

# ONE PLATE OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE PLEASE, TO GO

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF REUSABLE PACKAGING NETWORKS

A ROTTERDAM-BASED CASE STUDY

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NEDERVEEN

# ONE PLATE OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE PLEASE, TO GO

*An anthropological exploration of reusable packaging networks*

*– a Rotterdam-based case study*

Submitted to the department of Cultural Anthropology of Utrecht University as  
part of the requirements for the master's program Sustainable Citizenship

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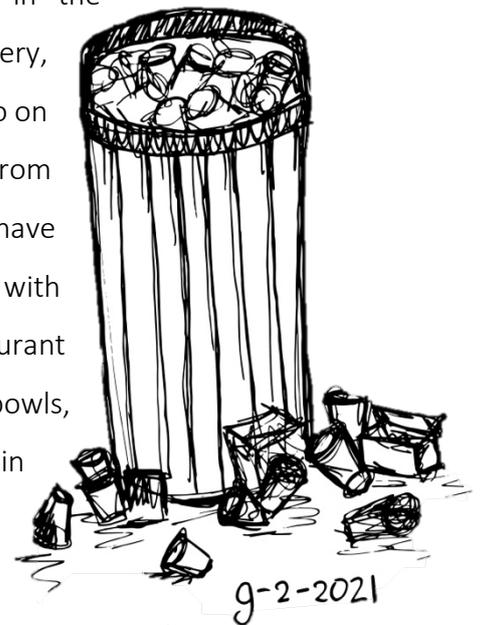
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## Introduction

Take-out drinks and meals are becoming increasingly common, especially during the COVID-pandemic, which made restaurants and cafés close doors and transition to take-out menus. Single-use packaging is the most common way of packaging such drinks and foods. In the last quarter of 2020, the number of take-out meals delivered in the Netherlands by Thuisbezorgd.nl, the market leader in home-delivery, was 39% higher than in 2019 (Obbink 2021). Coffee take-out is also on the rise; the NOS reported that coffee-to-go is the new getaway from home during lockdowns (Dorlo 2020). In the past year, I have witnessed trash bins in the streets of Rotterdam overflowing with coffee cups and meal wrappers. At the same time, restaurant management saw their storage fill up with single-use cups, bowls, containers, and lids. The vast majority of these disposables end up in incinerators and contribute to one of the main issues of the current unsustainable planetary situation: the unprecedented amount of waste produced by consumer societies (Reno 2016).



Alternatives to single-use packaging are emerging; deposit-based networks offer reusable packaging. In Belgium and Germany, reusable coffee cup systems are offered at a large scale<sup>1</sup>, and reusable food container networks are also emerging<sup>2</sup>. When ordering foods or drinks, consumers can rent a reusable carrier instead of a disposable one in exchange for a deposit. Within such systems, the consumers usually decide if they want to use this reusable carrier. In Rotterdam, two young entrepreneurs started a reusable packaging system in 2018. Later joined by a third co-founder, they now run the PackBack network, which is the subject of this research. I became acquainted with PackBack through collaboration. In the late fall of 2019, a friend and I started a reusable coffee cup project aiming to decrease the amount of disposable packaging used in the to-go coffee market. In collaboration with PackBack, we ran a pilot of our deposit-based system in December 2020 and January 2021. Specific courses I followed during the Cultural Anthropology Sustainable Citizenship master's programme, starting in September 2020, made me critically reflect on the sustainable value of our project.

<sup>1</sup> <https://recup.de>; <https://billiecup.be>, accessed on May 21, 2021

<sup>2</sup> <https://rebowl.de>, accessed on May 21, 2021

These reflections were the starting point of this thesis and centre around the concept of neoliberal individual responsibility. Did our project merely reproduce neoliberal logics of self-responsibility, or did it carve out spaces for structural change?

### Critical reflections and neoliberal individual responsibility

Neoliberalism is a system based on free-market ideology, which assumes that human well-being will be maximized through opening up all human action to the market sphere. Proposedly, a natural equilibrium beneficial for everyone, will establish itself through market forces. Free trade, strong private property rights and free markets characterize this institutional framework (Harvey 2007). Neoliberal reforms have prevailed in large parts of the world since the 1980s (Nixon 2011). The Netherlands was no exception, and neoliberal logic has remained the foundation of many policies ever since (De Jong 2013). The emphasis on the individual in neoliberalism can be traced back to two main features. Firstly, it is in line with the economic rationalities underlying neoliberal ideology, proposing that the liberal market is the just source to allocate resources (Hamann 2009; Harvey 2007). Secondly, redeployment of state power shifts responsibility from the government to individuals and corporations (Harvey 2007; Hibou 1998; Wacquant 2009).

Social scientists explored neoliberal eco-governance in relation to responsibility (Blühdorn 2009, 2014; Reno 2011). Such governance shifts the responsibility for environmental welfare from public or corporate to private and voluntary actors (O'Reilly et al. 2020). Neoliberal eco-governance rests on making individuals responsible for environmental goals (Reno 2011). Swyngedouw (2005) elaborates on this argument. He suggests current eco-politics are deceiving as they claim to fully embrace environmental concerns, while they are an integral part of neoliberalism, underscoring the values of self-managed risk and self-responsibility (Swyngedouw 2005). I refer to the experienced responsibility for environmental goals on behalf of individuals as *neoliberal individual responsibility*. To cope with concerns about an uncertain future, people turn to self-regulatory practices. For instance, the consumption of eco-labelled or 'green' products (Micheletti 2003; Seyfang 2005; Van Amstel, Driessen and, Glasbergen 2008).

Feelings of responsibility are often accompanied by feelings of guilt. Jensen (2019) argues that the neoliberal market exploits the rhetoric of 'the guilty humanity' for their benefit,

thereby distracting from the crucial role of corporations in countering climate change processes.



The personal dilemma I encountered while reading these theories concerned whether the reusable coffee cup system was reproducing these eco-governance politics of self-responsibility and guilt, thereby undermining structural change. Arguing along the lines of Jensen (2019), did the cups reinforce individualistic conceptions of guilt and cause people to turn to green consumption for absolution, thereby fuelling economic growth and commodity development? Did the emphasis on individual action – by making the disposable-or-reusable choice a consumer decision – reinforce the logic of neoliberal individual responsibility? The reproduction of neoliberal individual responsibility and environmental guilt is problematic as it reinforces the economic system which underlies the ecological crisis (Jensen 2019; Swyngedouw 2005). Theorists propose that structural change - to a society with a different economic system and cultural values - is needed to counter this crisis (Blühdorn 2009; Hickel 2020). Therefore, the reproduction of neoliberalist conceptions of responsibility and guilt undermine structural change.

### Re-shaping of neoliberal power structures

Anthropological accounts of local experience show how the neoliberal power structures shape said experience. However, these studies simultaneously illustrate how global processes are contested and re-shaped through the everyday (Freeman 1993; Millar 2014; Ong 1988). Thus, neoliberal capitalism is not an all-determining mechanism; it is reproduced and changed by individuals in their everyday practices (Tsing 2000). Hence the value of the anthropological lens; by examining how hegemonic ideologies play out on a local scale, it contests the idea of subordination, drawing attention towards the mutual influence of local experiences and larger power structures.

Foucault's concept of *subjectification* proves helpful in addressing this interplay. Subjectification is the process of the formation of the subject (Rutherford 2007). It refers to the ways in which the subject is led to observe, analyze, interpret, and recognize itself as a domain of possible knowledge (Steward and Roy 2014). This formation of the subject may be repressive, as well as productive. Firstly, individuals are subjected to a greater authority

through power. Power structures in society constrain and encourage individual action (Heller 1996). However, Foucault argues that inherently, when there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance (Heller 1996). “Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application” (Foucault 1980, 98). Thus, subject formation is repressive *and* productive; the subject is shaped by power structures and simultaneously is the author of the action. To further explain this productive side of self-making, Foucault indicates how one may use technologies of the self. Referring to “the ways in which people choose to become certain kinds – often more *virtuous* kinds – of subjects, through the application of techniques for improvement” (Rutherford 2007, 298). Hence, we are autonomous subjects who can intervene in our own lives and make changes. I will use the concept of agency to refer to this capacity and will to act autonomously. To oppose the individual action inherent to neoliberal individual responsibility, I now turn to collective action.

### Collective action

Daily responsibilities are increasingly directed towards nature and social justice (Seyfang 2005). As explained above, this may reflect neoliberal eco-governance logics of self-responsibility. However, as the concept of subjectification shows, individuals are not simply subjected to, and shaped by, power structures. Individuals have the capacity to contest these structures within their everyday practices. To address how this plays out, I explore the concept of collective action. Collective action is often presented as the missing factor in solving the ecological crisis (Jensen 2019). Due to our society’s individualistic and self-maximizing character, we fail to collectively organize around the goal of ecological well-being and stop climate change processes (Nixon 2011; Patel and Moore 2018). Collective action refers to all action for which some form of collectivity, a group, must be formed (Welch and Yates 2017) and is taken in light of a collective goal (Scott and Marshall in Barnaud et al. 2018). In contrast to the concept of agency, collective action does not involve contestation *per se*. Theories of sustainable citizenship offer one answer to where we may find spaces for collective action.

Regarding green consumption, theories of sustainable citizenship (Micheletti 2003; Micheletti and Stolle 2012) present an alternative to the theories on neoliberal eco-governance. Individual consumerist choices may be a political act, since daily responsibilities are directed towards nature and social justice (Seyfang 2005), citizenship and consumption

overlap (Trentman 2007). Sustainable citizenship, a concept proposed by Micheletti and Stolle (2012), describes such practices by which individuals may incorporate political goals in their everyday lives. Through *green political consumerism*, people consider everyday shopping episodes part of a larger political cause (Klintman and Boström 2013). This theory proposes that there is more to green consumerism than neoliberal individual responsibility, namely the collective dimension of a larger collective cause.

However, it is not merely shopping episodes that are being altered to political goals. Individuals may alter purchase and non-purchase behaviours to larger causes (Klintman and Boström 2013). Furthermore, *social entrepreneurship* is rising and refers to those entrepreneurs whose aim is to address a social issue through the development of their organization (Bacq and Janssen 2011). Therefore, I define *acts and practices of sustainable citizenship* as all those acts and practices an individual engages in aimed at safeguarding nature and human well-being (Micheletti and Stolle 2012).

Based on these reflections and literature, this thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

*How does initiating or using reusable food packaging engender and/or encompass individual acts and practices of sustainable citizenship?*

*To what extent do these practices reflect neoliberal individual responsibility and collective or political action?*

This research is an anthropological exploration of reusable packaging networks seeking the political and collective dimension in neoliberal individual responsibility. It illustrates how individuals and businesses are simultaneously shaped by the structures of our neoliberal consumer society and contest these very structures. Such simultaneous shaping and re-shaping can be illustrated by how users and initiators of the PackBack network express their worries about social justice and the ecological crisis. These worries translate into practices of sustainable citizenship, simultaneously oriented towards neoliberal individual responsibility and collective action. Instead of opposing each other as in a dilemma, I argue these two concepts should be seen as a continuum on which practices of sustainable citizenship find

themselves. Moreover, these practices may contain spaces for political action; they may contest the structural conditions of neoliberal society in a multitude of ways.

### The PackBack network explained



Tristan and Tine, two Rotterdam-based entrepreneurs in their twenties, initiated PackBack. Tristan has a commercial background and is a professional hockey player. Together with Tine - who has a background in social entrepreneurship, ran a social start-up and worked in the food delivery industry - they started a company called Shared Packaging in 2018. Back then, they aimed to develop a deposit-based reusable packaging system to eliminate as many disposables from the delivery market as possible. Their business bases itself in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and consequently focuses on restaurants within this area. Shortly after, Marko joined their team as technical co-founder. He is trained in informatics and focuses on all technical issues. In the spring of 2020, Shared Packaging had developed into PackBack. It no longer was a packaging system – offering reusable packaging to restaurants - but a network connecting actors in the packaging system aiming for systemic change (Figure 1). In June 2020, they ran their first pilot. PackBack has continued to run pilots and expanded the number of actors using the network ever since.

# GOVERNMENTS



Figure 1 - The PackBack network, author's own

PackBack is a network that connects actors in the packaging system and allows reusable packaging to circulate. It is a platform which packaging suppliers use to make their deposit-based packaging system operational. The organization aims to engender systemic change by making the packaging supplier responsible for the packaging they supply. This opposes the linear model the packaging sector commonly uses; packing is sold in bulk, and after delivery, no responsibility is taken for the further lifespan of the materials. By changing the current mode of ownership, PackBack aims to fundamentally change how we currently go about packaging foods, drinks, and the waste this generates. When working with PackBack, packaging suppliers keep ownership of the reusable packaging and pay PackBack for using their infrastructure. Restaurants, cafes, offices, and caterers pay the packaging supplier for renting the reusable packaging. The deposit flow is indicated in Figure 1: the restaurant group pays the deposit to the packaging supplier (in this case PackBack) and the end-user pays the deposit to the restaurant group. PackBack takes care of the refund of the deposit to the end-user through their app. This app is at the heart of the technical infrastructure PackBack offers to packaging suppliers. It allows for the tracking of packaging, the deposits to flow, and everything needed for the consumer to return the packaging. Tracking the packaging allows for determining the ecological impact of the system through the gathered data.

Currently, three packaging systems are operating within the PackBack network. In Belgium, Red-use is operating in Mechelen. In the Netherlands, Paardenkoper runs a coffee cup system. The PackBack food container system is the third system operating. This system was the starting point of the network. This research focuses on the PackBack network and system. The restaurants and consumers interviewed are those using this system. I chose this specific system as it is the largest and most established of the operating systems.

PackBack reusable packaging circulates in the PackBack network. The used containers are collected through drop-off bins in the restaurants or via home pick-ups. Cleaning is done by the PackBack crew and takes place at a cleaning installation. After cleaning, the packaging is redistributed among the restaurant group. The system further functions as outlined above; the PackBack system is a packaging supplier using the PackBack network (see Figure 6).

## Research methods

In order to answer the research questions, I depend on a family of methods. During 24 in-depth interviews with consumers, partners and the PackBack initiators, acts and practices of sustainable citizenship were explored. These conversations centred around respondent's motivations to take part in the network and how these motivations are connected to feelings of responsibility. To solidify and complement the interviews, I have conducted critical discourse analysis (CDA) of governmental and corporate marketing efforts. CDA is "where analysis seeks to understand how discourse is implicated in relations of power" (Janks 1997). By focusing on patterns in visual and verbal texts, CDA helps illuminate patterns that can be utilized in illustrating which discourses are at work in society (Janks 1997). Moreover, my weekly personal fieldwork diary and drawings will serve as a second means to strengthen the gathered insights. I do this through autoethnography, an approach that seeks to systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 273). Through critically analyzing my own experience, I unravel my acts and practices of sustainable citizenship and reflect on the attached meanings.

Consumers are all those end-users of containers circulating in the PackBack system. Recruitment of this population took place in one of the participating restaurants, and during bike pick-ups (the end-user can request the bowl to be picked up at home). The recruited sample consisted of 13 end-users who were primarily high-educated individuals in their 20s or early 30s. Prior to the interview, the participants were asked to execute a photography exercise, these photos were used to facilitate a dialogue. A more thorough description of this method is provided in chapter three.

Partners willing to talk about their business and collaboration with PackBack were recruited through Tristan. As a result, I interviewed four Rotterdam-based restaurants that offer PackBack reusable bowls to their customers and one local food platform that uses PackBack bowls. The motivations and acts of sustainable citizenship among the PackBack initiators were unravelled through in-depth and follow-up interviews as well as through participant observation during collaboration and time spent at the office. The interviews were based on these observations, previous collaboration, and online content analysis of podcasts, articles, and social media posts.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted both online and in person. This decision was made in consultation with the respondent. If a suitable space was available and both the respondent and I felt comfortable meeting in person, we did. If not, the interview was conducted online. I noticed considerable differences between these two interview locations, which are worth a brief reflection. The offline location allowed for a more subtle transition between the more formal interview and informal conversation before and after the interview. The conversation prior to the interview allowed both the respondent and me to get acquainted, which resonated during the interview. The conversation after the interview often provided interesting reflections on the interview itself on behalf of the respondent and myself in the form of a more personal conversation about the subjects discussed. These conversations proved to be challenging to reproduce in the online location, resulting in these interviews providing a different type of data compared to the offline ones.

Moreover, seeing one's house, workspace or restaurant may provide interesting information or subjects for conversation, as illustrated by the following interview experience.

*When walking into the restaurant, the space before the counter was filled up by two large electric bikes. In the back, Wessel, the owner, was cutting through a large bowl of beetroot. "I'll just finish this, I'll be right there", he told me. I sat down on a stool. "Are these bikes yours?" I asked him. "I lease them myself", he told me. He hires delivery drivers himself, Wessel further explained, as the delivery platforms do not take good care of their employees in his opinion. "Working for these platforms doesn't offer these guys any security nor a decent wage".<sup>3</sup>*

This observation and short conversation allowed me to learn something about this restaurant and owner, which I could not learn from online research and might have been lost in an online interview. Values of social justice were clearly important to Wessel, and this conversation and observation permitted me to incorporate this theme in our interview.

### Ethics and positionality

This section elaborates on issues of ethics and positionality within the research. Grassiani (2019) argues that "anthropologists are expected to be conscious of the different positions and

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<sup>3</sup> Fieldnotes, 20-4-2021, At Wessel's restaurant, Rotterdam

roles they have within the field and the way these influence and shape their study and writings” (25). Establishing the close relationships which are at the centre of the ethnographic methods often employed by anthropologists (Grassiani 2019) was difficult due to COVID-restrictions and the busy schedules of PackBack partners. However, anthropology is not ethnography (Grassiani 2019; Ingold 2017). Where ethnography is a mode of enquiry (Grassiani 2019), anthropology “is a generous, open-ended, comparative, and yet critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world we all inhabit” (Ingold 2017, 22). My enquiry on meaning-making practices on behalf of the consumers and partners, therefore, abstains from ethnographic methods but still is anthropological; this research explores the everydayness of acts and interpretations of meanings from the bottom up (Grassiani 2019). I have attempted to study with the research participants; to explore their meaning-making practices and imagined futures together through dialogue. When it comes to the relationships with the PackBack initiators, reflexivity is of great importance. Since these relationships grew closer during our past collaboration and throughout the fieldwork, the friendly character of our relationships may shape the data collection and analysis.

The anonymity of the research participants in the consumer population is granted. All possible identifiable characteristics are left out and pseudonyms are used. The anonymity of the organization members and partners is not granted, due to their online traceability and absence of sensitive information. If participants request to read this research, the thesis is forwarded after completion. All participants receive a summary of the research to ensure reciprocity.

Lastly, I will shortly reflect on the act of translation. Anthropology is often defined as an act of translation; we translate people’s stories into works to educate ourselves and others (O’Reilly 2012). “Translation is as concerned with mode, form, genre, and intention as it is with meaning and language, and is fraught with power dynamics and dominant forms of knowledge construction” (Besteman 2013, 4). Considering this research, I want to reflect on the more direct act of translation. All but one interview was conducted in Dutch, and therefore most excerpts and quotes in this thesis are translated into English. Such translation, like the first broader type, is inherent to subjectivity. Through reflexivity about my position as a researcher and possible desired outcomes, I aimed to translate as truthfully as possible. However, as an inherently subjective act, the translations of excerpts have undoubtedly been prone to my interpretation. By moving back and forth between my translation and the original transcript

and identifying the underlying sentiment within an excerpt before translation, I tried to ensure the truthfulness of my translation. Moreover, when in doubt of its truthfulness, a second reader assessed the translation.

## Structure

Through exploring empirical data of the conversations with respondents as well as my own experience, chapter one shows how individual actions and meaning-making reflect the structural conditions of neoliberal society. I elaborate on the concepts of neoliberal individual responsibility and environmental guilt and address how these concepts play out in Dutch governmental campaigns and PackBack's marketing efforts. The second chapter illustrates how the practices connected to the PackBack network do not merely reflect the neoliberal power structures presented in chapter one, but encompass spaces of collective action. Instead of opposing each other as in a dilemma, I argue that neoliberal individual responsibility and collective action are connected in a continuum. Where such collective does not contain contestation per se, chapter three shows the spaces for political action present in the practices of sustainable citizenship respondents engage in. This thesis ends with a brief conclusion recapitulating the main argument and shortly outlining possibilities for further research.

## Chapter 1 – Guilt

### *“We are all responsible”*

This chapter elaborates on the way in which individual actions and meaning-making of the users and initiators of the PackBack network are influenced by the power structures of neoliberal capitalism. I start with a vignette illustrating how feelings of responsibility and guilt have manifested in my own life throughout the fieldwork. Secondly, this chapter explores how the concept of neoliberal individual responsibility is echoed in Dutch governmental campaigns calling for climate action and PackBack’s communication efforts. Thirdly, I elaborate on the eco-friendly rhetorics used in both these governmental campaigns and corporate marketing efforts. This neoliberal narrative or eco-friendly rhetoric is a recipe for guilt, as it makes individuals responsible for ecological goals through accumulative pinpricks of guilt delivered on a day-to-day basis. I illustrate this argument with ethnographic material articulating feelings of guilt and responsibility. Lastly, I show how the trust in market logic as a just source of social change noteworthy for neoliberalism is echoed in green consumption practices.

### Vignette – Feeling guilty

*Today is one of those perfect spring days. The sun is shining, clouds are scarce, and a cool breeze makes the air feel fresh and crispy. After sitting behind my computer for hours, I’m longing for some fresh air and sunshine. I slip into a coat and grab my sunglasses from the dinner table. Time for a walk! As soon as I turn the corner and cross the street which leads to the promenade that borders the nearby river, something catches my eye. Shimmering bits of aluminium foil, colourful see-through remnants of bags, the sound of a can rolling on the pavement. Waste is everywhere. Plastic forks lying about, lids of bottles stamped into the grass, fast-food containers and mouth masks floating around in the water. I have lived here for years and walked this route more than I can remember, though the waste had never stood out to me like this. Now I see it all around, all the time. I started picking it up. Only to discover it had returned hours later. Feelings of powerlessness, frustration and anger started to take hold of me. To the point where I waited around the street corner and watched the kids eating take-out food from the butcher shop in my street. Waiting for them to drop the aluminium foil holding their wrap, so I could ask them to pick it up.*

*Later that day, I return from my trip to the supermarket. While unwrapping and putting away my groceries, an uncanny feeling strikes me. Why do I produce so much waste? Shouldn't I do something about it? Shouldn't I try and shop for my groceries elsewhere? I was about a month and a half into my research at this moment. Most of my interviews were conversations about wasting less, flying less, consuming less. Burdening the planet less. 'Don't you think that's important?' my respondents asked me. I noticed how I became hyper-attentive to waste; from the trash lying about in my neighbourhood to the food my roommate bought but didn't eat before it perished. From the leftover pasta my mom thoughtlessly threw away after dinner to my shopping habits.*

*That evening I sit down on my couch, feeling guilty. I watch an episode of a documentary series about waste and feel bad about myself. Should I change to a more sustainable bank? Should I stop flying? I shouldn't have ordered those new sneakers. I wasn't doing enough to save the world, was I? Strangely, these feelings worked paralysing. I haven't changed banks; I still shop at the supermarket, and I plan to fly to Spain after submitting my thesis.<sup>4</sup>*

I wrote this vignette a couple of months into the fieldwork. It was around the time that feelings of guilt started to take hold of me. I was constantly feeling I was not doing enough for a cause I cared so deeply about: ecological and social wellbeing. This guilt and the questions accompanying this sensation form the basis of this chapter. In my experience, feelings of guilt were coupled with feelings of responsibility. I feel responsible for the waste I generate, for the waste the society I am a part of generates, which is why I feel guilty for being complicit in its generation. From doing groceries to buying new shoes, my habits felt more and more connected to the planetary issues our consumer society is causing. Social scientists have explored such feelings of responsibility and guilt. The remainder of this chapter will draw from these theories. I first explore the connection between neoliberal eco-governance and such feelings by discussing governmental and corporate marketing efforts.

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<sup>4</sup> Vignette, 25-2-2021, Rotterdam



Figure 2 - Visuals Postbus 51 campaign 'Everyone does their part'

### ***Practical tips for a sustainable life***

*“Everyone can aid the climate. The government, corporations and you, everyone does their part. Big or small, expensive, or affordable. While some insulate their floors, others focus on wasting less food. Find your personal way to take climate action. Look at the options below to see what suits you.” Postbus 51<sup>5</sup>*

This is the latest Dutch governmental climate action campaign, though a similar narrative has been centring Dutch governmental campaigns about the ecological crisis since the 80s (Tielbeke 2020). We are all responsible; therefore, we should all act to reach a solution. People are asked to do their part in messages calling for do-it-yourself ecology. *Reduce, reuse, recycle.*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.iedereendoetwat.nl>, accessed on 4-5-2021

*Do your part. Buy efficient light bulbs. Fly less. Use your bike. Eat less meat. A better world starts with you!* The banners used in the campaign show such practical ways you can take climate action. On the campaign website, they are shown in a slide show above the campaign text. The first banner advocates choosing fruits and vegetables with little climate impact. *Eat locally and seasonally!* The second banner portrays a person who rents a car when he needs to move instead of owning one. *Drive less!* Lastly, the campaign advocates for insulating your house, considering energy reduction. *Save energy!* For a long time, I considered this narrative the only right way to go about responsibility for ecological goals. The way I live impacts this planet's ecological and social fabric negatively, which is my fault, and I should change to be less of a burden. The vignette reflects this experienced pressure to adjust my daily life. I feel responsible and guilty for the waste I generate, for the negative ecological and social impact of the groceries I do, for all that I consume beyond necessity. This felt responsibility echoes the rationalities of neoliberal eco-governance.

Neoliberal eco-governance, Reno (2011) proposes, “hinges on making individuals responsible for environmental goals” (26). As the individual bears the burden, it is individual behaviour that should change to fight climate change processes (O’Reilly et al. 2020). The Rijksoverheid website echoes eco-governance narratives; “this campaign wants to stimulate everyone in our society to contribute to 49% emission reduction in 2030. This goal is agreed upon in the Klimaatakkoord”<sup>6</sup> (climate agreement announced by the Dutch government in June 2019<sup>7</sup>). Individuals are called upon as responsible for ecological goals set by the government. Throughout the previous year, my opinion on responsibility issues tilted through reading about neoliberal individual responsibility. Campaigns as presented above strengthen the myth of a guilty humankind, in which all individuals are equally responsible for the ecological crisis. However, this responsibility is unevenly distributed among more and less culpable individuals (Hickel 2020). Racked by the guilt of ruining the future liveability of the planet, people are requested to change their behaviour. They drive less, change their diet, stop flying, pick up trash, inspire others and consume sustainable products. The most significant harmful by-product of such neoliberal eco-governance is that it distracts from the crucial role of governments and corporations in addressing the ecological crisis by taking the far-reaching

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/01/23/campagne-effectonderzoek-iedereen-doet-wat>, accessed on 22-6-2021

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.klimaatakkoord.nl/klimaatakkoord>, accessed on 20-6-2021

measures needed to avoid ecological collapse and social turmoil (Mann 2021). Relying on the same economic system that got us into this pendant situation to get us out of it, many scholars argue, is not an effective remedy (Blühdorn 2009; Hickel 2020; Nixon 2011; Patel and Moore 2018). The current neoliberal economic system centres around the core proposition that the economy must grow indefinitely. In practice, however, this has resulted in continuous exploitation of the natural world, including the human species (Patel and Moore 2018). As the influential 1972 report by Dennis and Donella Meadows argued, there are limits to growth (Meadows, Meadows, and Randers 1972). Infinite growth in a world with a finite biosphere is a recipe for disaster. Those who are culpable to a larger extent hide behind the myth of a guilty humankind while reproducing an economic system that is destroying our ecology.

### *Everyone does their part – a critical discourse analysis*

We will now return to the governmental campaign. Using CDA, I illustrate how the discourse of a guilty humankind and neoliberal individual responsibility are employed to reinforce power relations. When analysing the visual texts, a few things stand out. Firstly, the portrayed people's faces are either not visible or look away from the viewer. Instead of posing for the photo, their gaze focuses on what they are doing; they are photographed as if in the middle of an act. The latter underscores the power of the individual to take climate action. Secondly, the photos are all taken up close, thereby suggesting the intimacy of daily lives. This enables the viewer to envision taking similar actions. In short, the visuals underscore the individual's power to act in their own life. In the verbal text, the reader is personally addressed in an active voice; 'the government, corporations, and you', 'what suits you best'. Like the visual texts, this assigns power to the individual. The recurring emphasis on individual action reflects neoliberal eco-governance, which shifts responsibility for climate goals to individuals (Reno 2011). Furthermore, the beginning of the verbal text, and the campaign's title, emphasise that *everyone* does their part. Within the use of everyone - explained as governments, corporations, and citizens – we find the discourse of a guilty humankind. Why should you act? Because everyone is responsible. Climate action is thus framed within the discourse of neoliberal individual responsibility and individual action, not in the discourse of collective action. The latter reinforces neoliberal logic and, as illustrated in the remainder of this chapter, individually felt guilt for a collective problem. Interestingly, a liberal undertone accompanies the suggested individual action; *take climate action, but do it your way*. This liberal narrative reflects the social

conditions that this text is produced in. The neoliberal politics, which have dominated Dutch institutional politics since the 80s, emphasise such personal freedom (De Jong 2013; Harvey 2007). Moreover, the text does not differentiate in culpability, between different individuals or between governments, corporations, and citizens. Within the word *everyone* they are grouped as one mass culpable for attaining ecological goals. Where individual action is emphasised, collective action is almost absent. Though the role of governments and corporations is acknowledged, their action is pushed into the background by the call for individual action. In conclusion, the discourse of a guilty humankind and neoliberal individual responsibility continues to exist in Dutch governmental campaigns and is reinforced through these efforts. This is problematic as it distracts from the crucial role of governments and corporations and reinforces the idea that isolated individual efforts are the key to social change (Jensen 2019; Tielbeke 2020).

### *Neoliberal narratives in practice*

What struck me was that, though I no longer believe in a guilty humankind, feelings of responsibility and guilt keep manifesting themselves. Apparently, neoliberal eco-governance narratives are too deeply rooted to be erased by a year of studying disproving texts, documentaries, and podcasts. During conversations with respondents, I proved not to be the only one whom these narratives took hold of, as shown by the following excerpt:

*Myriam: I think that you are responsible as an individual, I do think that companies should carry out a sustainable message, but I think that you can take action as an individual. And, everyone is responsible for climate change, it's not just those large countries and multinationals, but we are responsible as well, as one little person in the Netherlands. So, I believe everyone should do their part.*<sup>8</sup>

Myriam, one of the PackBack consumers, recognises that companies should contribute to the solution. However, she emphasises that everyone is responsible and, therefore, we should all act. Responsibility is not differentiated; big countries, companies and individuals alike are all responsible and should act accordingly. Feelings of responsibility for ecological issues were

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<sup>8</sup> Consumer, 9-3-2021, Online

present among most of the respondents. The following excerpt shows feelings of responsibility, connected to the idea of the rational individual as proposed by neoliberalist thought.

*Jona: I feel kinda responsible, I think...Yeah, everyone generates waste, and you determine how much of it you generate through the choices that you make. [...] To actually see that what we're doing is negatively impacting our home, our planet, that is why I feel responsible for changing my lifestyle.<sup>9</sup>*

Jona explains how she feels responsible and that, as a rationally acting individual, negatively impacting the climate is a choice. The neoliberal narrative proposes the individual as rational and self-determining and “allows complicity in systematic environmental destruction to be framed as voluntary – the result of intentional, reasoned choice. The individual in this configuration is one that can be held culpable, as they consciously choose to participate in ecological harm” (Jensen 2019, 72). About half of the respondents used this logic; *I can choose to make environmentally friendly decisions; thus, I am responsible if I do not do so*. Another interesting feature is the use of ‘we’, also found in Myriam’s reasoning. ‘What we are doing’, ‘we are responsible’, this underscores the idea of a guilty humanity in which little differentiation is made between the varying levels of culpability between different individuals and between individuals, corporations, and governments. These ideas communicate similar logic to the governmental campaign. The theories of neoliberal eco-governance propose a shift of responsibility has taken place, from governments and corporations to private individuals. This mostly happens through communication channels, like campaigns and marketing efforts (Jensen 2019; Reno 2011; Tielbeke 2020). The discourse in the Postbus 51 campaign reflected this shift. How does the PackBack communication narrative overlap, and differ from, the neoliberal individual responsibility discourse from which the governmental campaign draws?

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<sup>9</sup> Consumer, 24–3-2021, Online

### *Neoliberal narratives and the PackBack communication strategy*

PackBack's communication predominantly takes place online. Therefore, I have analysed their two most used social media channels, LinkedIn and Instagram. Roughly three groups of posts can be distinguished (Figure 3). Firstly, photos depicting the three co-founders or other partners, in person, often accompanied by a personal story (3.1). With few exceptions, individuals look directly into the camera. Both these features – the viewer-focused gaze and the backstory - demand an imaginary social relationship. These posts underscore the collective action component of the communication strategy, as they induce feelings of connection on behalf of the viewer. To which I will return later.

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Figure 3 - PackBack social media posts, retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/packback.network>, accessed 21-6-2021 & <https://www.linkedin.com/company/packbackapp>, accessed 21-6-2021

3.1 Picture of the three PackBack co-founders, accompanied by the electric bike used for pickups

3.2 Social media post announcing the collaboration with SLA (a salad restaurant)

3.3 Picture of one of the PackBack food containers

The second group of posts announces new collaborations (3.2). Photos and videos of the bowls themselves accompanied by an explanation of the system - often placed beside a call to action for individual potential end-users or partners - are the third group of posts (3<sup>3</sup>).

In some ways, the PackBack narrative overlaps with the neoliberal individual responsibility narrative. Like the governmental campaign, the reader is addressed personally as a user of the network. This may be as consumer or potential partner; “join the Pack and

choose for waste-free delivery”<sup>10</sup>. The reader is asked to take individual action, namely, join PackBack through ordering or offering food in reusables. Moreover, the addressed individual is asked to consciously choose waste-free<sup>11</sup>, reproducing the neoliberal concept of the self-determining and rational individual. It asks individuals to “contribute to a circular system”<sup>12</sup>, which has a similar sentiment to ‘doing your part’. So far, the PackBack communication reflects the narrative of the governmental campaign; you can choose to act and should do so. We may, however, wonder to what extent this reflection of neoliberal logic within the communication strategy is deliberate. Janks (1997) argues, social conditions affect textual production: members of a society are constituted in and by the available discourses. Thus, the neoliberal discourse may not be deliberately chosen but may speak through PackBack’s communication. Furthermore, the concept of individual responsibility is less prominent in PackBack’s communication than in the governmental campaign. Where the Postbus51 texts mainly focussed on the individual responsibility to act, PackBack communication emphasises both individual and collective action. As explained above, this collective component is emphasised within the visual text and personal backstories. Moreover, this emphasis on collective action is found in verbal texts underscoring how their mission can only be achieved through collaboration. Texts emphasise how PackBack stimulates reuse “together with partners”<sup>13</sup>, and together they launch campaigns that take “the fight to the millions of disposables used”<sup>14</sup>.

Likewise, the numerous posts reporting on collaborations between PackBack and their partners underscore collective action. Altogether, PackBack’s communication efforts draw from the neoliberal individual responsibility discourse, though less prominently than the governmental campaign. Simultaneously, PackBack draws on the collective action narrative, emphasising the collective component of climate action. Therefore, the shift of responsibility is not as prominent as theories of neoliberal eco-governance propose, but significant responsibility is placed in the hands of the organisation and their partners. The following section explores how respondents understand this shift of responsibility.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/packback.network/>, post placed on 16-3-2021, accessed on 21-6-2021

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/packback.network/>, post placed on 18-2-2021, accessed on 21-6-2021

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/packback.network/>, post placed on 14-1-2021, accessed on 21-6-2021

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/packback.network/>, post placed on 18-2-2021, accessed on 21-6-2021

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/company/packbackapp>, post placed in February 2021, accessed on 21-6-2021

### *Tri-fold of responsibility*

Contradictory to what the shift in responsibility proposes, the majority of the respondents spoke of a tri-fold of responsibility; the government, corporations and individuals should act.

*Marko: I think we are all responsible. As humanity. I think everyone is responsible and should therefore act upon it. But I do think, uhm, when you take a look at how our society is designed, that this design is strongly influenced by past choices of governments and corporations. The people who were in charge. So, I do believe those are culpable to a larger extent.<sup>15</sup>*

This fragment shows how the idea of the guilty humanity can coexist with the idea of shared responsibility; *we are all responsible, and so are corporations and governments*. Marko's line of reasoning sounds similar to the PostBus51 campaign text. In contrast to the governmental text, however, Marko expresses the idea of a *differentiated shared responsibility*; we are all responsible, though some more than others. The latter goes beyond what the concept of individual neoliberal responsibility proposes, as Makro places more responsibility in the hands of corporations and governments than in his own qua humanity. Most of the respondents argued for such differentiated shared responsibility.

What resulted from this belief of shared, possibly differentiated, responsibility? Some believed that, though responsibility is shared, one can most effectively change the world through market pressure, as your consumer-voice is the most vital voice you have in this society. This idea is explored at the end of this chapter. Another common line of thought among respondents was that corporations and governments were to a larger extent culpable, though failing to act competently, resulting in feelings of powerlessness and frustration. To deal with these feelings, this group turns to agency resulting in self-regulatory practices of sustainable citizenship. Chapter three elaborates in this agentic behaviour. Noteworthy is that these different ideas may coexist; one may believe in consumer power and feel institutionally powerless simultaneously.

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<sup>15</sup> PackBack initiator, 13-4-2021, PackBack office, Rotterdam

## Environmental guilt

Jensen (2019) further elaborates on the neoliberal narrative, which he refers to as eco-friendly rhetoric; “the appeals around making small adjustments to one’s everyday lifestyle for the betterment of our planets health” (70). He does not merely refer to large governmental and corporate marketing campaigns, but to the yoghurt container that asks you to recycle, the napkin with an organic logo, and the option to compensate your CO2 footprint when pumping gas. Eco-friendly rhetorics tap into the guilt felt by individuals for the complicity in an economic system that proved devastating for the world ecology: neoliberalism (Jensen 2019). When someone holds the moral standard of environmental protection and violates their perceived obligations towards this environment, environmental guilt will likely occur (Basil et al. 2006; Pelozo et al. 2013). Scholars argue that environmental guilt can be felt both for what you do and about what you do not do (Jensen 2019; Theotokis and Manganari 2014). Respondents articulated both these expressions of guilt.

*Lisanne: Well, I didn’t fly last year, it’s actually been a year since we returned from our planned trip around the world. We were in Indonesia and planning to visit Australia and Japan [but came back due to COVID-measures]. I felt kinda guilty about that, like, ‘oh my god, I’m going to fly so much’.<sup>16</sup>*

This excerpt illustrates the environmental guilt felt for things one does, in Lisanne’s case, flying. Guilt for what one does not do was present in the vignette presented at the beginning of this chapter. I felt guilty as I was not changing banks, as I was not getting my groceries from a local platform. Environmental guilt may work both catalytic – motivative reparative behaviour – and paralytic – thus be overwhelming and evoke the reaction of ‘feeling you can’t do right’ (Jensen 2019). The experienced guilt paralysed me, there are many small lifestyle changes that I could have made, but did not. Though guilt simultaneously worked catalytic, I cleaned the neighbourhood and asked others to stop littering. Likewise, both responses - catalytic and paralytic - were present among respondents. The following excerpt shows how Bob feels overwhelmed by the amount of information concerning the negative climate impact of consumption he is confronted with:

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<sup>16</sup> Consumer, 15-3-2021, Online

*Sometimes I find it hard [to make the right decision in light of the environment]. Because more and more information is coming to light, and then you almost don't dare to [...] make choices anymore. Cause they will have a negative impact anyway.<sup>17</sup>*

Bob further explained he finds it challenging to make decisions as they most likely will negatively impact the environment and, therefore, contribute to feelings of guilt, which he experiences as highly uncomfortable. While some respondents echoed this reasoning, other respondents experienced the felt guilt as a catalytic force, as is illustrated by the excerpt by Myriam in which she discusses her car drive to work.

*Myriam: Now I do [take public transport to work], but to my former job I took the car, since that was about three times faster. But I thought about it every day. Like, gosh, I'm travelling by car again, this is impacting the environment.*

*Martine: And how did that make you feel?*

*Myriam: It sure felt conflicting, I tried to compensate for it by only taking the car to work and nowhere else. When I needed to go somewhere else, I would travel by public transport or bike. Uhm, and by compensating in other aspects of my lifestyle. So, in food, clothing, those sorts of things. But yeah, it still felt bad every time.<sup>18</sup>*

Here we see how guilt may serve as a catalytic force, as Myriam's felt environmental guilt for driving the car serves as a motivation to act in other parts of her life. Both Bob and Myriam experience guilt as uncomfortable. This negative experience of environmental guilt was articulated by most of the respondents. Environmentally unfriendly behaviours, such as wasting, high consumption levels or flying, were accompanied by bad feelings. As the theory above proposes, this was due to a violation of perceived obligations and an ideal image of the self. In contrast to these 'bad feelings', behaving environmentally friendly was accompanied by good feelings. Using the PackBack network was often connected to such good feelings, while using disposables and waste generation was connected to bad feelings. This trend is visible among both the partner and consumer populations. Likewise, among both the initiator and partner populations, sustainable entrepreneurship was connected to good and purposeful

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<sup>17</sup> Consumer, 6-5-2021, Online

<sup>18</sup> Consumer, 9-3-2021, Online

feelings. In contrast, entrepreneurship without a social purpose was connected to ‘empty’ or pointless feelings.

The good-bad behaviour dichotomy is reproduced and reinforced through the neoliberal individual responsibility discourse in marketing efforts. Through the ‘everyone does their part’ slogan, it is implied that doing nothing, in this context referring to not taking individual climate action, is no longer acceptable. Within PackBack’s marketing efforts, this dichotomy is less prevalent, though present. Using PackBack is presented as means to *support nature and your community*<sup>19</sup> and *order food in a sustainable manner*<sup>20</sup>. By labelling participating as environmentally friendly, not participating inherently is not. While the analysis of these marketing efforts partially explains the good-bad behaviour dichotomy, another explanation for the felt positive feelings may be explained by the absolute sustainable alternatives offer for the felt environmental guilt, as I explain in the following sections.

### Collective culpability and the individual burden

Environmental guilt is collective guilt, Jensen (2019) argues. We personally feel responsible and guilty for the devastating effect of the economic system we collectively participate in. Ashenden (2014) elaborates on how guilt is understood in our current neoliberal frameworks. She emphasises that guilt is the property of the individual; it is about what *you personally* do wrong. This conception of guilt is visible in the vignette. I feel personally responsible for a planetary problem. Consequently, I turn to individual practices. Jensen further argues that “the emotional frameworks used to make sense of guilty feelings increasingly reflected only the individual and thereby deflected recognition of collective guilt – a species of guilt whose uniqueness and value lay in its power to illuminate the connective threads that bind us into groups with shared responsibilities.” (Jensen 2019, 46). The governmental campaign presented at the beginning of this chapter reinforces this logic by emphasising the need for individual action to solve a collective problem. The incapability of our individualistic conception of guilt to make sense of the felt collective environmental guilt is problematic as it limits us to illuminate the threads that bind us into a group; instead, we turn our focus inwards (Jensen 2019). Thus, arguing along the lines of Jensen and Ashenden, our neoliberal conception of guilt

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/packback.network/>, post placed on 14-12-2020, accessed on 22-6-2021

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/packback.network/> & <https://www.linkedin.com/company/packbackapp>, accessed on 22-6-2021

limits collective action and stimulates individual action. The latter became evident to some extent from the practices of the respondents. Like in my own experience, guilty feelings translated into individual acts of sustainable citizenship.

## Green consumption

What do these theories of neoliberal individual responsibility and ecological guilt say about green consumption? Both argue that the individualistic notion underlying consumption as the pathway to social change maintains the conditions that undermine calls for effective climate action.

### *Green consumption and neoliberal individual responsibility*

Critics of neoliberalism and green consumption propose that green consumption upholds unsustainable consumer lifestyles. Moreover, they argue that green consumption practices maintain the system that keeps political leaders from taking the needed action to combat climate change processes (Blühdorn 2009). Corporations - such as Walmart, Coca-Cola and Nike – represent themselves as sustainability leaders. They turn to eco-business as “a tool of business control and growth that projects an image of corporate social responsibility (CSR)” (Dauvergne and Lister 2013, 2). Anthropological enquiry into these efforts has focused on problematising the corporate sector as an agent for sustainable development (Kirsch 2010; Nixon 2011; Spencer 2018). Corporations present themselves as stewards of the future planet while, in practice, using ‘sustainability’ to protect their market position. Is this the case for PackBack as an organisation and their partners? Respondents indicated that one of the motivating factors for offering PackBack packaging or initiating the network are economic incentives. The following excerpt illustrates the latter. Joris and I were discussing motivations for offering reusable packaging. One of these motivations was displaying a sustainable image.

*Martine: Why do you want to display such an image?*

*Joris: Well, I do think that there is a commercial interest behind such choices as well. I think our regulars, well, I think they believe it [sustainability] is important too.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> Restaurant manager, 31-3-2021, Online

Joris explains that displaying a sustainable image is commercially attractive, as the restaurant's customers find such an image important and will therefore continue utilizing its services. Within the partner and initiator populations, such 'use of sustainability for economic reasons' was present. Though proved more complicated than the theory proposes: sustainability is not merely exploited for economic reasons. Joris mentions, there is a commercial interest *as well*, hinting at other motivations laying beyond the market sphere. He further explains how intrinsic motivations go hand-in-hand with economic ones. Though PackBack partners and initiators did have economic motivations for offering reusable packaging or initiating a sustainable business, these were accompanied by intrinsic motivations. Chapter two further elaborates on this interplay.

### *Green consumption and environmental guilt*

To soothe the bad feelings accompanying guilt, sustainable (consumption) behaviours may be used as absolution (Jensen 2019). The following excerpt of my interview with Bob illustrates the latter. We were discussing his motivations for adjusting his lifestyle, considering safeguarding the planet's ecology.

*Martine: For whom do you do these things?*

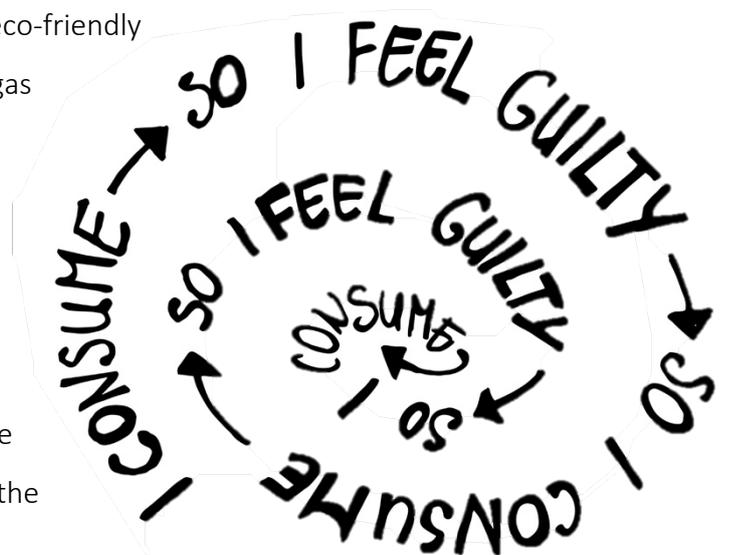
*Bob: Pff, uhm. [...] I think it's a combination of eh, knowing something has a negative impact and that there is a logical environmentally friendly alternative. Yeah, that causes me to [...] change for the wellbeing of the environment, of the planet. But simultaneously, these are things I do to feel better about myself. [...] Maybe to reduce that feeling of guilt, which is always present, to the minimum or something.<sup>22</sup>*

Bob's motivations for the acts of sustainable citizenship he engages in are two-fold. On the one hand, he is concerned about the future wellbeing of the planet and the effect of climate change processes. On the other hand, he acts to minimise the felt environmental guilt. One thus may, among other things, consume sustainably to cope with the experienced guilt. Jensen (2019) problematises the use of eco-friendly rhetorics by corporations. He argues that "being environmentally friendly is a big business – simultaneously a consequence of and cause for the

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<sup>22</sup> Consumer, 6-5-2021, Online

prevalence of eco-friendly rhetorics” (71). Eco-friendly rhetorics both frame consumption management as the most effective pathway for advancing social and ecological causes and help reify neoliberal logic. These logics “imbue the market with ethical potential and social responsibility and the public realms with market metrics” (Brown 2015, 49). You consume and therefore feel collective guilt for complicity in a devastating economic system; therefore, you consume sustainably to find absolution. Green consumption, however, takes place within the same economic system, therefore eventually resulting in feelings of collective guilt. The result is a vicious circle such as depicted in the drawing, the absolution for the felt guilt, green consumption, causes feelings of guilt. All eco-friendly messages - on napkins, yoghurt containers, gas station billboards and television commercials - serve as pinpricks of guilt; the aggregate of these pinpricks slows down effective action on ecological issues (Jensen 2019). Figure 4 shows examples of such pinpricks of guilt, photographed at the PackBack partners and found within the PackBack communication strategy.



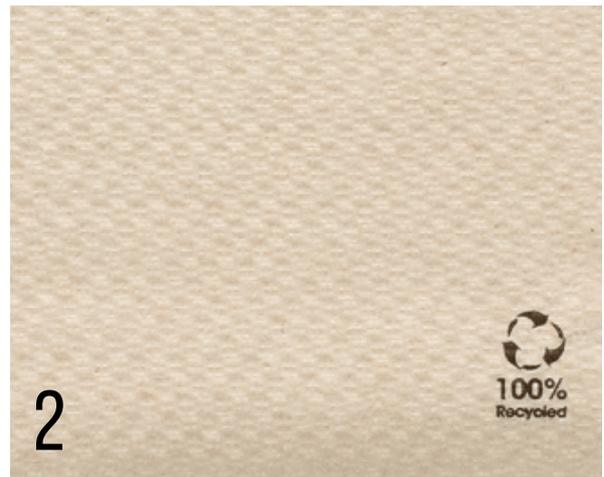


Figure 4 - Pinpricks of guilt

4.1 Paper bag used for packaging fruits and vegetables, author’s own

4.2 Napkin, author’s own

4.3 Screenshot of the user-interface of the PackBack app, retrieved from <https://packback.app/impact>, accessed on 22-6-2021

4.4 Sugar packet, author’s own

The first image tells the viewer to *make a difference* (‘Maak het verschil’) through consuming sustainably. The second shows a napkin, telling you it’s 100% recycled. The third image is a screenshot of the window in the PackBack app that elaborates on your impact. It tells you how much CO2 equivalent you have personally stopped from entering the biosphere by using PackBack. “Because of you, there is X CO equivalent less in this world”<sup>23</sup>. Lastly, the fourth picture depicts a sugar packet with the eco-friendly message that the paper bag must be recycled. Jensen (2019) argues, such eco-friendly messages used in green consumption – which constantly remind you of your guilt - are problematic as they reinforce the system which

<sup>23</sup> <https://packback.app/impact>, accessed on 22-6-2021

caused the ecological crisis in the first place. Following his argument, the sugar packet, napkin, paper bag, and application all remind you that your consumption harms this planet, and you can solve this issue by consuming sustainably. This argument raises some questions. Are all eco-friendly messages used in green consumption problematic? Are there no positive sides to asking someone to recycle their yoghurt container or use reuse instead of disposables? The following chapters will illustrate how the practices connected to PackBack do not merely reproduce neoliberal logic but carve out spaces for collective action and contestation.

### Trust in market forces

Theories of neoliberal responsibility and guilt (Blühdorn 2009; Brown 2015; Jensen 2019; Reno 2011) all propose that the market is portrayed as the most effective sphere for social change through neoliberal logic. Such trust in market forces was echoed among a part of the respondents. Many provided the same example, namely the growing amount of plant-based meat alternatives in the supermarket. They must be offered *because* consumers are demanding them; thus, *consumer demand changes the supermarket supply*. This logic was also used by Tine when discussing the role of the individual in social change. She argued that, besides taking initiative yourself, consumer behaviour is the most effective way to change the current system:

*Through the things you buy, you radiate your opinion. I believe that activism...sure it does help, but I believe your purchasing behaviour is an individual's most powerful tool. If you want something to be there, you have to buy more of it. Companies will then make sure there's more of it. So, I do believe that that is the most powerful tool an individual has.<sup>24</sup>*

This trust in market forces is, however, rarely expressed in isolation. On the contrary, it is often combined with articulating a shared, possibly differentiated, responsibility among corporations, governments, and individuals. The following excerpt illustrates the latter. Sophia and I discussed what she referred to as 'the system'; the current neoliberal mode of production and consumption.

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<sup>24</sup> PackBack initiator, 5-5-2021, Telephone call

*Martine: You've spoken about the system a few times now. How do you believe such a system may change?*

*Sophia: I think responsibility for such change partially rests on governmental shoulders. They can just tell companies that there's a cap on emissions, you know? [...] But yeah, I think we as customers [...] have a considerable amount of power, and that is why you can currently see that many meat substitutes in the supermarkets. There is a demand, and then it's there!*

*[...]*

*Sophia: I do have the feeling that when I order my food in a PackBack, or yoghurt in a glass deposit bottle, that I am triggering a small change. And maybe with my vote on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March as well. But this (e.g. using PackBack/author's note) feels a bit more practical or something.<sup>25</sup>*

This fragment shows how the idea of a shared differentiated responsibility may coincide with some trust in market forces. Furthermore, Sophia indicates practices of sustainable citizenship, such as using PackBack, come with the feeling of making small adjustments to the system she holds responsible for the ecological crisis. Most of the respondents expressed the idea that change starts bottom-up, through inspiration as shown in the second chapter or through market pressure. Rosa's quote illustrates the latter. We discussed the responsibility of others to change their behaviour considering social change.

*I think some people take the easy way. 'Ahh, big companies need to change. Ahh, governments need to change. Because it's just me, this little me, and without these big things, nothing is stopping. What can I do.' I think everyone needs to take that responsibility. Because we as consumers can change everything that companies do. We have the purchasing power so, it is, it goes hand in hand. So also politics, policies, they have to change. But they will change when there is enough pressure in society to change it. So, I think it is first on us, as people, and then on our employers and governments.<sup>26</sup>*

This excerpt illustrates the connection between the market sphere and social change proposed by Brown (2015). Rosa argues that society, corporations, and politics will change by showing

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<sup>25</sup> Consumer, 8-3-2021, Sophia's home, Rotterdam

<sup>26</sup> Consumer, 8-4-2021, Online

your political opinion through consumption. Theories of neoliberal individual responsibility and environmental guilt would argue that this is problematic, reinforcing an unsustainable situation. “The truism that in caring for the planet “every little bit helps” seems innocuous as a solitary statement, yet in the aggregate, it reinforces the logic that small, isolated changes made by individuals will add up to offset the systemic, substantial damage that occurs on a structural level each day” (Jensen 2019, 96). Many respondents expressed the idea that ‘every little bit helps’. Critics propose this idea is problematic as the structural problem has not changed through green consumption, it has even strengthened as sustainable consumerism catalyses new waves of economic growth (Blühdorn 2009). However, respondents’ practices do not limit themselves to consumption; they involve consuming less, creating and sharing knowledge, and changing fundamental lifestyle patterns such as diets. In chapter three, I argue that these changes go beyond neoliberal logic and therefore do not merely reproduce the structural problem.

## Reflection

In this chapter, I illustrated how individual actions and meaning-making reflect the neoliberal structures that form our society's fabric. The neoliberal narrative or eco-friendly rhetorics used in corporate and governmental marketing efforts advocate neoliberal individual responsibility and individual action. The analysis of the latest Postbus51 campaign showed how these logics are reproduced by governmental communication. PackBack communication to some extent reflected a similar discourse. Individualistic feelings of guilt and responsibility were reflected both in my own experience and among respondents. Scholars argue that the individualistic notion underlying consumption as the pathway to social change maintains the conditions that undermine calls for effective climate action. The next chapter explores how these issues play out within practices connected to the PackBack network. I argue that through practices of sustainable citizenship connected to the network to some extent to reflect the neoliberal power structures as described in this chapter; they simultaneously go beyond the market sphere by carving out spaces for collective action.

## Chapter 2: Collective action

This chapter explores how neoliberal individual responsibility and environmental guilt play out within practices connected to the PackBack network. I argue that the practices of sustainable citizenship connected to the network to some extent reflect the neoliberal power structures discussed in chapter one while they simultaneously carve out spaces for collective action. First, I explore how PackBack initiators, partners, and consumers incorporate collective goals into their lives by using or initiating the PackBack network. Thereafter, I discuss two elements of collective action in practices connected to the network: inspiration and feeling part of something bigger. Practices of initiating or using the network do not encompass aspects of neoliberal individual responsibility or collective action. However, they are rather to be perceived as placed on a continuum between the two.

### Responsibility and collective action

The awareness of climate change problems, social injustice and the need for environmental protection is rising in the public opinion (Blühdorn 2009; Dobson 2007). In the Netherlands, media have been reporting on increasing awareness by addressing issues such as climate shame (Giesen 2019; Pisters 2019; Rusman 2020; Slager 2020) – the felt shame for climate impact heavy consumption such as flying and eating meat – the increase in green consumerist choices (Bijlo 2018) and the needed practical adaptation to climate change effects (Van den Berg et al. 2021; Geelen 2021; Luttikhuis 2021). In anticipation of a future shaped by climate change, people engage in practices to shape their lives accordingly (Micheletti 2003; Seyfang 2005; Van Amstel, Driessen and, Glasbergen 2008). What does it mean for people to live while expecting a possibly devastating future? In what practices and acts may they engage to deal with this prospect? Chapter one proposed a first answer; influenced by the neoliberal fabric of our society, people turn to self-regulation and market-logs for social change. The beginning of this chapter presents a second answer; individuals may incorporate their worries and related collective goals into their daily lives through entrepreneurial practices.

*Tristan: “There isn’t just one party who’s responsible for the ecological crisis. I do believe real change takes place in the corporate sector, among big multinationals. That’s the place for effective change. But that change can only take place when the people, when consumers, ‘pull’ these corporations and when governments push them through legislation. And change always starts bottom-up; it starts with citizens. Always. Uhm, which is why I started this business”<sup>27</sup>*

Neoliberal individual responsibility - the experienced responsibility for environmental goals on behalf of individuals – reflects neoliberal eco-governance, the governance practices that shift responsibility for ecological goals from collective to private and voluntary actors. However, such felt responsibility can lead to much more than individual lifestyle adjustments. The quote above illustrates the latter. Tristan, one of the PackBack initiators, feels he needs to take responsibility as a citizen for stimulating the needed change to avoid ecological breakdown, resulting in the development of the PackBack network. The excerpt shows how, within his practices, neoliberal individual responsibility and collective action are connected; the felt responsibility as an individual resulted in collective action. Chapter one described how our individualistic conception of guilt results in individual action and therefore slows effective eco-governance. Similar to the critics of neoliberal eco-governance (Jensen 2019; Rutherford 2007), I argue that such individual action should be complemented with collective action. Finding collective action within the practices connected to the PackBack network challenges the thesis that individually felt responsibility results in individual action.

I have experienced something similar to Tristan myself. When starting the coffee cup project, I felt deeply worried and responsible for reducing the negative ecological impact of society. This responsibility partially resulted in behavioural changes – I stopped eating meat, avoided flying where possible, wasted as little food as I could – it became an individualizing force as chapter one proposes. However, guilt and responsibility also led to the initiation of the project. In both these examples, individual responsibility did not merely lead to self-regulation and sustainable consumption; it resulted in collective action. The felt responsibility culminated in organizing others around a common goal, namely reducing waste to lessen the negative impact of our consumer society on the planet’s ecology.

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<sup>27</sup> PackBack initiator, 16-4-2021, Tristan’s home, Rotterdam

The theories of *sustainable citizenship* presented in the introduction elaborate on this incorporation of collective goals in daily lives. Citizenship and consumption or entrepreneurship overlap as people alter their daily lives and corporate decision-making to common wellbeing (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Micheletti 2003). In line with the theories of sustainable citizenship, I argue that initiating or using the PackBack network allows individuals to incorporate collective goals into their daily lives. These practices are where consumption or entrepreneurship overlap with larger goals; they reflect the neoliberal power structures discussed in chapter one but simultaneously go beyond these structures. Collective action may include the incorporation of political goals, though it does not necessarily do so. For example, the organization around a collective goal by a group - such as the organization of a potluck dinner with your friends – can be classified as collective action though it likely does not have a political goal. This chapter illustrates how PackBack is a form of collective action. The third chapter elaborates on the political dimension of practices of sustainable citizenship.

### Incorporation of collective goals

Sustainable citizenship encompasses various expectations about how individuals and institutions should let concerns about human wellbeing and nature guide their everyday lives and decisions. Equally important, they need to do so without an immediate reward or payoff (Micheletti and Stolle 2012). The following section explores how initiating or using the PackBack network allows for incorporating collective goals into daily lives and professional decision-making across the entire process, from the initiators to the consumers.

### *Impact first – PackBack initiators*

Initiating PackBack encompasses individual acts of sustainable citizenship as the initiators chose to create this business partially for the greater good of society and the planet. Feelings of responsibility for ecological goals translated into the development of the business. How did such entrepreneurial goals translate into the decision-making process? One of the four pillars around which PackBack's decision making is centred is *impact first*. Referring to the idea that ecological impact should always be top priority in decision-making. The following examples illustrate how this plays out in practice.

Firstly, a shift in target audience took place in the fall of 2020. Instead of targeting small restaurants, bigger caterers and packaging suppliers are now targeted for participation. The initiators argue that this allows for a faster scaling, thus generating more positive impact. Since impact is measured in terms of waste reduction, a larger impact is achieved when more disposables are eliminated. This shift resulted in collaboration with packaging supplier Paardekooper – one of the market leaders in the Netherlands<sup>28</sup> - and negotiations with three big caterers are currently taking place.<sup>29</sup> Sustainable initiatives are often confronted with compromises to their sustainable values when scaling up (Singh et al. 2009). When small and catering to a niche market, one can generally decide to solely collaborate with ‘pure players’, those partners who fully embrace the same core values. When aspiring to scale up, initiatives must collaborate with bigger economic players who often do not hold similar values; thereby, they lose some purity. Research by Das (2009) shows how this plays out in practice. She explores Fairtrade Organizations’ (FTO’s) ability to adhere to their principles of social justice and development goals when they enter mainstream markets dominated by neoliberalism. On the one hand, the increased scale of FTO’s benefits marginalized producers by, for instance, creating greater financial security and facilitating the capacity to organize in unions. However, the increased scale breaks down the producer-consumer relationship. Consequently, the producers are less and less informed about the Fairtrade practices, resulting in lesser adherence to development goals (Das 2009). Thus, scale enlargement comes with a greater positive impact, as more marginalized producers can benefit, though it causes compensation on the purity of the social cause.

In the case of PackBack, the main goal in decision-making is making a bigger ecological impact. This is reflected in the decision to target larger partners. On the one hand, collaboration with big corporate players - who do not put ecological impact first - forces PackBack to compromise its corporate identity as a sustainable initiative. On the other hand, the increased number of disposables eliminated – not to mention the operational feasibility of the network<sup>30</sup> - generated through scaling may outweigh the compromises made. Marko, one of the initiators, explained:

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<sup>28</sup> <https://corporate.paardekooper.nl/>, accessed on 29-6-2021

<sup>29</sup> Tristan (PackBack initiator), 29-6-2021, phone call

We don't just look for collaborations with partners who are focused on sustainability issues. Most big companies, well, on paper, it'll say they think sustainability is super important, but in reality, that won't be the case. If they can contribute to our cause, however, why not. That only helps, doesn't it? It helps them, us, and society.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the FTO trade-off described above, the initiators argued that they do not experience a trade-off due to scale enlargement and the accompanying collaborations with large economic players. Preferably partners hold similar values, but all collaborations which enlarge the number of disposables eliminated contribute to their cause.

My collaboration with PackBack during the coffee cup project offers a second example. Within our project, the handling of the flow of deposits was a subject of discussion. My business partner and I felt deposit flows should transpire via the PackBack app and analogue, through monetary payments between the partner and the consumer. PackBack initiators

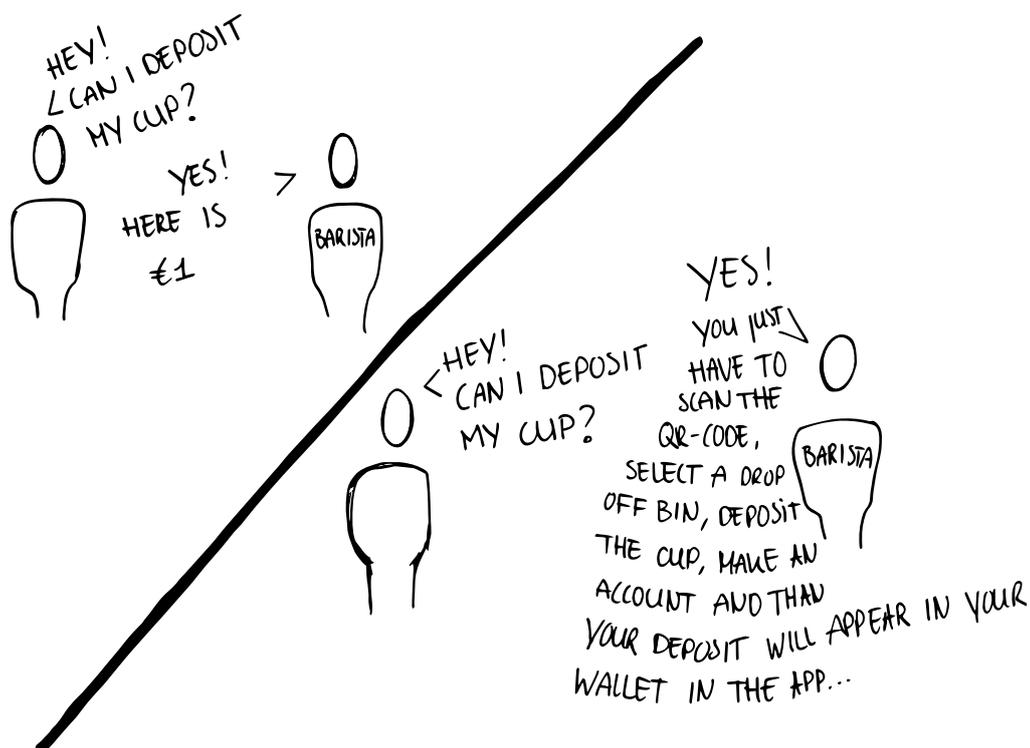


Figure 5 - Deposits: Cash vs App, author's own

<sup>30</sup> Running the network is more expensive when just small amounts of packaging flow through it, as the costs of operation can only be spread minimally. This is currently the case, and PackBack needs subsidies, and the initiators need to work side jobs, to make ends meet. However, their own revenues are rising, since larger commissions are coming in (from for instance packaging supplier Paardenkoper and Gemeente Zuid-Holland). When scaling up, the operation cost per packaging unit drops and revenues increases.

<sup>31</sup> PackBack initiator, 14-4-2021, PackBack office, Rotterdam

argued for handling deposits solely through the app. Our call for analogue deposit handling arose from the heightened barrier to entry the app presented for part of our potential consumers. Consumers might be scared off by the needed use of the app as it requires extra time and effort (see Figure 5). During conversations throughout the fieldwork, I discovered that PackBack chooses to work via an app that tracks the packaging as impact is put first in decision-making. Without tracing packaging, one cannot know if the system makes a positive impact. How often a single unit of packaging circulates, for example, is key in assessing this issue. If a single reusable bowl – considering all recourses needed for production - is only used once and then disappears into someone’s cupboard, the reusable bowl’s use will likely have a larger negative impact on the environment than a disposable bowl that ends up in an incinerator. When such a reusable bowl circulates 500 times, it is likely to use less resources, thus have a smaller negative impact on the environment, than its disposable alternative<sup>32</sup>.

### *Discomfort and disposables – The partners*

For the majority of the partners, working with PackBack was an outing of their sustainable business approach. What does working with PackBack entail? PackBack partners offer reusable packaging to their customers. Among the majority of the partners, consumers had to choose between disposable or reusable upon purchase. One partner decided to offer all their foods in reusables. PackBack delivers the packaging to the restaurant. For each used bowl, the partner pays an X amount to the packaging supplier, in this case, the PackBack system (see Figure 6). According to some partners, this price was equal to their disposables. For others, it was slightly more expensive.

When comparing reusable packaging to the more traditional disposable packaging, some differences arise for the partners. Firstly, disposables require less explanation as they are offered without a deposit and are disposed of after usage. Reusables require some explanation about the deposit flow and app (see figure 5). Secondly, most partners are a drop-off point – their venue holds a bin in which used bowls can be deposited – resulting in more traffic to the venue. This traffic presents another moment of possibly needed explanation on behalf of the restaurant staff. The rush which comes with the daily operations at times hinders this explanation. The issue of communication stood out during my

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<sup>32</sup> This is an example, the numbers are not based on a lifecycle assessment analysis.

observations at the restaurants. Staff at times did not feel comfortable explaining the details or simply did not have the time.

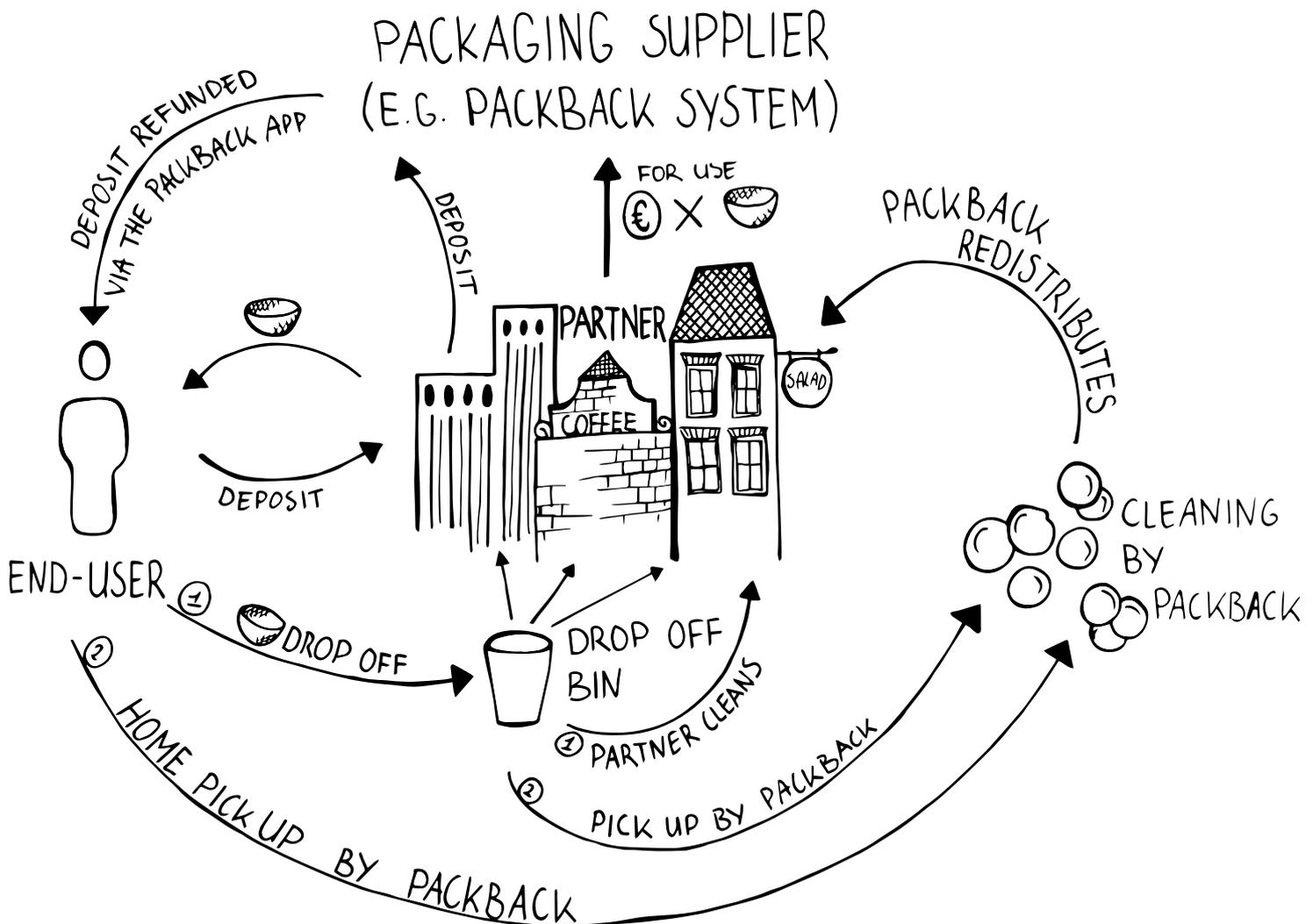


Figure 6 - PackBack network partner flow, author's own

Why do PackBack partners adopt a sustainable business approach? Such an approach may be adopted as it is commercially interesting, though it can simultaneously result from intrinsic motivations. The main motivation for offering PackBack was waste reduction. COVID-19 brought wasting behaviours into sight. Since restaurants had to transition to take-out menus, many disposables had to be used. Managers and owners feel bad about this increased usage of disposables and feel confronted when ordering the packaging or having a look in their storage space. The latter results in an economy-sustainability trade-off; due to the needed income generated by take-out, partners feel making waste is inescapable. As Joris, a restaurant manager, explains below, negative feelings may accompany wasting behaviours:

*You just see how much disposables are coming in every week. That's just, it's confronting. [...] When you see how many of those large boxes are delivered. That's just – and what I just said, we try to choose for as many biodegradable disposables and such material -but then still, you know? Then it's still so much. It's confronting.*<sup>33</sup>

As an antidote to generating waste through using disposables, reuse is generally associated with positive feelings. In addition, using PackBack allows partners to incorporate larger goals – such as safeguarding the planet - into their business.

### *Individualized collective action – The consumers*

Micheletti (2003) developed the concept of *individualized collective action* to describe the practice of responsibility-taking for common wellbeing by combining daily lives with collective causes, such as aiding sustainable development, through consumption. This may happen through purchasing or boycotting certain products and services (Klintman and Boström 2013). Using PackBack connects the individualist practice of consumption to the collective cause of waste reduction in light of safeguarding nature. The following quote illustrates such alteration of consumption practices.

*Jona: I do not support any charities or something, but I do try to buy products that represent the kind of world I would want to live in, now and in the future. That's what I'm always trying to do, when I buy things, I always think, 'what does this company do and how does that correspond with what I deem a good living environment for myself.'*<sup>34</sup>

Jona, one of the PackBack consumers, further explains what this good living environment is. She describes a place where people have equal chances, nature is safeguarded, and everyone can live the good life. This ideal image translates to consumption practices in which this aspired future is incorporated. In line with theories of sustainable citizenship, most of the respondents expressed this sentiment. By connecting individual action to a collective cause,

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<sup>33</sup> Restaurant manager, 31-3-2021, Online

<sup>34</sup> Consumer, 24-3-2021, Online

respondents go beyond the neoliberal idea of a self-maximizing individual (Harvey 2007); they adjust their action in consideration of a common purpose without expecting an immediate reward.

Where the concept of individualized collective action explores the actions of individuals engaging in green consumption practices, Welch and Yates (2017) argue that, besides actions, it is useful to see the virtual collectives that these practitioners compose. These authors emphasize the relationship between collective action and everyday routines, such as consumption patterns. Besides the more formal and organized types of collectivity – such as groupings and bureaucratic organizations – they stress the importance of alternative types of collectivity. In relation to sustainable consumption, Welch and Yates (2017) propose the concept of *dispersed collective activity*, referring “to the ways in which the socially, spatially and temporally patterned character of practices and arrangements give rise to aggregate effects, at which point often further collective and collective making practices develop” (Welch and Yates 2017, 298). Such scattered activity with aggregate effects may evolve into more organized forms of collectivity, which have the capacity to organize around goals (Welch and Yates 2017). Thus, the form of collectivity present among the consumer population may lead to more organized collectives engendering collective action.

### Spaces of collective action

For the sake of this research, I distinguish between collective action at the PackBack network level and the spaces for collective action embedded in individual meaning-making.

On the network level, the mission of PackBack is to engender systemic change by connecting the different actors in the packaging chain. Through collective action they aim to reach this goal. By doing so, they move beyond neoliberal logic. As explained at the beginning of this thesis, these logics imply self-maximization and maximization of growth (Harvey 2007). Their mission surpasses this logic as it requires collective action aimed at common wellbeing and safeguarding the planet. It is, however, important to note that PackBack exists within neoliberal market structures and therefore reflects them to a certain extent. The company will still need to grow and generate profits if it is to become a self-sufficient entity. The following two sections explore two spaces of collective action within individual practices connected to the network.

## *Inspiration*

Decisions are rarely made in isolation; they are influenced by interactions with peers in social networks. Social norms play an essential role in shaping individual pro-environmental decisions (Niamir et al. 2020). The following section illustrates how the inherently collective act of inspiration is embedded in practices within the PackBack network. The role of the inspirator was called upon by all groups and refers to inspiring others through one's practices. Chapter one illustrated how individuals might believe change starts at the bottom through consumption. Another line of reasoning, which may exist alongside the former, is that inspiration is the engine of bottom-up change. Tristan's line of reasoning at the beginning of this chapter illustrates the latter. The majority of the respondents connected inspiration to social change; through behaving sustainably and inspiring others with your behaviour, a movement can emerge, and therefore your behaviour is worthwhile. I argue the act of inspiration is inherently collective: *you inspire someone else*. As Diani and McAdam (2003) argue, "it is now commonplace to say that social connections to people who are already mobilized are what draw new people into protest movements, religious movements, and identity movements" (236). Likewise, people who are already mobilized into adjusting their life considering social and ecological issues draw in people who are not yet so. Academic research emphasizes the importance of the role model in inducing individual behaviours. Several studies illustrate how individual acts of sustainable citizenship - such as recycling or green consumption behaviours – are more affected by friends, relatives, and other influential individuals than 'outside influences' such as advertising or government campaigns (Barr and Gilg 2006; Goldstein and Goldstein 2011). Therefore, the role of the inspirator in social change is important to address.

Most of the respondents indicated how they had been inspired in the past, or how they have inspired in the past, inducing practices of sustainable citizenship. The following excerpt illustrates both avenues of inspiration. Enzo, one of the PackBack consumers, discussed his decision to change his diet from meat-based to vegetarian:

*It's something I notice about my parents. Look, I started eating less meat at some point, and now I barely eat it at all. Uhm, that's just because, in my social circle, I started noticing that more and more people were discussing meat substitutes. At a party, people said, 'I rarely eat*

*meat anymore, didn't you see that documentary' or 'I don't know, but I think it's kinda bad [to eat meat].'* And then you start thinking about it yourself, oh, what if I would stop eating meat as well. They don't do it either. Well, then you start researching, you start to think about it more. Which is when it starts playing a greater role. Look, same with my parents. As soon as my brother and I started [eating less meat], and more people in their surroundings did too, well, they [his parents] eat less meat now as well. If no one in their surroundings had done so, it wouldn't have played a part in their lives. So uhm, I do think that's where change starts.<sup>35</sup>

This excerpt illustrates how Enzo experienced being inspired by others and perceived the inspirational effect of his actions on his parents. He thereafter connects his evidence of the power of inspiration as an instigator for change to larger collective change: *that's where the change starts*. This line of reasoning is common among respondents and solidifies the proposition that individuals are most influenced to adopt environmentally friendly behaviours by known others.

Moreover, sustainable initiatives, goods, or practices may be used as vehicles for inspiration. Where some picked up trash to inspire others of this possibility, others gifted sustainable products to friends with the aim of inspiration. PackBack may be used similarly by all three populations. Initiators hope to inspire others to take initiative through leading by example. Braga et al. (2015) emphasize the influence of role models on the individual's decision to engage in social entrepreneurship. Their study shows that more than half of the interviewed social entrepreneurs were influenced by other social entrepreneurs. Inspirational practices on behalf of the PackBack initiators may thus trigger new waves of social entrepreneurship. I experienced such inspiration myself when starting the coffee cup project. Around me, friends and acquaintances started projects aimed at ecological or social impact, inspiring me in two ways. Firstly, these examples presented me with the option of taking initiative and starting my own project. They gave me the confidence that I would be able to do so as well. Secondly, this social network worked as a sounding board, with which I could discuss my ideas and count on for support.

Partners hope to inspire their customer base through the practices of sustainable citizenship – may it be food-related, social or waste-reduction - they engage in. The following

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<sup>35</sup> Consumer, 4-3-2021, Enzo's workplace, Rotterdam

excerpt shows this case for consumers. Sophia, a PackBack consumer, and I were discussing how she convinced others to engage in practices of sustainable citizenship. She had just emphasized how she did not want to evangelize the sustainable message - 'convert' others to change their lifestyle in a pressing manner - and then went on to explain:

*Sophia: I just really want people to think it's [sustainability] important. And for them to act out of that motivation. That's why I can be very happy with an initiative like Rechtstreex or PackBack. Then I can say, hey, have you seen this, have you used that, shall we order there.<sup>36</sup>*

The discomfort with being evangelizing is often connected to the softer form of persuasion embedded in inspiration. Inspiration takes place through action, as in Sophia's story, or through talk, as the excerpt by Enzo showed. These conversations mostly take place at social gatherings such as parties, at work or among friends.

### *Feeling part of something bigger*

The following section will illustrate how practices of sustainable citizenship connected to the PackBack network allow for feelings of collectivity. Most respondents indicated that using PackBack compared to regular consumption or entrepreneurship felt 'better'. A good feeling is obtained by participating in such initiatives. In the case of entrepreneurial choices, regular entrepreneurship is contrasted with sustainable entrepreneurship and regular consumption with sustainable consumption. Feeling good is connected to 'living in line with one's ideals', thereby reducing the felt guilt (as explained in chapter one). However, it may also be connected to the feelings of collectively. Among consumers, the feeling of collectively is often connected to individual practices such as using PackBack. This opposes the theory on environmental guilt presented in chapter one. Such guilt, and the consequent eco-friendly consumption, supposedly made people turn inwards and impeded people to see the connective threads that bind people together as a group (Jensen 2019). Conversations with respondents painted a more nuanced picture. Consumers did report feeling a sense of collectivity through their individualistic practices, illustrated by the following excerpt.

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<sup>36</sup> Consumer, 8-3-2021, Sophia's home, Rotterdam

*Martine: And what kind of feeling do you get from participating in initiatives like Pieter Pot (waste-free grocery platform/ author's note) or PackBack?*

*Sophia: Yeah, that makes me happy. I get the feeling that I, well, I'm doing something good. I'm doing the right thing. [...] And uhm, that others also think this is important, and together we can make sure that.... The almost powerless feeling I experience when I'm in the Albert Heijn. When you just want a vegetarian burger, but you cannot get it without it being wrapped in plastic. Uhm, it makes you feel like, hey, I'm not the only one, and together we can find different solutions besides this common way of doing things....<sup>37</sup>*

Sophia connects green consumption practices to being part of a collective movement. It reduces feelings of loneliness in her goals. This feeling of collectivity was present among the other groups as well. Marko, Tristan and Tine – the PackBack initiators - all work long hours, are often at the office during the weekends, and most of them work other jobs to earn a sufficient income. Whenever I would have to go by the office, someone was there to open the door. I asked Tristan how he felt, working this much to engender social change while he just noted that society at large did not seem to change fast enough. We discussed feelings of powerlessness resulting from this seeming inability of our society to combat ecological breakdown and his contact with other initiatives through the network.

*No, I think it works stimulating to know other entrepreneurs are fighting the same battles. That other companies are being set up. That transitions are happening.<sup>38</sup>*

In his reasoning, he emphasizes how others fight the same battles, hinting at feelings of collectivity. Moreover, such feelings work stimulating. Wessel, one of the PackBack partners, expressed something similar:

*Martine: What kind of feeling does working with PackBack engender?*

*Wessel: Yeah, that's just...it motivates. It energizes. Because you are working towards the same goals. What I said, I think the number of companies that really try to solve these issues,*

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<sup>37</sup> Consumer, 8-3-2021, Sophia's house, Rotterdam

<sup>38</sup> PackBack initiator, 16-4-2021, Tristan's home, Rotterdam

that work from intrinsic motivation. That try to solve something. Well, there are a few of them. So, it's always nice to find allies.<sup>39</sup>

All three examples show how through engaging with the network, feelings of collectivity may manifest themselves. Recognition of the collective is essential, as feelings of community have been recognized as pertinent to the process of large social change (Welch and Yates 2017). Using initiatives such as PackBack does not merely allow individuals to incorporate collective goals into their personal and professional lives; they allow for feelings of community, which are highly relevant to processes of social change such as sustainable development.

### The continuum

The following section illustrates how neoliberal individual responsibility and collective action are connected. Both the practices of initiating and using PackBack can be seen as being placed on a continuum (see drawing). They simultaneously reflect the structural conditions of neoliberal society and encompass spaces of collective action. Two examples of spaces of collective action are described above; inspiration and feeling part of something bigger.



### Initiating PackBack

Neoliberal logic and collective motivations meet in the practice of initiating the network. While the initiators aim to earn money and even sell the business for profits in the future, they simultaneously strive to generate positive impact through their company by letting *impact first* guide their decision-making. On a personal level, such incorporation of collective goals was connected to purposeful and good feelings. Academic enquiry into social entrepreneurship presents a similar finding; though one's purpose as an entrepreneur is to improve the wellbeing of others, social entrepreneurs gain personal wellbeing from

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<sup>39</sup> Restaurant owner, 20-4-2021, At Wessel's restaurant, Rotterdam

generating wellbeing for others (Douglas and Prentice 2019). Motivations varied among partners. For Marko, economic motivations prevailed, though he enjoyed the technical challenge and believed in PackBack's mission. Tristan and Tine experienced initiating PackBack as a means to deal with experienced feelings of responsibility, though simultaneously recognized the financial aspect of their motivations. The company itself and the initiator's motivations reflect the structural conditions of neoliberal society. However, the incorporation of the collective goal of diminishing waste generation allows for the inclusion of collective goals in entrepreneurial decision-making and the personal lives of the initiators.

The practice of initiating encompasses specific spaces for collective action. Inspiring other entrepreneurs and individuals to take initiative and think about reuse, for instance, as well as the feelings of collectively that arise from collaborating with like-minded partners. Through exploring a specific inspirational practice on behalf of PackBack, I illustrate how the connection of neoliberal individual responsibility and collective action plays out in practice.

Among half of the consumer population, the use of PackBack engendered a heightened attentiveness to waste; using PackBack inspired a train of thought. The following excerpt illustrates this. Zoe explains how she became more attentive to waste by using PackBack.

*Well, I was already thinking about waste and disposables, but now I'm more conscious. So uhm, what I've noticed is that I'm thinking, 'hey cool, they have reusable packaging', but I also notice when I order from other restaurants. You just notice, o, wow, they use a lot of plastics, or they provide plastic cutlery and such. [...] So, now I make the conscious choice that when ordering at a restaurant that doesn't offer reusables, to let them know that I at least don't want any of those extras that I don't use. So, they don't send me cutlery and napkins. I became much more attentive to all those things that you get and don't even use.<sup>40</sup>*

Disposables are the standard means of packaging and are considered the status quo. PackBack shows an alternative, and by doing so, contests the standard and stimulates a thought process. By bringing wasting behaviours into sight, PackBack surpasses individualistic market logic and moves along the continuum towards collective action. The heightened

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<sup>40</sup> Consumer, 7-4-2021, Online

attentiveness to waste often triggers further action such as bringing own packaging to restaurants or ordering without unnecessary packaging. However, this inspirational practice induces individual action and self-responsibility, therefore encompassing elements of neoliberal individual responsibility.

### *Offering reusable packaging*

This chapter explored the spaces for collective action that can be found within the practice of offering reusable packaging to consumers on behalf of partners. Offering PackBack allows partners to incorporate collective goals into their decision-making process, collaboration with sustainable initiatives may serve as a vehicle for inspiration and these collaborations engender feelings of collectively. Neoliberal individual responsibility and collective action connect in the act of offering reusable packaging to customers. All partners indicated that offering reusable packaging is interesting commercially. PackBack helps them to display the sustainable message they want to communicate to their customers, which is commercially attractive for marketing reasons. The following excerpt of my conversation with Wessel illustrates the latter. We discussed his motivations to work with PackBack, he had just told me he works with PackBack in light of waste reduction, and as it helps him display a sustainable message to his consumers.

*Martine: Why would you like to display such an image?*

*Wessel: Well, in the end, that's to sell more. [...] Cause that's one's right to exist as a commercial business. So, in the end, that's what matters most. And we just want everyone who works here to earn a decent living, on the conditions that food is local, seasonal and we work as sustainable as possible.<sup>41</sup>*

Wessel indicates that as a commercial business, maximizing sales is the top priority. Sustainability, in this scenario, may be used as a marketing tool to incentivize these profits. So far, we mainly see neoliberal logic reflected. However, Wessel started a business with an ideological approach; thus, neoliberalism meets ideology. To illustrate his argument, Wessel compares running a business with a sustainable approach to opening a regular restaurant. He

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<sup>41</sup> Restaurant owner, 20-4-2021, At Wessel's restaurant, Rotterdam

explains how he runs his business with a sustainable approach as he wants to inspire people, find purpose, and respond to a market trend.

*That's why I compared this business to a pizzeria. Look, if I were to approach it purely commercially, well, then I'm not making the best decisions now. But when I look at intrinsic motivation. And my own experience and sentiment about my job. Then I do think I made a valuable decision. [...] There is a part of me that just really wants to do something like this [run a business with a sustainable mission]. On the other hand, I see that demand for such businesses is increasing, and I just feel it will succeed.<sup>42</sup>*

This example illustrates how economic and intrinsic motivations coincide. On the one hand, Wessel works with companies such as PackBack as it helps him display a sustainable message which increases sales. On the other hand, working with a sustainable approach allows him to feel he is spending his days usefully.

Positions along the continuum varied among partners. Where some chose to offer reusable packaging mainly for commercial reasons, and for others the primary motivation was waste reduction, and sustainability was one of the core values of the business approach. Where some actively engaged in inspirational practices such as conversations with customers, others did not actively aim to inspire their customers-base.

### *Using reusable packaging*

Within the act of using PackBack by consumers, the collective and the individual coincide. Firstly, the idea of the consumer is inherently individual as being someone who purchases goods or services for personal use.<sup>43</sup> Ordering and consuming foods or drinks from the PackBack containers - though it may take place collectively as goods can be consumed together - will always have an individual component. Furthermore, for some using PackBack was motivated by the belief that sustainable consumption induces social change, reflecting individualist market logic. However, these practices encompass collective action. Through individualized collective action for instance, by incorporating collective goals in consumption

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<sup>42</sup> Restaurant owner, 20-4-2021, At Wessel's restaurant, Rotterdam

<sup>43</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>, accessed on 18-6-2021

practices. Moreover, individuals may use sustainable initiatives, such as PackBack, to inspire others to change their behaviours. Furthermore, feelings of collectivity can arise through usage, enlarging the collective action component of the practice of using PackBack. Like the partner and initiator groups, using PackBack is placed differently on the continuum for each individual. Where some actively engaged others in their behaviours of usage and thereby place the practice further to the collective action side. Others used PackBack in a more individual manner; though individuals were often motivated by a larger goal, no inspirational practices, or feelings of collectivity arose. Therefore, their practice of using PackBack would be placed further left on the continuum.

Notably, the focus on individual practices in addressing ecological issues had other origins than market logic; feelings of powerlessness and frustration about the current modes of production and consumption made for the turn to self-regulatory practices. Chapter three will further address these issues.

## Reflection

Consumption or entrepreneurship overlap within practices of sustainable citizenship; collective goals are incorporated into daily lives through shopping episodes and organizational decision-making. Practices of sustainable citizenship connected to the PackBack network allow individuals to do so. This chapter illustrated the latter through exploring spaces of collective action within these practices. Inspiration and feelings of collectivity which are experienced within interaction with the network allow individuals to go beyond neoliberal individual responsibility and connect their individual practices to a greater cause. Lastly, as the theory of sustainable citizenship proposes, market logics and collective action overlap within the identified practices. While practices reflect neoliberal logic to some extent, they simultaneously encompass spaces of collective action. Rather than reflecting either-or, they can be seen as being placed on a continuum in a multitude of ways. Where collective action does not involve contestation per se, chapter three explores the spaces for contestation within the identified practices of sustainable citizenship. How, and in what ways, can these practices become political in the sense that they contest the structural conditions of neoliberal society?

## Chapter 3 – Political action

Chapter one illustrated how structural conditions of neoliberal society shape individual meaning-making and practices by inducing individual action. Neoliberal narratives used in governmental and corporate marketing efforts engender individualistic feelings of guilt as they present the individual as responsible for ecological goals. Thereafter, chapter two showed that practices connected to the PackBack network do not merely reflect these structural conditions but encompass spaces for collective action. This chapter takes a different approach; it explores to what extent, and under which circumstances, practices of sustainable citizenship can become political. Political refers to how these practices challenge the structural conditions of the neoliberal society. This chapter thus explores the spaces of contestation to the structural conditions of neoliberal society within the practices of PackBack initiators, partners, and consumers. Where some practices were directly political, other contestations were more indirect and subtly embedded in everyday acts. This chapter starts with exploring the direct political act of lobby work and moves to the more subtle contestation embedded in everyday lifestyle choices.

### Lobby work

PackBack engages in lobby work aimed at stimulating reuse and discouraging disposables and waste generation. Such lobby work is a direct political act, as the organization is involved in the formation of legislation. Chapter two discussed the issue of scale connected to sustainable initiatives. Seyfang and Smith (2007) argue that sustainable initiatives may impact policies and transform (inter)national systems through scaling, which can be illustrated by PackBack's lobby work concerning European Union (EU) legislation. This June, the EU introduced a law aimed at limiting the use of single-use plastics.<sup>44</sup> Within the Netherlands, Rijkswaterstaat (RWS) has crafted a more far-reaching version of this law.<sup>45</sup> PackBack was involved in the discussions around the formation of these Dutch policies through inclusion in a stakeholder trajectory.<sup>46</sup> RWS invited PackBack to join stakeholder group meetings, which started on April 15<sup>th</sup> 2021 and

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<sup>44</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/topics/plastics/single-use-plastics\\_nl](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/topics/plastics/single-use-plastics_nl), accessed on 29-6-2021

<sup>45</sup> Tine (PackBack initiator), 5-5-2021, Telephone call

<sup>46</sup> Tine (PackBack initiator), 5-5-2021, Email conversation

continue until this summer.<sup>47</sup> This invitation was based on PackBack's efforts to replace disposables with reuse<sup>48</sup>, efforts which would likely have not been noticed if they would not have increased their scale. PackBack's aim within this group is to assess how legislation can be sharpened in ways that incentivize reuse.<sup>49</sup> Instead of altering the current use of disposables to the new laws, they aim to move away from disposables entirely. When I asked Tine, one of the PackBack initiators, about the results of such meetings, she explained that though no strict laws are in place that prohibit disposables, these lobby efforts push big corporate players to investigate reuse. In Tine's experience, corporate players such as McDonald's and Albert Heijn show interest in reuse as pressure rises due to new laws by European, Dutch, and provincial governments and governmental organizations. This emerging interest reflects in one of the side-effects of the lobby work; the openness to conversation by these big players. PackBack has entered exploratory conversations with both McDonalds and Albert Heijn. Conversations with both corporations were aimed at collaborating to initiate pilot projects. No concrete action has been taken yet, though conversations with Albert Heijn about them being a drop-off point location are in an advanced stage<sup>50</sup>.

Spaces of contestation to neoliberal structural conditions are present within PackBack's lobby efforts. Time and effort are dedicated to the direct political act of lobby work aimed at changing the rules of the current linear packaging system. If such legislation comes into place, packaging suppliers will be forced to deviate from business-as-usual and take responsibility for what happens to packaging after sales. Though the conversations with big corporate players can be seen as encompassing elements of contestation - PackBack dedicates time and effort to introduce reusables into these neoliberal corporations – such collaboration encompasses more elements of collective action and neoliberal individual responsibility. Political action, collective action, and neoliberal individual responsibility are not mutually exclusive but are connected. These corporations enter the conversation with PackBack as they feel the pressure of emerging legislation; to keep up their sales, they feel compelled to investigate reusable packaging. Moreover, as explained in chapter two, the aim to increase in scale – PackBack had an ambitious growth ambition – often results in collaborations with big corporate players.

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<sup>47</sup> Tine (PackBack initiator), 5-5-2021, Email conversation

<sup>48</sup> Tine (PackBack initiator), 5-5-2021, Email conversation

<sup>49</sup> PackBack initiator, 5-5-2021, Telephone call

<sup>50</sup> Tine (PackBack initiator), 13-7-2021, WhatsApp conversation

Thus, the conversations between PackBack, Albert Heijn and McDonalds can be seen as part of their impact first objective and the consecutive aim to increase in scale.

### Finding purpose

Letting ecological and human wellbeing guide everyday decisions and corporate decision-making is often connected to finding purpose in life among respondents. Individuals engaged in practices of sustainable citizenship as these result in a greater sense of meaning compared to the 'regular alternative' of the practice. The following examples show how such feelings are present among all groups and contest neoliberal structural conditions as they go beyond the self-maximizing individual proposed by neoliberalist logic (Harvey 2007).

When exploring the motivations of the PackBack initiators to choose PackBack as their job, a few things stand out. They could all get another job, which would likely result in a higher income, allow for more time off and cause fewer worries. However, Tine, Tristan and Marko choose to dedicate their time to PackBack. As chapter two showed, this can be attributed to a combination of economic and ideological incentives. Neoliberalism is a system that proposes a self-maximizing individual (Harvey 2007). Each individual is an entrepreneur of the self, maximizing their wealth to the fullest (Kenny 2015). The pattern witnessed within the job choice of the PackBack initiators contradicts the latter, illustrated by the following excerpt.

*Tristan: Yeah, [I started PackBack] cause it gave me some sort of purpose, in the social sense. Before PackBack, I've also worked regular office jobs. To put it irreverently. [...] I know that at times I really thought, I'm putting my time into this, I come from a very prosperous country, I've had everything in my life, and what am I doing with it, I'm doing very useless things. This is not going to make the world a better place. And at some point, that starts to eat at you a little. [...] And then I thought yes, Tris, now you have to do something else. And that's when I stepped into this adventure with Tine.*

This excerpt shows how one may work a less maximizing job as it provides a sense of spending one's time purposefully. Among PackBack partners, a similar pattern arose; working with a sustainable business approach is often more time-consuming and costly than a traditional business approach conforming to the neoliberal structures of our society. However, as

Wessels' quote at the end of chapter two illustrated, such a choice is often motivated by the sense of purpose derived from working with an idealist rationale. During the execution of the coffee cup project, I experienced something similar myself. If I were to maximize my time and wealth, the choice to dedicate my time and effort to this project was flawed. The coffee cup project required investment of time and skills, and though it was a learning experience, no monetary reward resulted from this investment. However, the choice to engage in the project did align with my ideals and experienced calling to contribute to a society more respectful to all forms of life. Therefore, expressing this calling and ideals in a project made me feel purposeful. Within the consumer group, a similar pattern was found. Individuals engage in many practices at once, purchase and non-purchase related. All these practices accumulate into one's lifestyle. PackBack consumers engaged in many different practices, which were often more time consuming than the 'regular' alternative.

One example can be found in ordering PackBack instead of disposables with a take-out meal. With few exceptions, consumers are presented with the reusable-or-disposable choice upon purchase. This may happen online – for instance, through delivery platform Thuisbezorgd (see Figure 7, phone 1 and 2) – or orally at the partner's venue. When ordering their meal online or in-store, and choosing a reusable PackBack container, consumers are asked to pay the deposit upon purchase. After consuming their meal, the consumer must scan the QR-code (see Figure 7, phone 3) on the packaging and can thereafter choose if 1) they want the container to be picked up at home, or 2) they want to deposit the container themselves in one of the drop-off bins. Consecutively, a time or place is chosen. The PackBack container will then be picked up at home at the agreed-upon time, or the consumer can deposit it whenever they see fit. Once PackBack confirms the return of the packaging, the deposit appears in the wallet section of the app. The consumer can then decide to have the deposit refunded to their bank account.

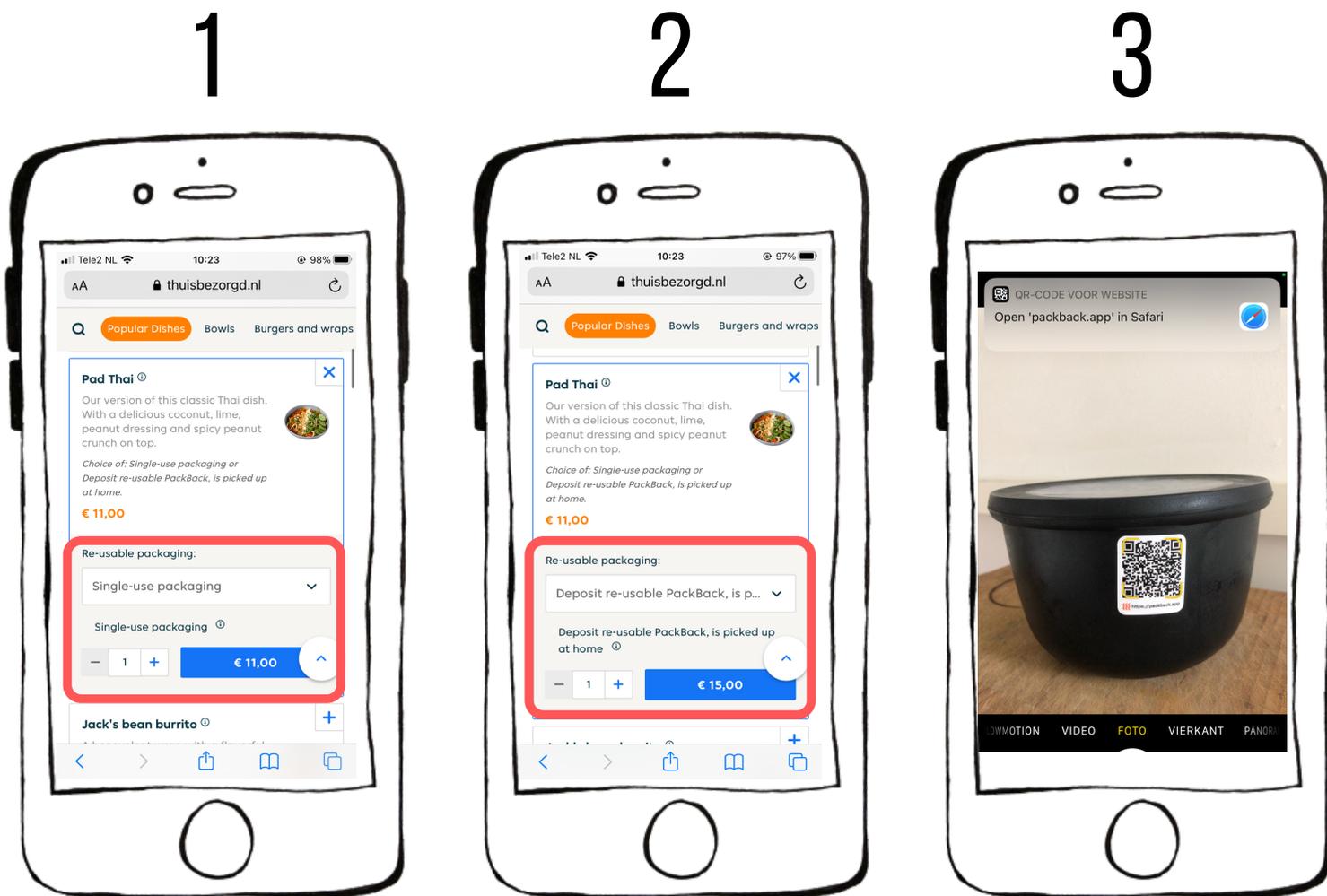


Figure 7 - PackBack consumer experience

7.1 Still from Thuisbezorgd.nl showing the order with the single-use packaging option selected.

7.2 Still from Thuisbezorgd.nl showing the order with the reusable packaging option selected.

7.3 A telephone scanning the QR-code on a PackBack bowl, consequently a pop-up appears redirecting the user to the web app where the process of returning the bowl continues.

Though PackBack strives to make this process as easy as possible for the end-users, it will always be more of a hassle than simply disposing a single-use container. Notwithstanding the increased effort, consumers still decided to use PackBack. This pattern recurred in many other practices, such as circumventing the supermarket through shopping locally and creating products instead of purchasing them. Practices which require more time and effort than the 'regular alternative'. Theory proposes a focus on intrinsic goals - such as the internal reward derived from sustainable lifestyle choices through living in line with one's ideals and feeling like doing something good for a greater cause - produces a sense of meaning and a greater sense of purpose (Hedlund de-Wit et al. 2014; Ryan et al. 2006). The practices of sustainable

citizenship PackBack consumers engage in allow these individuals to live in line with their ideals and therefore feel good through finding a greater sense of meaning or purpose.

The examples above illustrate how the intrinsic motivations for sustainable entrepreneurship or lifestyle choices produce a sense of purpose. By surpassing self-maximization through altering choices to a common goal, individuals challenge neoliberal logic. Individuals choose for a greater sense of purpose over maximizing their wealth and time.

### The PackBack consumers

The following section is based on the interviews and photo-elicitation conducted among PackBack consumers. Visual ethnography, more specifically participant photography (Brace-Govan 2007), was used to facilitate a dialogue. Participant photography allows “respondents [to] collaborate in the data-gathering process and assist the researcher by taking photos themselves, and then discussion is woven into the data-collection and analysis processes” (Pink 2001 in Brace-Govan 2007). The participants were asked to photograph 1 to 10 needed ingredients for a sustainable pathway into the future in their lives. These photos served as a photo-elicitation device during in-depth semi-structured interviews. This exercise served to draw political causes and the imagined pathways to achieve related goals into consciousness (Brace-Govan 2007). Furthermore, as Ingold (2017) proposes, “to study anthropology is to study *with* people, not to make studies *of* them” (21). The participatory way of data gathering contributed to this cause, as it allowed respondents to actively contribute to the subjects discussed. The visual component of the research proved useful, as it drew practices into consciousness and stimulated prior thinking about motivations, allowing for an encompassing conversation about these practices.

The photo exercise made respondents reflect on everyday practices. Therefore, this method allows for a certain type of result; everyday practices that revolve around food, self-care, everyday social interactions, and consumption prevailed in the photos. Larger themes or less everyday practices such as voting, trust in politicians and workshops or lecture attendance are less easily photographed and may therefore be relatively absent within respondents’ photos. However, the interviews went beyond discussing the photos. They served as a starting point for the conversation after which deeper motivations and larger themes such as trust in institutional politics and hopes and fears underlying their practices were discussed.

## Agency & institutional powerlessness

Within the consumer population, respondents believe the world should be treated a certain way to ensure a liveable planet for future generations, themselves and/or for safeguarding nature. Worries, ideals, and frustrations concerning the ecological crisis and social justice translate into practices of sustainable citizenship. These may be green consumer practices, referring to the buy -and boycotting of products and services. Such practices are also about what people do, or do not do, in other aspects of life. The practices of sustainable citizenship which consumers engage in mostly centre around 1) food: eating vega(n) or eating fewer animal products, biological foods, Fairtrade, local and seasonal foods, avoiding shopping in supermarkets; 2) waste reduction: bringing own packaging to supermarkets and restaurants, using PackBack, avoiding shopping in supermarkets, emitting less CO<sub>2</sub>, reuse ; 3) self-care: waste-free body products, natural body products, make own products; 4) consuming less: purchasing little new clothing, purchasing second-hand items, purchasing less in general; consuming fewer fossil fuels 5) voting: voting for a party which focusses on ecological and/or social problems; 6) inspiration: inspiring others to try sustainable initiatives or change behaviours.

Anthropology illuminates the efforts of the individual to contest the very power structures that define them in their everyday practices. It highlights the possibilities and conditions of human life in lived experience (Ingold 2017). The theory of subjectification in the introduction elaborates on this phenomenon; it shows how the formation of the subject is simultaneously repressive and productive. Repressive as individuals are subjected to a greater authority which constrains and encourages individual action, as shown in chapter one. Productive as the individual is the author of the action. The individual possesses agency, the will and capacity to act. The concept of agency was a recurring theme in the conversations with respondents and provides an alternative viewpoint on the origin of the emphasis on the individual within the identified practices of sustainable citizenship.

The majority of these practices are individual practices. Contradictory to what theories of neoliberal individual responsibility propose, the emphasis on the individual cannot merely be explained as a reflection of neoliberal power structures. About half of the respondents experienced feelings of powerlessness concerning these structures. Due to such feelings of

powerlessness, respondents turned to their daily lives to find possibilities for change. Sophia expressed such a turn to agency when we discussed her frustration regarding 'the system', hinting at the current modes of production and consumption leading to ecological breakdown.

*Sophia: I can at least do something! I can think yeah, governments should solve it and companies should change. And I do really believe so! But in my daily life, I am the one that can decide to get my yoghurt at Rechtstreex (locally sourced foods platform/author's note) instead of in the Albert Heijn.*

*Martine: Those are the choices that –*

*Sophia: Over which I have the power, which I actually can change!<sup>51</sup>*

Sophia calls upon her will and capacity to act, to explain the made changes in her daily life through which she tries to circumvent the current modes of production and consumption. These are the things she has the power over to change, while the large structural conditions of society are too large to address. Part of the sample connected the turn to self-regulatory practices to a lack of trust in corporate and political leaders as the stewards of social change.

*Puck: I do believe the responsibility rests on the wrong shoulders. I believe corporations and governments should have a crucial role [in addressing the ecological crisis]. [...] But maybe it's because I don't trust those governments and big corporations who pollute and cause so much harm in other areas. I just don't have a lot of faith that that will change any time soon. And maybe it's that lack of trust, which makes me think, maybe I should start the change a couple of levels lower.<sup>52</sup>*

Puck argues she does not trust governments and corporations to change their harmful behaviours; therefore, she turns to self-regulatory practices. Like Puck, Ronald connected the institutional incompetence in slowing the ecological crisis to his engagement in practices of sustainable citizenship.

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<sup>51</sup> Consumer, 8-3-2021, Sophia's home, Rotterdam

<sup>52</sup> Consumer, 9-3-2021, Online

*Ronald: The majority of our political parties doesn't have real electoral programmes. [...] It's thin air. [...] That's why it takes so long before problems are addressed. Promising benefits, like mortgage interest deduction, CDA and VDD do it all the time, and that way, they win votes. And that's why we aren't succeeding to turn the tide [combat the ecological crisis]. That's why, as a citizen, as an individual, you're the most impactful by making different decisions in your daily life.*<sup>53</sup>

Both Ronald and Puck present daily life as the most effective sphere for social change, as politics and corporations lack the willingness or power to incentivize the needed change. Anthropological research has emphasized how individuals reproduce and change neoliberal capitalism in their everyday practices (Freeman 1993; Millar 2014; Ong 1988). Consequently, spaces for agency are carved out. This reproduction provides individuals with the ability to reshape neoliberal capitalism, to contest its structures. Within these scholarly efforts, agency points at the ability of individuals to reshape the structures of the society in which they exist. Chapter 1 showed how the focus on self-regulatory practices results from trust in consumer power. The analysis presented above puts these findings into perspective; the focus on the individual does not merely reflect neoliberal logic but results from feelings of powerlessness and the consequent turn to agency. Underlying the turn to self-regulation is the belief that change is a bottom-up phenomenon. Chapter two illustrated how this is related to the act of inspiration; inspiring others through leading by example can start a movement, and therefore individual acts engender change.

The origin of the self-regulatory practices thus goes beyond neoliberal individual responsibility. The following section will provide examples of how these practices themselves can become political.

### *Green political consumerism*

Theories of sustainable citizenship propose that consumption can be a political act. Through *green political consumerism*, people may consider their everyday shopping episodes as part of a larger political cause (Klintman and Boström 2013). Firstly, it is worth distinguishing between purchase and non-purchase practices.

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<sup>53</sup> Consumer, 22-3-2021, Online



Figure 8 - Green consumption practices (photos by respondents)

- 8.1 Environmentally friendly body products (Jona)
- 8.2 Locally sourced groceries (Puck)
- 8.3 Environmentally friendly clothing (Rosa)
- 8.4 Fairtrade products (Bob)
- 8.5 Waste free and natural soap (Zoe)
- 8.6 Mushrooms without plastics packaging (Lisanne)

Among the consumer group, individuals engaged in many purchase-related practices aimed at safeguarding nature or social justice, thereby connecting their consumption practices to this political goal. The shampoo and conditioner in photo 8.1 symbolize green political consumersism since Jona purchases environmentally friendly body products instead of regular ones. She prefers using products that do not cause harmful waste to end up in the environment via wastewater since she wants to safeguard nature so she, and others, will be able to enjoy it in the future. The soap in 8.5 symbolizes green political consumerism as Zoe chooses to buy this soap as it is made from natural products, produced in The Netherlands, and packaged and delivered in a waste-saving manner. She believes the consumption of such soap compared to a regular alternative minimizes the negative impact of her consumption.

Zoe deems this important as she is worried about the effects of consumption on planetary well-being. Both Jona and Zoe, as well as the authors of the other practices in Figure 8, “make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices” (Micheletti 2003, 2). Within the political dimension of consumption practices, we find an alternative dimension to green consumption than theories of individual neoliberal responsibility propose.

### *Voting*

When it comes to non-purchase behaviours, the most common direct political act individuals engaged in is voting. Many respondents let their voting choice be guided by their concerns about ecological and social wellbeing. However, the prevailing view among all groups was one of little trust in institutional politics and its decisiveness in slowing down climate change. The following quote from the interview with Myriam illustrates the latter:

*I have to say that I don't really care about politics, and don't really follow it. [...] I don't know to what extent politics has a big influence on solving the climate crisis. Because companies themselves produce most of the waste, and yes, I doubt to what extent politics can influence that.*<sup>54</sup>

This lack of trust resulted in little to no willingness to engage in any institutional political action such as political participation or activism. It is striking that individuals barely took photos depicting institutional political practices. One possible explanation is the invisibility of institutional politics in the daily life. Though most interviews took place at the time of the parliamentary election on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2021 - therefore billboards of politicians, tv-interviews and debates, and newspaper articles about institutional politics were omnipresent. In general, however, Dutch politicians are relatively invisible, and their governing efforts lack transparency. This is a conclusion presented by the *Staatscommissie parlementair stelsel* (State committee parliamentary system) in 2017 (Meijer 2017). Though shortly present during election campaigns, the status quo of institutional politics is an invisible state. Secondly, the absence of the photos may reflect how it is easier to express ideals in the everyday than in the

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<sup>54</sup> Consumer, 9-3-2021, Online

institutional political arena. Where everyday consumption and non-consumption practices are present in the everyday and are relatively easily adaptable, institutional political practices are harder to engage in as they require more time and effort (Shah et al. 2007). Thirdly, the lack of trust and activity may be explained by the used method; photographing the everyday is more suitable to show political activism in consumption than in institutional political practices. However, such practices were discussed during the interviews, and from the initiators to the consumers, the lack of trust in institutional politics and related activity prevailed. The final section of this chapter addresses the possibly problematic dimension of this lack of trust in institutional politics.

### *Consuming less*

Sustainable consumption encompasses purchasing behaviours, as shown above, and non-purchasing behaviours (McDonald et al. 2012). The gathered data show a similar pattern; individuals consume less and do not merely substitute regular products with sustainable alternatives (Figure 9). These ideas are often connected to the reuse of their own products or through purchasing and selling second-hand items, such as clothing. Furthermore, aiming to consume less resulted in repairing used items and in building or making things. For example, Jona built a table from spare parts of her garden shed (9.6) and Lysanne fixed her grocery bag when mice ate a hole in its bottom (9.1). These practices symbolize consuming less as both Lysanne and Jona decided not to buy something anew, but fix or build the desired product from materials they already owned. They did so as both believed consuming less is essential in safeguarding the future of our planet. Mobility is another sphere in which these ideas are practised; mobility options consuming fewer fossil fuels are favoured over more fuel-intensive vehicles (9.4). Neoliberal structures of production and consumption propose that you induce sustainable action by changing behaviour through the market system (Brown 2015). Through consuming less, individuals surpass these logics as sustainable action is induced through non-purchase behaviours.

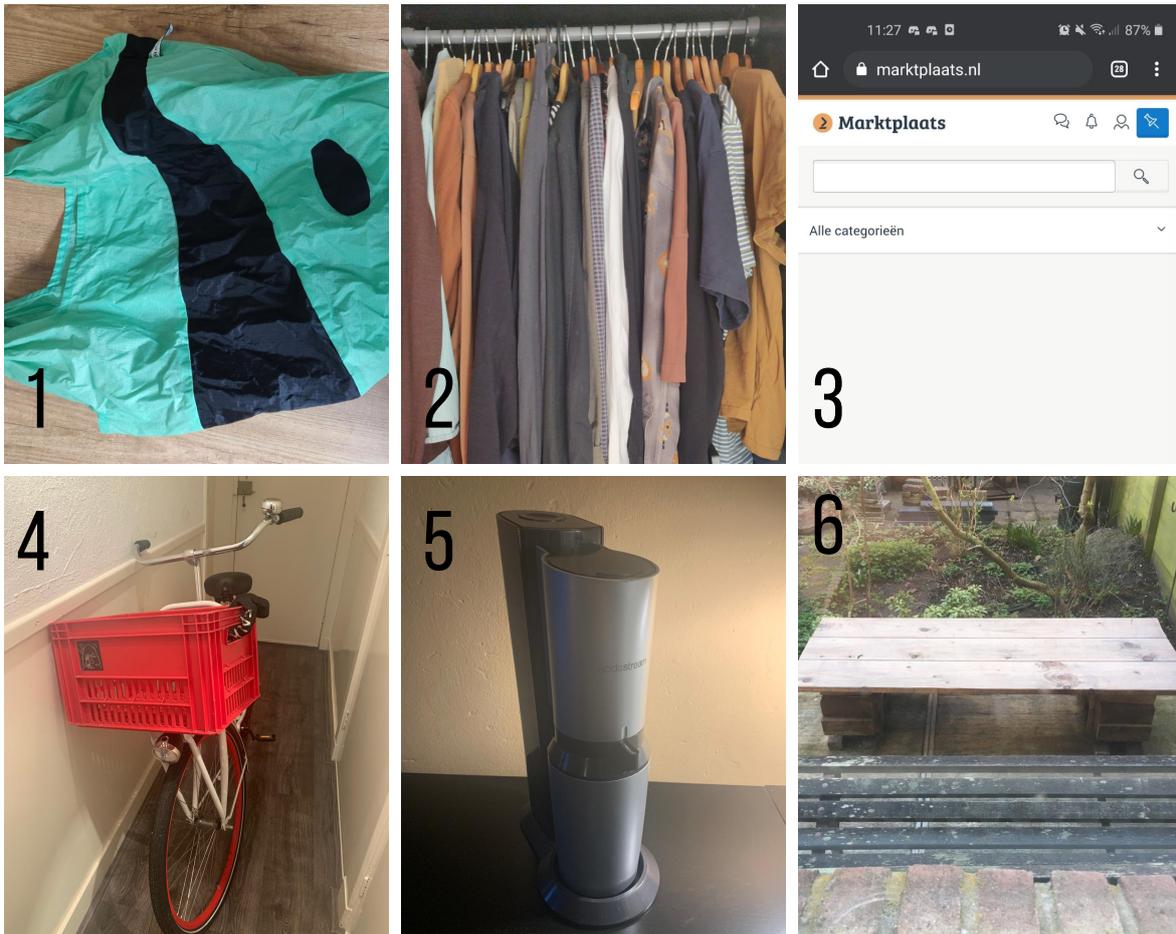


Figure 9 - *Consuming less* (photos by respondents)

9.1 A reusable bag which was fixed when a mouse chewed a hole in the fabric (Lisanne)

9.2 Secondhand clothing (Marcel)

9.3 Marktplaats.nl, a website which allows for the sale of second hand items

9.4 A bike, the respondent used this mode of transport instead of the car where possible to consume less fossil fuels (Bob)

9.5 A soda stream, so sparkling water does not have to be bought in plastic bottles anymore (Bob)

9.6 DIY garden table, made from left-over material (Jona)

### *Knowledge creation and sharing*

Anthropological efforts have described how knowledge creation and sharing allows individuals to contest power structures and form social ties (Polleri 2016; Vine 2018). Knowledge creation and sharing prove to be a place of contestation as people connect through this practice, surpassing the self-centred individual. Respondents share knowledge about living sustainably during workshops, in online communities, and within other types of relationships. One examples of such practices is reading sustainability-themed books to one's children (10.1). Anna explained her practice of reading such books to her children by her own experience

growing up. Her parents have always emphasised the environmental effects of her actions, which she believes has had a major impact on her behaviour today. Educating oneself through documentaries and books, as visible in 10.3 and 10.4, were recurring themes among respondents. Many of them educated themselves in this way, discussed the books and films with others, and experienced a heightened attentiveness to their lifestyle choices afterwards.

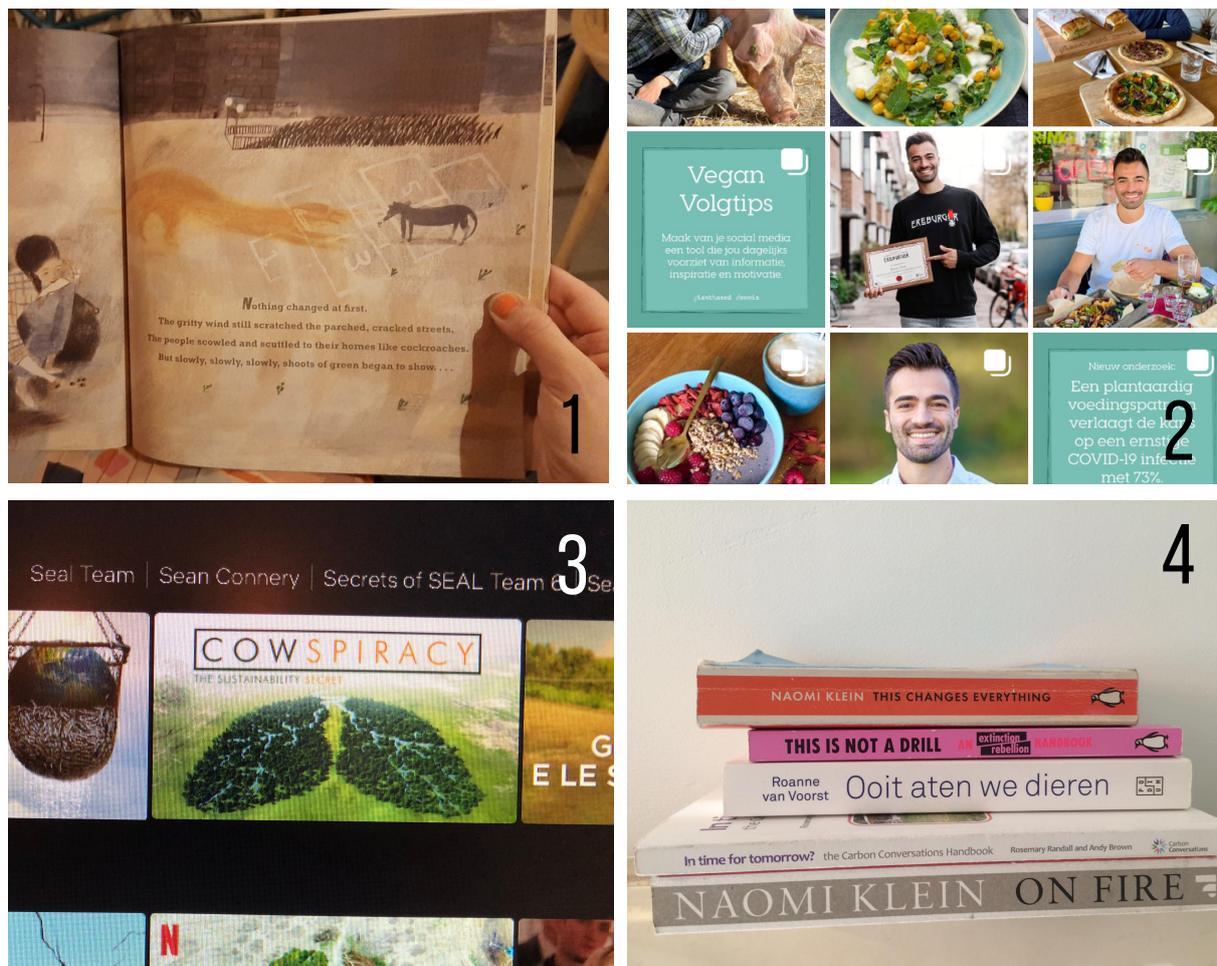


Figure 10 - Knowledge creation and sharing (photos by respondents)

10.1 Reading books with a sustainable message to children (Anna)

10.2 Following and participating in social media accounts with themes surrounding sustainable lifestyles (Marcel)

10.3 Watching documentaries about social and ecological wellbeing (Bob)

10.4 Reading books on ecological crisis (Puck)

### Change of diet

Lastly, many respondents changed their diet as an act of sustainable citizenship; they reduced or seized their intake of animal-based products. Such a choice was generally motivated by animal welfare motivations as well as the smaller negative ecological impact of a vega(n) diet

compared to a meat-based one. This decision is reflected in the photos by Sophie (11.1) and Enzo (11.3). The plant-based milk and chickpeas represent the choice to reduce their animal-based food intake and transfer to plant-based alternatives for the abovementioned reasons. The photos by Bob (11.2) and Puck (11.4) depict books on the negative effects of animal products and recipes for vegan cooking. These books inspired and aided their transition to a vega(n) diet. I argue that such a decision can be seen as a direct contestation of neoliberal logic. These logics aimed at maximization caused continuous and devastating exploitation of the natural world (Patel and Moore 2018; Nixon 2011) and are reflected in the current bio-industry system. The neoliberal farm is a factory aimed at profit maximization and often neglects animal welfare, product quality and sustainability (Stoll-Kleemann and O'Riordan 2015). Moreover, changing one's diet pertains to a more profound lifestyle change and does not merely involve green consumption choices. Therefore, a decision to change one's diet can be seen as contestation to market logic.



Figure 11 - *Changing diets* (photos by respondents)

11.1 Plant-based milk (Sophie)

11.2 *Ooit aten we dieren* (Once we ate animals) a book challenging the dominant animal-based diet (Bob)

11.3 Chickpeas (Enzo)

11.4 Books on vegan cooking (Puck)

### Limits to contestation

This section explores the limitations of the contestations identified above. The first group of contestations are the direct political acts of lobby work and voting. The limitations of these acts are difficult to address without further future research, going beyond the scope of this research. Therefore, I focus on the limitations prone to the more indirect political acts described in this chapter; the contestation of the structural conditions of neoliberal society through everyday practices. These acts include finding purpose through practices of sustainable citizenship, political green consumption, consuming less, knowledge creation and sharing and changing one's diet. People engage in these practices aiming for social change. What we may ask ourselves is if this is an efficient strategy.

On the one hand, ethnographies show how power structures can be changed through everyday contestations, reshaping, and changing them. On the other hand, turn to self-regulatory practices underscores neoliberal individual responsibility. First, I want to clarify that I do not mean to argue that strategies of individual and consumer responsibility are unnecessary or misguided; I would agree that such lifestyle adjustments are things people in the global North must incorporate into their daily lives. However, the population takes up the mantle of saving the planet through the focus on individualist practices. Rutherford (2007) argues "this allows for the management, self-surveillance and regulation of behaviour in such a way that lays claim to the kind of subjectivity that those who are environmentally conscious wish to have, and the governing of said subjectivity which does little to address the neoliberal order which contributes to environmental problem" (299). The focus on individual practices, even if containing contestations, may thus do little to address the neoliberal order. I argue that contestations, however subtle, are important in changing the neoliberal structural conditions of our society. Simultaneously, arguing along the lines of Rutherford (2007), I believe we must ask ourselves if a turn to individualist practices - though encompassing spaces of collective or political action - is an efficient means to a healthier planet. I believe the focus on the individual combined with a relative absence of institutional political activity and a lack of trust in the government as steward for social change can be problematic.

One writer who published work on this issue is Jaap Tielbeke (2020), who wrote a book called *A better environment does not start with you* (Een beter milieu begint niet bij jezelf). His argument coincides with Rutherford's line of reasoning; the turn to self-regulation underscores neoliberalism and maintains this unsustainable system and the myth of a guilty humanity. He argues that a better world starts with institutional political activity and activism, as the ecological crisis is a political problem, which calls for far-reaching governmental measures. He does not argue for a halt to individual lifestyle adjustments; changes in lifestyles are crucial in reducing our impact on the world's ecology. Nevertheless, solely focusing on such lifestyles might not be very effective. Tielbeke (2020) argues that the best means to contribute to structural change is through activism and political participation by addressing corporations and political leaders directly.

## Reflection

This chapter explored to what extent practices of sustainable citizenship can contest the structural conditions of our neoliberal society. Political action varies in level of directness. Where some practices are directly political, such as the lobby work on behalf of PackBack or the voting practices of individuals, other contestations are more subtly embedded in everyday practices. By choosing to engage in sustainable citizenship practices which require more time and effort compared to the regular alternative to those practices, individuals contest neoliberal structural conditions. Finding purpose and a common political goal is put above self-maximization. Taking a closer look at the PackBack consumer's practices showed how the individualistic character of their practices does not merely reflect neoliberal power structures but originates in feelings of powerlessness. Consequently, individuals turn to agency to deal with such feelings, resulting in self-regulatory practices. Political dimensions can be identified in these practices, both purchase-related – through green consumption – and non-purchase related; through consuming less, knowledge creation and sharing, and dietary change, individuals contest the structural conditions of neoliberal society. However, it is important to explore the limits of such contestation in everyday lives. The focus on the individual combined with a relative absence of institutional political activity and a lack of trust in the government as steward for social change can be problematic, as corporations and governments are not directly called to order.

## Conclusion

This thesis explored the individual acts and practices of sustainable citizenship within the PackBack reusable food packaging network. Acts and practices of sustainable citizenship are all those acts and practices an individual engages in aimed at safeguarding nature and human wellbeing. The empirical material showed how using – through consuming or offering reusable packaging – as well as initiating the PackBack network can be seen as an act of sustainable citizenship as these very acts allow individuals to incorporate collective goals into their individual lives and corporate decision-making. The three chapters of this thesis assessed to what extent these practices reflect neoliberal individual responsibility (chapter one) and collective action (chapter two) or political action (chapter three).

Neoliberal societies' hunger for economic growth comes with grave consequences. The natural world, including the human species, is continually exploited. One of the major consequences of the neoliberal economic system is the ecological crisis we find ourselves in today. Individual actions and meaning-making reflect the neoliberal structures that are our society's fabric. The neoliberal narrative or eco-friendly rhetorics used in corporate and governmental marketing efforts advocate neoliberal individual responsibility and individual action. Such efforts result in individualistic feelings of guilt and responsibility. Racked by the guilt of ruining the planet's ecology, individuals turn to self-regulatory practices. Through such marketing efforts, consumption is presented as *the* pathway to social change, maintaining the conditions that undermine calls for effective climate action by distracting from the crucial role of governments and corporations. Though practices connected to the PackBack network to some extent reflect these neoliberal power structures, they encompass spaces for collective and political action.

Collective action is often presented as the missing factor in our current efforts to meet ecological goals. Practices of sustainable citizenship connected to the PackBack network allow individuals to incorporate collective goals into their daily lives through shopping episodes and organizational decision-making. For instance, through inspirational practices and feelings of collectivity which are experienced within interactions with the Packback network. While practices reflect neoliberal logic to some extent, they simultaneously encompass spaces for collective action. Rather than reflecting either-or, neoliberal individual responsibility and collective action can be seen as being placed on a continuum.

Where collective action does not involve contestation per se, political action contests the structural conditions of our neoliberal society. Contestations within the practices of PackBack initiators, partners, and consumers are direct as well as indirect. The lobby work on behalf of PackBack initiators or the voting practices of individuals are examples of direct political action. Other contestations are more subtly embedded in everyday practices. By choosing to engage in sustainable citizenship practices which require more time and effort than the regular alternative to those practices, individuals contest neoliberal structural conditions. Underlying motivations for consumer practices illustrated how the individualistic character of their practices does not merely reflect neoliberal power structures but originates in feelings of powerlessness. Consequently, individuals turn to agency to deal with such feelings, resulting in individual practices. Political dimensions can be identified in these practices, both purchase-related – thus through green consumption – and non-purchase related. Through consuming less, knowledge creation and sharing, and dietary change, individuals contest the structural conditions of neoliberal society.

Through this study, I simultaneously aim to nuance the anthropological critiques on the market and individual practices as sphere for social change – by showing the elements of collective and political action that may arise – and highlight the limitations of the market and individual practices as solutions to the ecological crisis. This case study of PackBack, who are commercialized in an environment that does not hold their values, illustrates how market-related practices encompass collective and political action elements that go beyond and even contest neoliberal logic. However, I call for prudence when trusting market forces and individual practices as the route to social change. Especially the relative absence of trust in institutional politics and institutional political action worried me. How can we change a system if those who are deeply worried about its effects do not directly address those culpable to a larger extent? Or if those profoundly disturbed strive for ecological wellbeing through the very economic system that got us into this pendant situation? Further research in this domain, then, may explore the consequences of the absent trust in institutional politics and related activities such as activism and party membership. In this way, we may envisage possible futures in which those who hold the key to systemic change are effectively addressed.

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