

Do connoisseur consumers care about sustainability? Exploring coffee consumption practices through netnography

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305

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Abstract

Purpose – The coffee industry has experienced two major trends: the development of connoisseur consumption of specialty coffee and the importance of sustainability. Despite the increasing concomitant relevance of both trends, literature on how sustainability has been interlacing with connoisseur consumption is rather limited. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse how connoisseur consumers (CC) integrate sustainability into their coffee consumption practices.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a qualitative netnographic approach through an interpretive cultural analysis of specialty coffee bloggers narratives, conceived as a specific sub-group of CC that tend to be particularly active on social media.

Findings – Through the lens of social practice theories, the study reveals that CC are likely to implement and perceive sustainability very differently from the dominant mass market as subject to the influence of their shared rituals, values, norms and symbolic meanings. Such findings are relevant under a managerial perspective as they also generate insights on how to foster environmentally friendly practices in coffee consumers as well as on how to create more sustainable marketing strategies.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the literature on coffee consumption behaviour and sustainability. First, by analysing actual behaviours rather than intended, the study offers an alternative approach to the dominant paradigm of linear decisions models in the study of sustainable consumption. Second, because CC possess a unique consumption style, different from the mainstream market, the analysis has led towards the identification of alternative sustainable consumption patterns and enablers.

Keywords Connoisseur consumers, Coffee, Sustainability, Social practice theory

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

As coffee continues to be one of the most traded goods in the world and consumed by a large proportion of the worldwide population on a daily basis (Samper and Quiñones-Ruiz, 2017; Pascucci, 2018), over the past two decades, the coffee industry has witnessed deep changes in consumer behaviours mostly driven by two important trends: the development of the global specialty coffee market and the increasing importance of sustainability issues (dos Santos *et al.*, 2021). The first trend has changed coffee perception from commodity to specialty product, embedded with cosmopolitan nature, rich in identity value and popular among what the literature has identified as connoisseur consumers (CC) (Shaker Ardekani and Rath, 2020). CC have been defined as experts in a given consumption domain, consuming products not to satisfy utilitarian needs but as a sign of distinction and status (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1995)

CC are rich in cultural and economic resources, tend to reject mass-produced products and embrace goods that are designed to cater to a personal sense of worth (Shaker Ardekani and



Rath, 2020; Kozinets, 2002; Quintao *et al.*, 2017). On the contrary of mainstream consumers, CC perceive consumption as a form of hedonism and symbolism through which they build their own identity and status among peers (Samoggia and Riedel, 2018).

Alongside connoisseur consumption, sustainability and ethical issues have also started to severely impact the coffee industry by unravelling the existence of an increasingly environmentally and socially concerned consumer. Specifically, the increasing awareness of environmental and social problems is pushing consumers to change their habitual purchase behaviours and values. In the coffee industry too, consumers have been increasingly asking for more sustainable practices such as fair-trade coffee, ethical sourcing and energy and waste minimisation (Guimarães *et al.*, 2019; Samoggia and Riedel, 2018).

Nonetheless, despite the increasing concomitant relevance of connoisseur consumption and sustainability, literature on how and in what ways sustainable consumption has been interlacing with connoisseur consumption is rather limited. In this regard, prior research shows that CC have generally been considered to behave more sustainably than mainstream consumers (Kumar and Smith, 2017; Papaiconomou *et al.*, 2016; Samoggia and Riedel, 2018). In particular, by valuing the provenience of goods, their quality and ethical attributes, it has been proven that CC tend to be particularly sensitive towards the environment and sustainability (Quintao *et al.*, 2017; Shaker Ardekani and Rath, 2020; Guimaraes *et al.*, 2019). Interestingly, though, studies that investigate how sustainability and connoisseur consumption interlace have mostly adopted behavioural intention models approaches, which analyse the rational and cognitive states driving CC consumption decisions.

Behavioural intention models are characterised by predicting consumers' behaviours as the result of individual decision-making processes (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). Therefore, behaviours are considered rational processes that can be predicted through consumers' attitude, perception and values (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Hargreaves, 2011).

Nonetheless, as behavioural intention models focus on intended rather than actual behaviour (Hargreaves, 2011), there is still very little understanding on how CC act in relation to sustainability and, in particular, on how they have been practically incorporated into their coffee consumption practices (Perera *et al.*, 2018).

Accordingly, to investigate CC actual rather than intended behaviours, social practice theories (SPT) have been considered as the most suitable theoretical framework for the analysis. In fact, SPT offer an alternative approach to the dominant paradigm of linear decisions models as they conceive behaviours as practices, seen as sets of actions that take place within a wider socio-cultural system (Giddens, 1984). SPT, in this view, raises a series of radically different questions on how sustainability is embedded into already established, and often routinised, behaviours (Warde, 2005).

SPT shift the focus on how consumers engage with consumption and how their behaviours unfold into practices (Shove *et al.*, 2012). SPT take a more holistic approach to the understanding of sustainable consumption, which, in fact, can better explain consumption complexities and nuances (Iyanna *et al.*, 2019; Hargreaves, 2011).

Based on the above premises, using the theoretical lens of SPT, the scope of the paper is to investigate how CC integrate sustainability into their already established and unique consumption practices.

In answering this question, the paper fills two important theoretical gaps within the literature on sustainable consumption and consumer behaviour. First, as the paper studies actual behaviours, it enriches current theories on sustainable consumption, which mainly focus on intended behaviours (Hargreaves, 2011; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). The second gap relates to the analysis of sustainable consumption within the specific context of CC. In this regard, the contribution of this study lies in the fact that CC possess a unique consumption style, very different from mainstream consumers. In fact, it has been argued that CC, because of some special consumption characteristics, like cultural consciousness or

the symbolic value attached to consumption, are unlikely to passively conform to the pseudo-sustainable indoctrination of the dominant mass market (Carfagna *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, their analysis can reveal different ways to perceive and implement sustainability in comparison to mainstream consumers, leading to the identification of alternative sustainable consumption patterns and enablers.

The study of the entwinement between CC consumption and sustainability also opens an interesting area of research from a managerial point of view. CC have often been considered as “lead users”, considered to possess great potential to influence other consumers. Therefore, the influence they exercise on other consumers might instigate sustainable micro-practices that can create paths for a more sustainable societal behaviour (Kozinets, 2020). Accordingly, the paper also aims to generate insights on how to foster environmentally friendly practices in coffee consumers as well as on how to create more sustainable marketing strategies that are in line with CC practices.

More specifically, the paper focuses on a specific sub-group of CC: specialty coffee bloggers. Bloggers are, in fact, considered as a valuable source of data about consumption as, through a constant online interaction with their audience and other bloggers, they are likely to openly share a great amount of information about their consumption practices, values, opinions and so on (Hsu and Tsou, 2011). Furthermore, as their ideas are often embraced and shared by the larger community of their followers, they might reveal beforehand what consumption trends might develop in the near future (Doane, 2009). Finally, as the study wants to obtain an in-depth and culturally rich understanding of CC practices through the analysis of their narratives, netnography is considered to be the most suitable methodological approach (Kozinets, 2020; del Vecchio *et al.*, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Social practice theory and sustainable consumption

Practice theory has been gaining increased attention in consumption studies to counteract the strong focus on linear decision models to explain consumer behaviour. The principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of behaviour come from the development of the practice and not from the individual decision-making (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Accordingly, individuals act as the *carriers* of a practice (Shove *et al.*, 2012). Practices can be seen as ways of doing things, routinised types of behaviours that are deeply embedded within everyday lives (Schatzki, 1996).

As there is no unified approach to the definition of what a practice exactly is, the paper focuses on the various components that make up a practice (Shove and Pantzar, 2005) as well as the connections between its elements (Warde, 2005). Specifically, this paper conceives a practice as an assemblage of materials, competencies and meanings that are integrated together by practitioners through regular and repeated performance of series of actions (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Shove *et al.*, 2012; Schatzki, 1996). As Shove *et al.* (2012) pointed out, only through the immediacy of doing and successive moments of performance, the “pattern” provided by the “practice-as-an-entity” is reproduced and sustained over time.

Materials refer to the physical aspects of a practice and include tools, objects, infrastructures, hardware and the body itself (Shove *et al.*, 2012). Materials assume relevance when individuals give them meanings, gain skills through them or make rules about them (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). When materials are used, because of their intrinsic properties, they might trigger a practice transformation (Warde, 2005).

Competencies – often referred to as “skills” (Hargreaves, 2011; Breadsell *et al.*, 2019) – encompass the know-how, knowledge and understanding that are crucial to perform a certain practice (Giddens, 1984; Shove *et al.*, 2012). Such know-how can be referred to as the understanding of appropriate doings and sayings required by a practice in a given context (Schatzki, 1996). The higher the level of competences possessed by an individual for a given practice, the more the individual is likely to properly perform the practice and to reach a

position of expertise that allows him/her to critically assess the practice, identify potential issues or problems and come up with solutions to improve it. This process might eventually lead to a transformation of the practice. Nonetheless, practices that are deeply eradicated or performed in un-reflected ways are more difficult to change (Gherardi, 2016).

Finally, meanings include norms and social conventions (explicit or implicit) shared by a group of people to which individuals refer to in order to properly perform a practice (Schau *et al.*, 2009; Warde, 2005). Meanings might also include symbols, feelings and aspirations that are relevant to a practice (Shove *et al.*, 2012). Symbolic meanings might be ascribed to objects or to specific actions and, because of their hidden nature, they can only be inferred by observing how individuals interact with each other in a specific context (Schatzki, 2002).

Interestingly, literature on sustainable consumption has been overlooking the above aspects and paying far more attention to the identification of beliefs, attitudes and values as predictors of changes toward pro-environmental behaviours. In fact, the more popular theories on sustainable consumption perceive pro-environmental behaviours as the product of individual decision-making processes and more efficient technologies (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). In particular, the “behavioural-attitude gap” remains one of the most unresolved and problematic issues in sustainable consumption literature since, even if an increasing number of consumers is nowadays concerned with environmental and social aspects, they rarely transform their intentions into a green purchasing behaviour (Blake, 1999; Carrington *et al.*, 2014; Young *et al.*, 2010). Hence, attitudes do not always translate into behaviours, and individualist paradigms seem to fail short in understanding the complexity of ethical and sustainable consumption (Iyanna *et al.*, 2019; Hargreaves, 2011). Consequently, different authors (Susky *et al.*, 2021; Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger, 2014) have started to advocate the need for new theoretical approaches that consider sustainable consumption’s embedment into a range of social contexts and people’s daily routines. So far, SPT has been applied to investigate the purchase and disposal of households products (Beatson *et al.*, 2020), the use of resources (Breadsell *et al.*, 2019), food consumption (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014; Fifta *et al.*, 2020) and sustainable commuting (Iyanna *et al.*, 2019).

According to SPT, a more sustainable consumption could be achieved through the change of one’s current practices (Warde, 2005). In fact, the main components of a practice – materials, competences and meanings – are likely to change, disappear or evolve (Thurnell-Read, 2018; Hargreaves, 2011; Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Accordingly, this might lead to a change in the practice, depending on how these elements are deeply embedded into someone’s habits and to what extent the practice is routinised (Bourdieu, 1984). At times, new elements might even prompt the creation of a new practice, which did not exist before. However, it is important to emphasise that, when a practice has become a routinised habit, performed without too much need for reflection or cognitive engagement, it is often resistant to change (Shove and Walker, 2010; Wilhite, 2010). Therefore, making the practice more sustainable is rather critical (Liedtke *et al.*, 2013).

2.2 *The practice of specialty coffee consumption of the connoisseur consumer*

As previously discussed, CC are educated, sophisticated and consider coffee drinking as a serious leisure activity (Guimaraes *et al.*, 2019; Quintao *et al.*, 2017).

To understand how CC construct their consumption practices, this section draws on SPT as well as on the work of Bourdieu on taste (1984). In his book “Distinction”, Bourdieu (1984) discusses the link between taste and social structure. According to Bourdieu, taste is central for the reproduction of a social structure and is associated with social status. Social status is achieved with the accumulation of what Bourdieu calls cultural capital: knowledge and competences that are accumulated through education and experience. Therefore, cultural capital becomes the linchpin of a system of distinction in which taste confers social status to people (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital can be objectified through the possession of highly valued objects or embodied by performing the correct practices in a given domain.

The notion of cultural capital is extremely important to understand how CC perceive and perform consumption. In fact, drawing on Bourdieu (1984), it can be argued that CC are likely to possess different levels of cultural capital based on how much competences and knowledge they have accumulated. The higher the level of cultural capital, the more CC will show a discerning taste, which is ascribed with symbolic meaning as it confers social status (Bourdieu, 1984). In the case of specialty coffee, the possession of cultural capital is translated into a continuous appreciation and recognition of good quality coffee, according to given norms and conventions (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). The possession of coffee evaluation skills, such as a refined sensitivity towards different coffee aromas and appearances, the recognition of the optimal temperature, the impact of the cup on taste, are all competences considered as signs of one's possession of cultural capital (Quintao *et al.*, 2017; Kozinets, 2002).

CC must also follow pre-established norms for storing, preparing and disposing coffee (Kozinets, 2002; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). In fact, the meticulous and pre-determined approach that CC adopt in performing coffee-related practices make them identifiable to "rituals". Rituals are usually defined in opposition to habits, which are routinised actions instinctively performed by all consumers for utilitarian or functional reasons. By contrast, a ritual can be defined as an ensemble of competences through which materials are ascribed with symbolic meaning and entail a continuous engagement with different materials (coffees, coffee shops, equipment) and pre-established norms for long periods of time (Schatzki, 2002).

One of the most important rituals of CC is what Bourdieu calls "the taste transformation ritual", which involves a progressive corporeal training and a continuous elaboration of procedures through which taste becomes more refined and the competences needed to consistently appreciate and recognise good-quality coffee are developed. According to Bourdieu (1984), taste then becomes a discriminative faculty through which consumers are classified according to the knowledge they possess in a given consumption domain and which differentiates CC from mass consumers.

To properly perform rituals, CC must know and follow specific systems of meanings, such as norms, values or beliefs, which are usually shared, accepted and respected by all CC (Warde, 2005). The more these systems are eradicated into the practice and collectively accepted as social conventions, the more CC feel normative pressure to their observance and will put effort to respect them (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013).

Such systems are usually set in opposition to mainstream consumption (Kozinets, 2002; Thornton, 1996). For example, in the case of specialty coffee, CC believe that low-quality coffees have very similar aromas, are poorly processed and incorrectly roasted. For CC, coffee should be consumed only in boutique cafes, which use high-quality beans, sourced from small farmers and prepared by adopting innovative brewing techniques and equipment (Samoggia and Riedel, 2018; Guimaraes *et al.*, 2019). Coffee chains are perceived as low quality because of the uniformity and predictability of coffee taste and their association with commodity logics (Thompson and Arsel, 2004). Therefore, as sustainability is a value that has, in fact, increasingly been embraced by the dominant culture, its negotiation into CC systems of shared meanings might become problematic as they are unlikely to passively accept the sustainability promoted by the mainstream market.

To conclude, drawing on SPT and the work of Bourdieu, the theoretical part has outlined and explained how CC perform their consumption practices, placing particular emphasis on those elements that make their consumption style different from mainstream consumers. Such elements can be summarised in the following key points:

- (1) Predominantly performing practices as rituals instead of habits;
- (2) Ascribing symbolic meaning to competences and materials; and
- (3) Sharing a number of implicit systems of values, norms and beliefs.

Accordingly, the analysis will investigate how sustainability fits into CC systems paying particular attention to those aspects that make their consumption different from mainstream consumers.

3. Research design and methodology

3.1 Netnography

310

As the research aims at uncovering how sustainability has been implicitly embedded into CC consumption practices, netnography is believed to be the most appropriate method for a number of reasons. First, as a qualitative approach able to address critical knowledge about a more nuanced and empathic meaning of consumption, netnography allows to obtain an in-depth and culturally rich understanding of CC practices in a real-life context (del Vecchio *et al.*, 2020; Cayla and Arnould, 2013). Indeed, netnography can be considered as a way of viewing data and understanding the world as “a cultural matter”. Moreover, originally mastered by Kozinets as a form of online ethnography, netnography has been recently rephrased to deal with the advent of social media and the variety of data available today. Specifically, netnographic approaches build on participants’ observations in their own natural context and the researcher’s subjective interpretation or understanding of social systems with their shared cultural meanings (Kozinets, 2020). In doing so, the researcher’s construction of reality, perceptions and experiences play a critical role in representing the dynamics of the phenomenon. Therefore, to correctly interpret the data, the researcher must be familiar with the phenomenon under study. The collected data might consist of online observations, visualisations, data scraping, archival work, interviews and active engagement with new forms of data collection (Kozinets, 2020).

The netnography of this paper has focused on the analysis of specialty coffee bloggers meant as members of the specialty CC community. Since CC practices have mostly developed through online interaction among members, especially via social media, such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as via several blogs run by passionate consumers and professional baristas, bloggers represent the most suitable object of analysis (Quintao *et al.*, 2017). Specialty coffee bloggers have received substantial media attention, which has been referring to them as “The First Generation Coffee Celebrities”, coffee-geeks who are just “crazy, passionate nerds” about coffee (The New Yorker, 2019). For them, consumption is a true cultural experience associated with a specific lifestyle, which they enjoy sharing with like-minded individuals through a consistent online interaction (Kozinets, 2002; Quintao *et al.*, 2017). In fact, blogs have historically been known as online diaries, deeply subjective and personal, used by consumers to build an identity based on their own unique sense of self and on their community values and norms (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Belk, 2014; Erz and Christensen, 2018). Additionally, by offering consumption guidance on what products to consume and how, bloggers shape key discourses within cultural fields (Doane, 2009). Such a critical role of cultural intermediaries somehow contributes to the development of new practices (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014; Warde, 2005; Thurnell-Read, 2018).

Therefore, in this study, specialty coffee bloggers practices are considered as the object under observation, while bloggers as the carriers of the practice (Warde, 2005).

3.2 Data collection and coding

Data were collected starting from two bloggers posts mentioning the most influential coffee blogs in 2019 (Kozinets, 2020), compounded with the blogrolls of the initial 40 blogs and, being bloggers’ particularly active on Twitter, their Twitter followers who were also specialty coffee bloggers. The number totalled to 74. Subsequently, an additional screening process was made to dismiss more than one-year inactive accounts, corporate blogs and blogs not

addressing sustainability at all. After this last cut, 43 was the final number (Appendix). Although sharing the same values and norms in relation to coffee consumption, the bloggers under analysis were rather heterogeneously varied in terms of country of origin, following and type of blog. For example, while some blogs mostly focused on product reviews such as coffee equipment, others would focus on suggestions on how to make better coffee, while others would retain a more personal style writing about their subjective experiences when visiting cafes. Some blogs were run by professional baristas with a large following, while others were run by consumers with just a passion about coffee with a smaller and more limited audience.

The actual data collection started in March 2019 and was performed by two different members of the research team. To specifically select posts discussing topics related to sustainability, each blog was manually searched via an Advanced Google Search. NCapture was used for data extraction of posts including these words: sustainability, sustainable, recyclable, reusable, compostable, disposable, eco, fair trade, organic, shade-grown, environment, environmental footprint. Bloggers' posts were eventually complemented by Twitter data of each of the initial 74 bloggers accounts, collected as datasets through NCapture. In total, we analysed 222 blog posts (including comments) and 856 tweets.

The analysis followed an integrative inductive/deductive interpretative approach, as seen in [Hollebeek et al. \(2017\)](#). Data were coded through the software NVivo following an inductive approach from empirical to conceptual ([Gioia et al., 2012](#)), which abstracts concepts from the subjective interpretation of the data, and it looks for emerging themes within the implicit meaning of the narratives to then use them to generate theory from the bottom up ([Kozinets, 2020](#), p. 315). The aim of this approach is to understand how specialty coffee bloggers incorporate and create meaning of sustainability in relation to their connoisseur coffee consumption practices. To preserve bloggers' expressions, data were first coded using an open coding approach ([Gioia et al., 2012](#)), and during the second-order analysis, axial coding ([Strauss and Corbin, 1998](#)) was used to identify similarity and differences among the first-order codes. This process merged topics related to each other into new higher-order more abstract themes ([Gioia et al., 2012](#)), following a thematic analysis ([Terry et al., 2017](#); [Kozinets, 2020](#)). An example of the full coding process can be found in [Table 1](#).

The emerging themes were then analysed within the context of the extant literature of SPT and CC ([Taylor and Bogdan, 1984](#)) and reorganised into more abstract aggregate dimensions relevant to identify how bloggers connoisseur consumption practices incorporate sustainability ([Gioia et al., 2012](#)). The themes are presented in the next section.

4. Findings

4.1 Connoisseur consumers habits and sustainability

This theme looks at how CC incorporate sustainability into their habits. As previously discussed, habits relate to routinised practices performed for utilitarian reasons such as practical solutions to problems ([Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017](#)). Although habits are not peculiar to CC and are usually performed by all types of consumers, CC still engaged with them either through their performance or, at least, openly expressing opinions on their blogs. Two largely discussed habits were takeaway consumption and coffee pods. Usually, these practices are largely adopted by mainstream consumers as they are more efficient, convenient and faster ways to consume coffee. Nonetheless, they are also considered as highly unsustainable because of the amount of wastage they produce in terms of disposable cups and used pods, which are very difficult to recycle.

Interestingly, CC were acknowledging their convenience, but were also proposing alternative approaches to make them more environmentally friendly. For example, in the case

local shop". Overall, CC seemed to favourably accept reusable cups, slowly turning them into the appropriate object to use and, consequently, making their adoption a shared norm (Schatzki, 1996; Warde, 2005). Therefore, CC would put more effort into changing such habit (McCracken, 1990): "*Great job making reusable, desirable. With a mug like this, I'd gladly deal with the 'inconvenience' of carrying it and washing it, just to be seen with it*" (Brian's Coffee Spot).

The establishment of reusable cups as the appropriate doing and as the correct social convention (Warde, 2005) might, therefore, trigger the transformation of takeaway consumption into a more sustainable habit.

4.2 The inherent sustainability of rituals

This theme looks at how CC incorporate sustainability into their consumption rituals. As previously discussed, CC perform rituals as a sign of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), and their performance represents the culmination of particular understandings and rules on coffee evaluation (e.g. the type of cup used, the optimal coffee temperature, etc.), composed of implicit principles about storing, tasting, preparing and evaluating coffee (Kozinets, 2002; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). Discourses on sustainability subtly emerged on those narratives where different cups were assessed against the tasting rituals. For CC, the choice of the right cup was an important competence, considered as a sign of distinction, as different cups, made of different materials, would not only have a very different impact on coffee taste, but also on pleasure and gratification of the consumption experience (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982): "*people use products more when they take pleasure in using them*" (Dear Coffee I love You).

CC would evaluate cups using structural criteria, based on sensorial hints such as better taste, tactile and visual impressions (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Ceramic cups were considered as providing the best tasting experience, while disposable cups implied the devaluation of the object of consumption from its symbolic significance and were seen as one of "*the worst things done to coffee quality and the environment*". For CC, an object's aesthetic properties are equally important as they "*deal better with inconvenience if they are beautiful*" (Coffee Stylish) (Holt, 1995).

By contrast, disposable cups were criticised for worsening the tasting experience: "*specialty coffee deserves to be treated specially*". CC criticized those consumers who would still choose disposable cups not only because they were behaving unsustainably, but also because they were not showing distinction in taste (Bourdieu, 1984): "*while the environmental debate may still be out, why overlook the fact that an espresso tastes far better in a real cup? Would you drink a single malt scotch out of a paper cup?*" (The Shot).

According to CC, ceramic cups would also have the minimum environmental impact: "*For a long time, I wasn't overly concerned about my own disposable-cup footprint. That's not to say that I never use them, but for me, a cup of coffee is a treat — a pleasure to be savoured while spending some time in a café — so I almost always drink in*" (Double Skinny Macchiato).

Interestingly, though, sensorial pleasure was also confirmed as the most important criteria when CC had to choose what type of coffee to buy. In this case, personal satisfaction and taste were considered more important than adopting a more sustainable behaviour:

There is GOOD quality Fair Trade coffee and there is BAD quality Fair Trade coffee, and that it doesn't help anyone just buy blindly without considering flavour and preference (Serious Eats).

Similarly, making coffee through more simple brewing techniques (cold brewing, press pot, traditional coffee maker) was considered more sustainable than coffee pods. For CC, simpler brewing remained the most environmentally friendly as "*they do not produce as much waste as the individual coffee pods and produce better coffee*" (Coffee Museum). In this case, the object

symbolises status through showing a discerning taste (Bourdieu, 1984), and also, it implicitly objectifies the realisation of the sustainability ideal of CC (McCracken, 1990).

4.3 Criticism of mainstream sustainability

This theme analyses the delicate and highly debated topic of sustainability becoming a mainstream value (dos Santos *et al.*, 2021). As previously discussed, CC values are set in explicit opposition to mainstream markets (Thornton, 1996); therefore, the incorporation of sustainability into mass markets systems was perceived as an abuse of the value of sustainability for commercial purposes: “*What was once an alternative is now becoming co-opted and industrialized in the name of product marketing by the big coffee producers it originally intended to counteract*” (The Shot). Narratives transpired a conviction of mainstream brands greenwashing consumers, by giving the false illusion that “*the more they buy green, the more they save the environment*”. Corporate brands were accused of promoting a disposable type of consumption, convenient and fast, which sits in dialectical opposition to connoisseur consumption values: “*making coffee ritual like a water stop in marathon race*” (Bean Thinking): “*Why does convenience trump quality, sustainability, health, freshness, environment, and taste?! #kcups #SayNoToPods*” (Coffee Nate).

Criticism also emerged towards businesses being perceived as overly environmentally friendly: “*Some cafes seem too busy saving the world than to make a great-tasting espresso*” (Bean Poet). They were perceived by CC as “*trying too hard*” (Thornton, 1996): “*the list of causes and do-goodness is so in-your-face, it’s honestly a bit too much here. I applaud them for their well-intended causes, but I like to have a good espresso without feeling like I’m marinating in them*” (The Shot). In fact, CC perceived too much sustainability so overwhelming to the point of making their overall experience less pleasant.

Finally, practices such as buying fair-trade coffee or compostable pods were considered as “low-commitment sustainable actions” and, accordingly, perceived as a cheap and weak effort for conscience’s relief: “*The desire for a simple solution to exist is so strong that consumers are willing to commit to the first thing that comes by and sounds promising*” (Coffee Nate).

4.4 Supporting the mainstream market and its sustainable practices

This theme discusses how some CC would take a less radical approach to connoisseur consumption practice and, accordingly, would hold an entirely different perception on the sustainable practices of mainstream consumption. Being less invested and committed to connoisseur values would make these CC feel less pressure to comply with connoisseur consumption rules and conventions. Accordingly, they would express rather positive opinions on corporate brands and their approach to sustainability, like being appreciative of products’ convenience and quality: “*new pods improved enormously in quality of sourcing and sophisticated brewing devices bringing back the aroma and flavour of brewed coffee*”, “*Bottom line for me is, the Keurig in my office is fast, clean, makes a hot cup of coffee, and it’s just a cup of coffee . . . not a glass of fine wine*” (Commenter on Coffee Nate).

Some CC would even praise the efforts made by mainstream brands in promoting a more sustainable consumption: “*although compostable cups are not a solution*”, in fact, “*it’s better than nothing as every little bit counts*”. In fact, they believed that keeping sustainability as an elitist value would have prevented the much larger mainstream consumer group to embrace it and, in a broader perspective, do more harms than benefits:

More mainstream coffee consumers — the ones who will help build sustainable economic markets for even better coffee — will not get over their apprehension of delving deeper into coffee as long as its image is that of the self-celebrated coffee geek or judgmental coffee snob. And even we coffee geeks will eventually be stifled by Third Wave coffee’s conformity of nonconformity (The Shot).

4.5 For-here consumption and authentic sustainability

The last theme analyses how CC renegotiate sustainability as a value coherent with connoisseur consumption practices through the redefinition of the meaning they attach to sustainable behaviours. Such articulation emerged during discussions on “for-here” consumption and its association with the arousal of positive feelings such as tranquilly and peace of mind: *“specialty coffee is a treat to be pleased spending some time in a café”* and *“an invitation to be more careful, thoughtful, conscious and not to hurry”* (Bean There).

For-here consumption pushes individuals to be more sensitive and aware of their own emotions and, therefore, embrace feelings of peacefulness, tranquillity and mindfulness: *“She’s waiting for you [ceramic cup]. She does not enable you to hurry, run, or go go go. Instead, she begs you to be careful and conscious. You cannot run out the door with Her, or down the street, or take Her into a speeding car. She demands to be a stationary moment, an interruption in your journey”* (Coffee Detective).

Interestingly, for CC, the mindfulness of for-here consumption would also make individuals more environmentally conscious: *“Is there a parallel between trying to live more sustainably and the art, or science, of coffee appreciation?”* (Bean Thinking).

For CC, the path towards an environmental consciousness was associated with the taste transformation ritual (Bourdieu, 1984) as, only when a consumer has become acculturated and developed a more refined taste, is able to appreciate coffee in a more mindful and thoughtful way:

I am far too aware that I’m on a sustainability journey: There is still so much more to learn, so many new things to experience, it is a journey I’m very happy to have embarked upon (Bean Thinking).

The quote suggests how, for CC, the pursuit of sustainability almost reflects a need for self-actualisation, motivated by higher-level problems of moral meanings.

CC’ sustainability ideal is, therefore, in neat contrast with the sustainability promoted by corporate brands. They see sustainability as an authentic pure value whose respect and in-depth understanding are for an elite of coffee consumers who gradually learnt how to appreciate coffee and sustainability through the coffee acculturation journey.

5. Discussion

Drawing on SPT, the themes’ analysis has shown how CC hold a solid appreciation for sustainability’s higher purpose and are prepared to change their current routinised coffee consumption practices to embrace a more sustainable consumption (Warde, 2005). Overall, CC tend to follow a set of pre-established actions and routines that are mostly deeply eradicated habits and represent the appropriate doing in their given socio-cultural context (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). Such appropriate doings also imply the conformance to a system of rules, norms and social conventions, which is tacitly shared and accepted by CC and whose understanding permits to properly behave as well as to demonstrate status through distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, as seen in both cases of reusable cups and pods, when new sustainable habits are introduced into such systems, initially, they might encounter some resistance (Shove and Walker, 2010; Wilhite, 2010). Eventually, as their adoption becomes more entrenched into the system, they will turn into a social convention, and consumers will gradually put more effort to incorporate them into their consumption practices (Svenson, 2018).

Nonetheless, the analysis has shown that CC do have a diversity of opinions and perspectives on matters related to sustainability, which can be reconducted to their position in the practice: more committed participants are likely to contribute and play a proactive role for the development or transformation of a practice. In fact, the analysis shows that what is expected as sustainable behaviours by CC considerably vary based on how engaged they are with CC values systems. Accordingly, CC possessing different levels of commitment to connoisseur consumption values showed disagreement in relation to how they perceive

sustainable practices, especially those performed by mainstream consumers. The higher their cultural capital, the more they will embrace CC shared values and beliefs, including the refusal of “mainstream sustainability” (Thornton, 1996). Nonetheless, tensions also seemed to emerge when sustainability was not consistent with tasting rituals and the pursuit of status (Bourdieu, 1984).

Therefore, consistently with Quintao’s finding (2017), although sustainability was overall highly valued, it remained a subordinate value in comparison to the exhibit of taste and sensorial pleasure. Therefore, in the above circumstances, the overarching flair of positivism towards sustainability was somehow undermined.

Finally, CC that strictly adhered to consumption rituals were unconsciously adopting a more sustainable behaviour like, for example, avoiding disposable cups or preferring more complex home production methods, which required the understanding of different blends, water temperature, humidity, etc., as well as higher levels of investment in equipment such as grinders, filters, brewers, etc (Kozinets, 2002). Nonetheless, although more time consuming, these practices would produce better coffee and minimise environmental impact. Interestingly, such choices were mostly dictated by the exhibit of a discerning taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Accordingly, sustainability was only an incidental positive outcome of CC consumption practices.

Therefore, it can be implied that ritualised practices that serve hedonic reasons and whose performance is a sign of distinction are more likely to be sustainable as they intrinsically perform actions that reduce wastage. Accordingly, it can be argued that the performance of rituals does not require a behavioural shift towards new more sustainable practices.

6. Theoretical implications

The study has explored how CC incorporate sustainability into their coffee consumption practices, through the analysis of specialty coffee bloggers narratives. Considering the limited amount of research on sustainable practices of CC, the paper fills an important theoretical gap within the literature on sustainable consumption and consumer behaviour (Hargreaves, 2011; Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). The analysis has confirmed that CC, because of their unique consumption practices, are likely to implement and perceive sustainability very differently from the dominant mass market. Therefore, the investigation of their practices has led to the identification of alternative sustainable consumption patterns and enablers, which are summarised here below:

- (1) Strong adherence to CC values pushes them to use objects and perform actions that are intrinsically more sustainable such as in the cases of for-here coffee consumption and home production, which avoid fast and convenient habits such as pods systems. In general, adherence to CC values implies mindfulness not only in terms of coffee appreciation but also in terms of searching for authentic sustainability.
- (2) Sustainable objects that trigger new actions, which are likely to become social conventions, are more likely to be adopted (reusable cups).
- (3) A weak adherence to CC values does not necessarily imply that consumers fail in behaving sustainably. In fact, they might still embark upon those “low-commitment” sustainable practices (buying fair-trade coffee or compostable pods) which, although of minor impact, can be embraced by a larger number of people.
- (4) For CC, sustainability means more than just adopting an environmentally friendly consumption as it also entails the adoption of practices that differentiate them from mainstream consumers by showing distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). In this case, CC ascribe to sustainability a more authentic meaning dense of emotional cues as well as considered as a mindful process leading towards self-actualisation.

- (5) As seen in the cases of pods and reusable cups, consumers whose identification with CC values is weak will be more reluctant in modifying their unsustainable unreflected practices as they value convenience and are not prepared to renounce to it for the adoption of more sustainable practices.
- (6) Brands that are perceived as “trying too hard” in appearing sustainable might lose credibility in the eyes of CC. Furthermore, they might also lessen the pleasure of tasting experiences since an excessive exposure to sustainability might divert their focus from coffee appreciation.
- (7) Consumers with a stronger adherence to CC values tend to choose coffee based on status and preferences, regardless of the fact that coffee has been produced sustainably or not.

Second, as the paper adopts an SPT approach and investigates actual behaviours rather than intended, it enriches current theories on sustainable consumption studies, which predominantly focus on studying sustainability through behavioural intention models. Shifting the focus from intended behaviours to actual has allowed to gain a more holistic vision of sustainable consumption, which better takes into consideration its complexities and nuances.

7. Managerial implications

In terms of managerial implications, the analysis of how sustainability interlaces with CC unique consumption style and the identification of different enablers of sustainable practices can provide practical recommendations to firms wanting to enhance the sustainability of their products, communicating more sustainable ideas and, eventually, educating consumers to become more sustainable.

When targeting consumers with strong adherence to CC values, firms should avoid too much emphasis on sustainability as they might perceive it as a lack of attention to the more important coffee quality as well as trigger a sense of guilt, reducing the pleasure of the coffee tasting rituals. Furthermore, they might even question the authenticity of the brand's approach to sustainability. Sustainable objects that hold a symbolic value can be used for product strategies such as cross-selling or upselling and lead highly invested consumers towards an escalation of involvement and investment into sustainability (McCracken, 1990) as they reflect their need for self-actualisation, which can be achieved through an acculturation towards coffee appreciation. Brands should be wary of using attributes that can be associated with mass consumption – e.g. fair-trade – as surrogate criteria to coffee quality with consumers with high levels of cultural competence. Finally, the study also demonstrates the value of bloggers as a source for the acquisition of important information on the sustainability practices of CC.

8. Limitations

Finally, the paper presents some limitations, which might prompt future research development. First of all, the study is based on a small sample of coffee bloggers and their related Twitter accounts. This can limit the generalisation of the findings. To improve the significance and reliability of the results, future research should use larger dataset by gathering information via additional social media monitoring tools. Combining the netnographic richer and more sensible insights with big datasets provided by social media monitoring (Reid and Duffy, 2018) could be a very promising and innovative approach to obtain a more holistic understanding of consumer behaviour and consumption trends. Secondly, the study has focused on a specific cluster of coffee consumers that can be considered as a single online community. To learn more about the habits and conventions of other coffee consumers, future studies should study how sustainability fits with the practices of further communities. Third, the number and type of observations were limited to online

data. This allowed to gain insights into CC everyday practices, as it is acknowledged that consumers are used to express their narratives in public (Gopaldas, 2014). However, to have a richer understanding of how sustainability practices can be fostered in the coffee industry, offline data should be collected, e.g. observing the CC inside cafés or during other purchasing and consumption scenarios.

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Appendix
List of the specialty coffee blogs included in the sample

Blog name	URL	Blog name	URL
1 A Cuppa Day	acuppaday.tumblr.com/	23 KC coffee geek	kccoffeegeek.com
2 Coffee Detective	www.coffeeedetective.com/	24 The Coffee Compass	thecoffeecompass.com
3 Coffee Stylish	coffeestylis.com	25 Brian Coffee Spot	www.brian-coffee-spot.com
4 Fancy a Cuppa	www.fancyacuppa.co.uk	26 Coffee Me	coffeeme.cafe
5 Jim Seven	jimseven.com	27 Coffee Corner	coffeecorner.com
6 Putting weird things in coffee	puttingweirdthingsincoffee.com/	28 From coffee with love	fromcoffeeewithlove.com
7 Bean There	beanthere.at	29 Make good coffee	makegoodcoffee.com/
8 Coffee and Crumbs	coffeeandcrumbs.net/	30 The pour Over coffee	www.thepourover.coffee
9 Dear Coffee I love you	dearcoffeeiloveyou.com	31 Coffee Companion	companioncoffee.com
10 Fresh Grind	frshgrnd.com/	32 Cups of London coffee	100cups.blogspot.com/
11 Love and Coffee	/love4coffee.de/en/	33 Nordic Coffee Culture	nordiccoffeeculture.com
12 The Coffee Concierge	thecoffeeconcierge.net	34 I need coffee	ineedcoffee.com/
13 Coffee Blogger MKE	coffeebloggermke.video.blog	35 Pure Coffee Blog	purecoffeeblog.com
14 The Coffetographer	thecoffetographer.com/	36 Vancouver Coffee Snob	vancouvercoffeesnob.com
15 Coffee Grind Guru	coffee grindguru.com	37 Scott rao	scottrao.com
16 Get a coffee maker	getacoffemaker.com	38 The cortado	www.thecortado.com
17 Nicholas Cho	tastemade.com/	39 Seattle coffee scene	seattlecoffeescene.com/
18 The Way to Coffee	thewaytocoffee.com	40 The little black coffee cup	thelittleblackcoffeecup.com/
19 Bean Ground	beanground.com	41 COFFEE GIRL NEEDS	coffeegirlneeds.wordpress.com/
20 Coffee Nate	CoffeeNate.com	42 Coffee Gear Lab	coffeegearlab.com/
21 Coffee or bust	coffeeorbust.com/	43 Coffee Area	coffeearea.org
22 Fried Coffee	friedcoffee.com		

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