are responding to this pressure.

There is a whole series of indications of how different the concrete forms of ecological action can be. Some of these strategies enjoy a very good reputation, others are criticised. However, our research design does not allow us to make any conclusions about the physical and biological effects that the observed strategies have on the environment.

You conclude that standard products are coming under pressure from their sustainable alternatives. Could you elaborate on how this pressure manifests in the market? What are the inherent risks or challenges for the mainstream commodity structure in light of your findings? Can we already observe phenomena like market displacement, for example, or is there a limit to how much standard products can be displaced, considering potential affordability issues for the masses?

Gajewski: When we claim that the standard form is under pressure, we are referring to a development that has been observed: non-sustainable standard products are increasingly required to justify themselves *in light of the emergence of sustainable alternatives*. Sustainable product alternatives frequently draw comparisons with their conventional counterparts in order to justify themselves, particularly on the analytical level. This inevitably makes the non-sustainability of the latter more apparent in the daily lives of consumers. In particular, we observe that manufacturers are increasingly criticised on social media for being unsustainable. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly challenging to launch new business models or products without these being publicly evaluated against the standard of sustainability. The standard form is under pressure as evidenced

by the tendency of established providers to incorporate sustainable product alternatives into their existing range or to give their existing products a sustainable upgrade. One particularly frequent target of ridicule is the practice of various mineral water providers who have been declaring their products as "vegan" for some time. However, we do not claim that there are already clear indications of the displacement of the standard form. When examining the market shares of various providers, it is evident that sustainable products remain a marginal phenomenon despite their apparent omnipresence.

It can be argued that the widespread adoption of sustainable products in mainstream markets would be a welcome development. It is not possible to assess the true impact of each individual product on the sustainability of production conditions with any degree of reliability. Nevertheless, it is clear that these products contribute to consumers thinking more about their consumption behaviour and the production conditions of their products. This, in turn, demands more sustainable products from providers. However, the central challenge in the ecologisation of markets is precisely this. Not all consumers are able or even willing to make their consumption more sustainable. On the one hand, there are tangible economic difficulties associated with sustainable consumption. These products are still almost uniformly quite expensive. Furthermore, there is evidence of educational inequalities, with studies indicating that sustainable products are predominantly purchased by individuals with higher levels of education. Finally, there is ideological resistance. In particular, in male-dominated, right-wing environments, vegan and sustainable products are rejected as threats to established securities and as coercive measures of left-wing and feminist agendas. Consequently, we continue to regard regulatory measures such as supply chain legislation, provided that they are consistently enforced, as the primary instrument for preparing societal production and consumption for the ecological demands brought about by the climate crisis.

What future research directions do you see stemming from your work?

Schrör: We see this on two levels. On the one hand, we want to contribute to research into sustainable consumer products and believe that we have made an important first step in this direction. However, further research is undoubtedly necessary. Research into the further development of the market shares of such ecologically enriched products is important, as is the development of parameters for categorising actual sustainability. With our framework, we are also discussing different ways of defining sustainability. Further work is needed to achieve greater clarity here.

Gajewski: On the other hand, we are interested in how capitalism as a whole is coming to terms with crises such as climate change and other major upheavals. We have shown that Boltanski and Esquerre's model of analysis is suitable for providing good explanations beyond the expansion of the luxury industry - this expansion is also a late capitalist finding. We believe that this capitalist

commodity value model can also be applied to other, neighbouring areas, in particular the (sustainable) digital economy.

Eltje Gajewski, Simon Schrör, The standard form under pressure? On the ecological re-configuration of product presentation using the example of consumables, *Socio-Economic Review*, 2024; <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwae020>