

Consumer Behavior

THE STUDY OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

Consumer behavior is closely linked to people's identity, individual values, motives, and goals. "Consumer Behavior" as a subject at the University of Bern uses theories and methods from psychology and economics to understand why consumers behave in certain ways and what individual characteristics and external factors lead to behavioral changes. The Institute of Marketing and Management's [Department of Consumer Behavior](#) aims to promote health and sustainability behavior among consumers, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. To this end, it carries out applied research and practice projects with partners such as federal offices, NGOs, or businesses.

How is consumer behavior linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Through their behavior, consumers collectively leave behind an ecological footprint that is too large for sustainable development, as evidenced by the increasingly early date of Earth Overshoot Day [1]. However, individual consumers are not solely responsible for the environmental crisis: our needs for products and services are also heavily shaped by society [2]. Our current ways of producing, transporting, trading, and consuming goods are causing greenhouse gas concentrations to rise to levels that are harming our ecosystems. Risks to climate and biodiversity are increasing, and food security, human health, and prosperity are in jeopardy.

Consumers have the power to reduce the harmful effects of their behavior on the climate and on nature. By basing their choices and actions on sustainability goals, they could put pressure on producers, retailers, and policymakers. Promoting sustainable behavior is also a key socio-political concern and an increasingly important goal for many states and communities of states. This legitimizes both research into behavioral change and the application of research findings in practice.

Research in the field of consumer behavior is interdisciplinary. It draws on approaches from social, environmental, and health psychology, as well as from marketing and

behavioral economics. Marketing is a proven, systematic approach to changing behavior. Interventions address the specific behavior of a particular target group. The focus is not necessarily on the target group whose behavior deviates the most from the desired behavior; rather, interventions typically target groups where the greatest net effect, or overall positive change, can be expected. For example, if the aim is to promote increased public transport use as opposed to car use, the preferred target group is not necessarily frequent car drivers. Instead, it might be people in suburbs with good access to public transport [3], as they have the opportunity to change their behavior. A comparison of suburbanites with people living in the city center, who also have access to very good public transport and actually use it, shows how great the potential is. Ideally, interventions should be based on a scientific approach, using theories from psychology and behavioral economics, as well as qualitative and quantitative measurements of the specific target group

Example: An awareness campaign to reduce food waste

Promoting behavioral change in relation to food waste is an area with great potential to contribute to sustainability (SDG 12). Up to one third of all food purchased by households ends up in the bin, despite still being fit for consumption. Consumers are largely aware of the consequences of this waste, such as financial losses (**SDG 1** and **8**) or damage to the environment (**SDG 1, 6** and **14**) and the climate (**SDG 13**), but they still find it difficult to avoid food waste.

Indeed, it is well documented in consumer research that knowledge has a limited impact on our behavior. Knowledge transfer and information campaigns alone are usually not enough to change people's behavior [4, 5]: achieving behavioral change requires motives, incentives, or barriers. It is important to take these motives, incentives, and barriers into account when designing and implementing effective prevention and intervention measures. For example, in the case of food waste, environmental motives and social norms have been shown to encourage consumers to refrain from throwing away food that is still edible, or to choose to buy fruit and vegetables with minor aesthetic defects (**SDG 12**). Accordingly, restaurants could contribute by informing their customers how many diners take

home leftovers – for example, by noting this information on a card displayed at the table. In this way, knowledge from consumer research can help prevent food waste (SDG 2 and 17).



How does the University of Bern's Department of Consumer Behavior incorporate the topic of sustainability into research and teaching?

In terms of research, the Department of Consumer Behavior investigates, among other things, how overarching goals can change consumption habits [6], whether social media influencers can play a role in health promotion, how information about the behavior of others can encourage the use of reusable takeaway boxes [7], what product labels can promote sustainable choices, [8] or how target-group-specific interventions can reduce resource waste [9, 10].

Transfer from research to practice is becoming increasingly important. For this reason, the Department of Consumer Behavior works with practitioners to develop solutions that promote sustainable behavior. Partners include the federal government, local authorities, NGOs, and other organizations.

In terms of teaching, students gain a general insight into the diverse topics of consumer behavior and have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge in the field of social marketing. Students develop an understanding of the actions, thoughts, and feelings of consumers, learn about theories and models of behavioral change, and are able to derive behavior- and target-group-specific interventions from the existing literature. Studying this topic prepares them for roles in business and policy, where they can help promote sustainable consumer behavior.

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Copyediting of German version: Dr. Marion Leng (CDE)

English translation: Tina Hirschbuehl and Marlène Thibault (CDE)

Layout: Simone Kummer (CDE)

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Version 1.0

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This document was compiled within Project 7.9, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), of the University of Bern. Project 7.9 supports the Vice-Rectorate Quality in incorporating sustainable development into teaching at the University of Bern. Project 7.9 focuses on disciplinary and interdisciplinary connections with sustainable development, helping the faculties and institutes to identify these connections and make them visible to a wider audience.



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