

Sustainable consumption communication: A review of an emerging field of research

Daniel Fischer, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands, daniel.fischer@wur.nl
Presenter: Daniel Fischer, daniel.fischer@wur.nl (in person)

Communication plays an important role in promoting sustainable consumption. Yet how the academic literature conceptualizes and relates communication and sustainable consumption remains poorly understood, despite growing research on communication in the context of sustainable consumption. This presentation provides an introduction to the academic session by introducing a first comprehensive review study of sustainable consumption communication (SCC) research as a young and evolving field of scholarly work. Through a systematic review and narrative synthesis of N=67 peer-reviewed journal articles, we consolidated the research conducted in this field into four distinct types: communication as an approach to (1) behavior change, (2) self-empowerment, (3) systems change, and (4) reflection on current discourses and practices around sustainable consumption. Our findings reveal that most journal articles focus on incremental changes in individual consumer behavior (“weak” sustainable consumption) and employ communication as an intervention tool with little reference to communication science and theory. They also reveal integration challenges arising from the disciplinary diversity and fragmentation characteristic of the research field. Future research should develop shared frameworks and terminology, diversify its foci, synthesize relevant evidence, and innovate critical perspectives that go beyond one-way business-to-consumer communication. The results of our review can serve researchers engaged in sustainable consumption communication to better systematize their efforts and contribute more effectively to changing systems of consumption in the future. To put the framework to use, we will contextualize the other contributions to the session in the framework.