



Understanding of eco-shaming phenomena in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse how eco-shaming practices are being understood by environmental activists and people actively involved in Kazakhstan's ecological agenda. Although there have been many studies on how receivers of eco-shaming artifacts react to them, there is a gap in how environmental communication campaign producers use the knowledge about eco-shaming and what language they elaborate on and think about eco-shaming. This study will allow a better understanding of what environmental communication practitioners need in terms of assessment and reflection in order to consider when and how to use eco-shaming to strive for changes and when not.

The research is done with an interactionist perspective and uses insights both from the literature review and the empirical data gathered in five focus groups. The focus group participants consider that eco-shaming risks pushing an individual away from learning about how to care for the environment. At the same time, this study argues that even though eco-shaming does not necessarily create changes as such, it might be considered as a relevant way of raising one's voice in the absence of access to deliberative forums. The study concludes with suggestions for future research and recommendations for environmental communicators in this regard.

Keywords: eco-shame, eco-shaming, Kazakhstan, environmental activism

Table of contents

List of tables.....	6
List of figures.....	7
Abbreviations.....	8
1. Introduction.....	9
1.1. Problem formulation.....	9
1.2. Aim and research questions.....	10
2. Background.....	11
2.1. What is shame and how it differs from guilt.....	11
2.2. The multifaceted nature of eco-shaming.....	14
2.3. Environmental activism in Kazakhstan.....	16
3. Theoretical framework.....	19
3.1. Core of symbolic interactionism.....	19
3.2. Interactionist view on shaming.....	20
3.3. Social field.....	22
4. Methodology.....	23
4.1. Data collection.....	23
4.2. Data analysis.....	26
4.3. Limitations.....	27
4.4. Ethical remarks.....	28
4.5. Contribution.....	28
5. Results.....	29
5.1. Making sense of eco-shaming as accountability of powerful actors.....	30
5.2. Making sense of eco-shaming as conversational feature in interpersonal communication.....	32
5.3. Alternatives to eco-shaming.....	34
6. Discussion.....	36
6.1. Eco-shaming as an appropriate sanction.....	36
6.2. Eco-shaming as an inappropriate sanction.....	38
6.3. Covert discourses for new research.....	40
7. In lieu of concluding remarks.....	43
References.....	45
Acknowledgement.....	52
Appendix.....	53

List of tables

Table 1. Selection criteria and variables for focus groups' participants.....	25
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

List of figures

Figure 1. Illustration of interrelations between social fields emerged within the discussions and eco-shaming phenomena.....	29
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Abbreviations

MRI	Magnetic Resonance Imaging
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SI	Symbolic interactionism

1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyse how eco-shaming practices are being understood by environmental activists and people actively involved in Kazakhstan's ecological agenda. Significance of the research is justified by the following: **(i)** the existing studies on influence and effectiveness of eco-shaming praxis demonstrate an ambivalent nature worldwide; **(ii)** there are no traced studies of the phenomenon within Kazakhstan; **(iii)** development of further understanding of eco-shaming practicalities are valuable for people working in communications in the upcoming years (Trend Watching 2020). Indeed, eco-shaming is an ambiguous communicative phenomenon that has been used and is likely to continue being used in environmental advocacy campaigns. Environmental activists and communication specialists often have to relate to this phenomena when designing campaign devices. Therefore, it is important to understand how they make sense of eco-shaming and deal with its ambiguous nature.

In what follows, research questions, the theoretical framework, methodology, results and discussion are presented. The study concludes with suggestions to consider both for academia and communication practitioners.

1.1. Problem formulation

In 2021, a range of ecological issues caused by anthropological impact already has practical solutions. Yet, no matter what problems are addressed, it is still people who make and accept proposed changes. Greatly simplifying, one cannot restrict bushmeat hunting, shut down every oil station or force everyone to wear only second-hand clothes in one day without social disruptions. Accordingly, studies on social norms and strategies for behavioral change are still the key subjects to environmental communication research.

The latter includes sociological, philosophical and psychological premises. For instance, there is a traditional discussion on the interplay between agency and structure, i.e. what influences individual decisions (Giddens 1986). Inquiries of environmental justice, in turn, backlight how responsibilities for ecological

consequences should or should not be divided (Crosby 1986; Wilson 2014). From the philosophical perspective, questions arise in a blurred line between unethical manipulation and healthy co-construction of understanding of social functioning. Does urgency justify the enforced implication of ‘new’ norms? To what extent should historical backgrounds be taken into account when we want society to function environmentally friendly? What methods are upheld to achieve desirable goals?

With the growing global environmental awareness, different emphasis and approaches coexist to address these questions. One of them is shaming and stigmatization of certain types of behaviour as a form of social regulations. Shame is theorised not only as a potential ‘governor’ of norms and an instrument against powerful actors (Jacquet 2016); but also as a threat to social ties (Goffman 1997; Scheff 2003). Hence, there are multiple ways to define shaming and its effectiveness within environmental discourses as well when aiming at systematic shifts.

To contribute to this discussion, this study focuses on studying activists' sense-making of eco-shaming to better understand its phenomena.

1.2. Aim and research questions

The aim of the research is to study how eco-shaming practices is being understood by people actively involved in Kazakhstan's ecological agenda. The following research questions are proposed to fulfil the aim:

RQ1. How is eco-shaming defined and operationalised by environmental actors in Kazakhstan?

RQ2. Is eco-shaming perceived and talked about differently when actors are in a communication receiver-position, compared when in a communication producer-sender position?

RQ3. What value do they put on eco-shaming practicalities and their effectiveness?

2. Background

This section is an overview of the desk research. In order to develop a vocabulary to discuss eco-shaming and how it is used, the section describes how the more general concept and phenomena of ‘shame’ have been theorized and studied across the fields. Further, a literature review on eco-shaming is presented along with examples of its application. Lastly, a resume on environmental activism in Kazakhstan is included to sketch the context for the research.

2.1. What is shame and how it differs from guilt

There is no direct answer to what shame is. It is mainly theorised as a painful experience of one’s inconsistency to a particular ‘ideal’ along with an awareness that certain individual acts or characteristics might be a subject of condemnation (Gilbert, Pehl & Allan 1994; Prokofiev 2016). It might also be caused, but not necessarily, by external verbalised evaluation. Consequently, there is a tendency to emphasize one of the mentioned occasions in ethical, sociological and psychological conceptualisations of shame (Prokofiev 2016).

Here are several classic examples. Aristotle's perspective in *Rhetoric* describes shame as “*a kind of pain and agitation about evils present, past, or to come, which appear to tend to loss of character*” (Aristotle in Buckley 2019:127). In his interpretation, shame appears as an act of dishonour and tied to the opinions of others quite rigidly (ibid.; Prokofiev 2016). It echoes in the sociology of emotions, where shame is related to trust issues, being a component for strengthening or threatening social bonds (Scheff 2003; Retzinger 1995). A signifier for both processes is the level of admission of existing shame. As sociologist Scheff (2003:258) describes it: “*Acknowledged shame, it seems, could be the glue that holds relationships and societies together, and unacknowledged shame the force that blows them apart.*”

Contemporary social scholars usually list shame among understudied concepts, while this emotion has a vital social role (Scheff 2003). For instance, in his famous studies of the history of manners and civilizing processes in Europe, Elias

highlights that social interaction is not only a process but a formation – the frame for interaction with nuances for evaluation (Fontaine 1978). Notably, in Western societies, while the threshold for shameful evaluations has been decreasing, the awareness of the emotion has been declining (ibid.). Yet, Elias has no definitions of shame, such as assuming the concept is interpreted in an ordinary manner (Scheff 2003). Another argument is that while classical social theorists, like Parsons, Weber or Durkheim, interpret emotions as a driving force for social life, the scientific knowledge remains scattered and does not “*improve on our shared beliefs*” (ibid.:240).

At the same time, a psychologist Helen B. Lewis (1989) identifies shame as a master emotion. The scholar states that shame controls behaviour hence the lack of attention to shame in psychotherapy has been the cause of many failures. In this perspective, shame is often covert and might be recognised by secondary effects: a flushed face, sweating, depression, talkativeness, feverish actions, indifference, etc. (Ikonen & Rechartt 1993). Furthermore, shame breeds anger that is directed at both oneself and others which can be recognised within group interactions (ibid.). To identify anger and shame, another scholar, Retzinger (1995) outlined a methodology to spot characterising verbal cues and paralinguistic gestures. She lists a series of defensive reactions, e.g. denials; explicit indifference to accusations; projections, e.g. placing of own experience onto others; abstractions, e.g. referring to ‘they’ or ‘it’; pauses; over-softening voice; hesitation¹ (ibid.:1109-1110).

Another psychologist, Paul Gilbert (1997) suggests a distinction between internalised and external manifestations of shame, i.e. self-assess and attention to humiliation, respectively. He (ibid.:141) argues that “*shame and humiliation should not be so readily bracketed together, for a while they overlap, and people can experience both at the same time, there may also be subtle but important differences between them*”. In this way, Gilbert assigns a role of vital motivation to shame to be accepted and attractive, not necessarily caused by others' judgments (ibid.). It is worth noting that later studies on Gilbert's theoretical premises show that patterns of internalised shame are based on childhood memories in which the influence of interactions are highly involved (Prokofiev 2016). The family's lifestyle, emotional reactions received to what is happening are the primary sources of knowledge about the world and its norms and rules for an individual (Sapolsky 2019).

¹ The mentioned is not applied in this study with ethical consideration, i.e. the researcher is not seen as a legitimate professional to make conclusions about personal covert shame. Instead the study focuses on direct shaming and interaction dynamics.

In anthropological studies, in turn, shame is analysed either as a cultural phenomenon, e.g. history of manners, or as a ubiquitous occurrence, having to do with, e.g. within sexual relationships (Karlsson & Sjöberg 2009). As a prominent example, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict contributed to the division between cultures of shame and guilt (Lie 2001). Their studies propose that primary communities tend to accentuate one of the mentioned feelings to mediate social relationships, and this accent depends on traditions and context (ibid.). The culture of guilt allows a person to question his or her acts but not necessarily his or her identity. If something goes wrong, and a person admits it, he or she begins to talk about how to fix it and live on. In the culture of shame, if something goes wrong and a person recognises it, an individual deeply worries that he or she is not good enough in general. In this perspective, guilt represents an ache from the admission of moral unacceptability of one's own thoughts and acts, while shame questions an identity as a whole.

The mentioned explicit differentiation between shame and guilt is also traced in advertising and marketing fields (Bedford et al. 2011; Chang, Zhang & Xie 2015; White & Habib 2018). For example, in their analysis of gain and loss framing, Baek and Yoon (2017) propose that people, who experience guilt, are motivated by desires to gain rewards, while shame is associated with avoidance of losses and punishments. Stemming from these proposed origins, the authors suggest that concerns about acts and way of thoughts relate to guilt, while a wholly negative self-evaluation is a shame (ibid.).

Besides, the development of neurophysiology contributes to the latter differentiation. Munich scientists, Michl et al. (2014) have studied neuromechanics of guilt and shame. The experiment involved volunteers experiencing these feelings while undergoing MRI² scanning. It turned out that shame involves those parts of the brain, which monitor externalities, detect errors, or are responsible for memory (ibid.). Besides, the middle frontal gyri were also often illuminated in the brains of ashamed people (ibid.). This part relates to the passive work of brains, e.g. the subconscious (ibid.). Guilt, in turn, 'lighted' those brain areas, which are responsible for decisions on basic survival emotions, like fear and fight-or-flight (ibid.). Based on these data, scientists state that guilt, despite the intensity of vegetative reactions, nevertheless stimulates an individual to take action, while shame makes a person want to freeze or hide (ibid.). Therefore, while both emotions cause various levels of mental suffering, they are linked to different behavioral propensities (ibid.; Sapolsky 2019). It is also important to stress that presented studies refer to shame and guilt as naturally defined and that they, the researchers, should identify the difference. This

² Magnetic Resonance Imaging

approach is different from psychological and some traditional sociological perspectives, including interactionism and postmodernism, where guilt and shame are often conceptualised as social constructs.

The presented set of academic accounts is not complete. However, it does demonstrate how various shame and guilt manifestations are being studied in different disciplines. Overall, it shows three mainstream premises for this research. Firstly, the experience of shame is tightened both to the context of the situation and shared norms in a particular society. Secondly, there are similarities in experiences of guilt and shame, but mostly they differ in origins and ways to influence the behaviour. Lastly, shame might be covert or acknowledged.

2.2. The multifaceted nature of eco-shaming

Eco-shaming is an umbrella for all practicalities of blaming someone because of non-environmentally friendly behaviour or politics. In this way, definitions of the concept include: **(i)** a praxis to make someone aware of harmful behaviors (Bruhn 2018; Mkono & Hughes 2020); **(ii)** a self-regulation act caused by eco-guilt (Bedford et al. 2011); **(iii)** hypocrisy-labels to be aligned with environmental beliefs and consents (Mkono 2020); **(iv)** tactics of activists to promote environmental ideas (Bloomfield 2014). Additionally, there are no traced beginnings of the ‘eco-shaming’ concept and its final definition. However, it is possible to state that shaming praxis on environmental issues have blossomed in commerce to nudge customers towards certain products (Zinkhan & Carlson 1995; Bedford et al. 2011; Amatulli et al. 2019) and within political debates (Downie 2014; Bloomfield 2014; Tingley & Tomz 2019). It is a need to point out that the eco-shaming literature often does not rely on the mentioned rigid shame-guilt distinction from anthropological or neurophysiological studies. Yet, eco-shaming studies tend to include labels on particular choices and the presence of ‘the audience’ for shame manifestations.

Regarding the latter, involvement of ‘the audience’ has been a part of various punishment systems for a long time. There is a theory that first hominids learned to talk for regulation of social ties, i.e. speaking allowed to manipulate status of each other within a group by rumors (Harari 2016). Until the eighteenth century, official punishments and executions in Europe were specially carried out as spectacular events to warn the rest against criminal acts (Foucault 1979). Along with industrialisation and workers’ movements worldwide, non-state forms of sanctions have also been updated with more public involvement through petitions

and demonstrations, including within environmental issues (Jacquet 2016). Going through this evolution, ‘the audience’ moved to the Internet (ibid.).

Moreover, eco-shaming might be exemplified by its various applications. On the one hand, there is a public condemnation of non-ecological political or market acts, which results in fundamental industrial changes (Harter 2004; Bloomfield 2014; Flanagin 2015). For instance, the *No Dirty Gold* campaign in the US has led to the establishment of a multi-stakeholder initiative for responsible mining in developing countries, whereas it all started from small local shaming campaigns of jewellery businesses (Bloomfield 2014). There is also an example of collapse at Canadian and European markets for seal-products, which has been influenced mainly by shaming campaigns, by Greenpeace (Harter 2004). Its long-lasting animal-rights advocacy has dropped exports of seal products by ninety percent and complexified the life of local communities (ibid.; Flanagin 2015). On the other side, not only institutions and businesses are being shamed. The *Public Lands Hate You* social media movement publicly denounces individuals who make pictures in natural parks, trampling plants (Allsop 2020). These activities cause social pressure and official investigations of visitors’ behaviour from the National Park Service in the US (Canon 2019). The examples of individual eco-shame are complemented with the study by Mkono and Hughes (2020), who unpacked the rising tendency for tourists worldwide to feel a certain degree of guilt while travelling because of the overall negative stigmatisation of flying.

At the same time, eco-shaming to change individual behaviour is also described by its different manifestations. For instance, Lindenberg and Steg (2007) propose that environmental norms can be successfully transmitted to society by moralisation, i.e. by application of stigmas for not complying with a desirable norm to be. In this way, the construction of moral social expectations strengthens personal responsibilities towards desirable actions (ibid.). Another perspective stresses the significance of group relation, bonded to shame and guilt. In particular, Mallett’s (2012:227) survey showed that eco-guilt and eco-shame inspire pro-environmental choices because a “*group-based guilt motivates participation in collective action*”. This stance is also supported by Schmitt et al. (2019). The scholars argue that it is the involvement in a collective struggle that attracts more people to strive for social changes (ibid.). Slightly different results by Moore & Yang (2020) indicate an increase of pro-environmental choices caused by guilt and shame among young people, who usually do not pay much attention to the environmental agenda. In summary, despite different accents, these studies describe the potential of eco-shaming to challenge individual making sense of ecological issues.

Yet, eco-shaming practicalities have pitfalls unpacked within sociological studies, too. Lindenberg and Steg (2007) themselves list mechanisms of neutralising even activated shame and guilt, e.g. denials of responsibility and seriousness of ecological problems or the belief that personal involvement does not change much. Furthermore, eco-shaming might dramatically increase anxiety, both causing harm to an individual and complexifying narratives about ecological problems (Pihkala 2018). Hence, while some become seekers of emotional comfort, searching for new information, others might be immobilised and distanced from traumas caused by eco-anxiety (Verdugo 2012; Panu 2020). Moreover, those who already practise a certain level of dedication, e.g. align their travels with ‘green’ transportation, struggle to follow their own choices daily (Mkono 2020). Following hypocrisy-labeling causes pressure and leads to frustration towards the environmental agenda, in general (ibid.).

In this regard, there are researchers, offering to re-focus shaming from individuals to powerful actors, e.g. business, corporations, industries and politicians. Kenneth Roth, the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, wrote in 2004:1: *“The strength of organizations like Human Rights Watch is not their rhetorical voice but their shaming methodology – their ability to investigate misconduct and expose it to public opprobrium”*. He stresses that the methodology is effective when there is clarity about violator and remedy, which is gained when violation can be perceived as discriminatory *“rather than a matter of purely distributive justice”* (ibid.). Jennifer Jacquet (2016), an Associate Professor at the Department of Environmental Studies at New York University, explicitly echoes this statement. Particularly, she argues that shaming, including eco-shame, adapted as a non-violent approach in the era of social media, is still a solution to stimulate large-scale changes (ibid.).

Taking into account the mentioned differences in the examples of applied eco-shaming, the sense-making of eco-shaming by Kazakhstani activists and people publicly involved in the ecological agenda is considered a valuable source of information to know more about how the concept is reflected on producing environmental communication artifacts. That is also because local activists take a visible role in shifting and promoting democratic ideas, including in relation to environmental issues (Beysembayev, Gusarova & Kabatova 2020).

2.3. Environmental activism in Kazakhstan

For a long time, environmental problems in Kazakhstan have not been prioritised to ensure national security, even after the disaster in the Aral Sea region (Asanov et al. 2021). Back in the Soviet period, numerous amounts of water from the Aral

Sea's tributaries, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers, were channeled and lost in irrigation (Micklin 2016). Under these circumstances, the lake's surface was only ten percent of the original area in 2007, which still cause traumatic consequences for the whole region, increasing salinity of both waters and soil (Granit et al. 2012). At the same time, among the most pressing ecological challenges within the country are water scarcity and transboundary water management, climate change, air quality in almost every city, extensive soil degradation, loss of biodiversity and increase of unmanaged wastes (Asanov et al. 2021). Generally, scholars stress low levels of environmental awareness, both among politicians and the population (ibid.).

So far, successful environmental activist campaigns are traced starting from the late Soviet period (Weinthal & Watters 2010). At that time, famous national writers and intellectuals from Central Asia publicly condemned the health impacts of centralised policies from Moscow (ibid.). There were public debates about the redirection of the Siberian Rivers via a huge canal across Kazakhstan to solve the Aral Sea's issues, caused by cotton manufacture (Micklin 1992). Those were cases of a victory of environmental activists since Gorbachev declined the Siberian Rivers plan (Weinthal & Watters 2010). Additionally, there was the anti-nuclear movement Nevada-Semey, resulting in the final shutdown of the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site in Kazakhstan in 1991 (Kuzembayeva et al. 2019). Among the latest successes of environmental activists: the *Save Kok-Zhailau* movement, which postponed constructions of a ski resort in the national park zone in Almaty (Adamdar News 2019); and a broad independent citizen monitoring of air quality AirKaz.org (n.d.).

Up to date, there are certain tendencies of environmental activism and new legal possibilities to perform it. In relation to mainstream, popular ecological issues for environmental campaigns are air pollution, natural parks protection and plastic recycling (And.kz 2020). These topics are also stated to be reflected in *The road map for environmental initiatives of activists and volunteers*, initiated by the Ministry of Ecology, Geology and Natural Resources of Kazakhstan (2020), but the text of the document is not available online to read³. Regarding recently appeared possibilities for activists, in July 2021, the new ecological code comes into force (Ramazanov 2021). Changes include, among others, empowerment of public associations (Association of Practicing Ecologists 2021).

It is important to mention that the growth of the NGO-sector has created the majority of environmental campaigns after Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991 (Kuzembayeva et al. 2019). However, the sector still meets institutional

³ Lastly checked on May 5, 2021

obstacles. The latest report provided for the Sixth Meeting of parties to the Aarhus Convention stresses “*lack of environmental policy, contradictory regulatory legal acts and their poor observance*” within the country (Kuratov & Omarbekova 2017:19). Public access to official ecological and statistical data remains restrained (ibid.).

3. Theoretical framework

The study has the symbolic interactionist perspective. In what follows, the core of the perspective is described. Further, the interactionist view on shame is demonstrated through ideas of Cooley, Goffman and Turner to explain how the feeling might appear and develop in communication. Additional theoretical concept of ‘social field’ is introduced at the end of this section.

3.1. Core of symbolic interactionism

Interactionism proposes the understanding of society as a web of agents, who co-construct, exchange and receive meanings about the world. This perspective was significantly developed in a variety of social scientific theories of the twentieth century, including *affect control theory*, *conflict theory* and *social exchange theory* (McCall 2013). Yet, the red thread for the mentioned is *symbolic interactionism* (SI), i.e. “*the perspective that the agents involved in the interaction are selves and that distinctively human interaction takes place through those selves’ reliance on the use of symbols and their shared meaning*” (ibid.:3).

Throughout progressions of the doctrine, SI scholars reflected numerous traditions. As a result, there are many ‘flavours’ of SI. McCall (2013) suggests distinguishing four major camps: process tradition, structural tradition, dramaturgical and postmodern. The first is influenced by Mead and Blumer, i.e. the authors of the term ‘*symbolic interactionism*’. Particularly, a student of Mead, Blumer (1969) stressed the fluidity of interactions and their inherent unpredictable nature. He viewed people as actively involved and constantly engaged in communication, while slightly neglecting the idea of general explanations and forecasts on social behaviour (McCall 2013). This perspective is relatively opposed to the structural tradition of SI (ibid.). For instance, Kuhn (1964) argued to incorporate every level of communication into social research, i.e. social constructs about the world are contextually placed and not developed in the vacuum. A correlative median between those two traditions is the dramaturgical perspective significantly developed by Erving Goffman (1959), as we can call it - Shakespeare's “*life is the theatre*”. Overall, it means that “*whenever in the presence of others an individual inevitably projects (or expresses) a definition of*

the situation, and does so by means of two quite different kinds of expression: the expressions that the person gives, and the expression given off” (McCall 2013:19). In this way, there is a stage, impressions, role-taking and its reception. Studies on the latter fall into the interest of the last-mentioned SI tradition, i.e. postmodernism, where scholars deconstruct the issues of representations, legitimacy of scholars and their interpretations (Denzin 1996). Despite mentioned accounts, all of the traditions include the following principles with different accents: humans are self-regulated social animals, who tend to have common nature unique to other fauna and social differences in relation to each other and the context of their communication (McCall 2013).

As it is presented, the theoretical framework *“does not claim to explain the character of reality but can be used in an analysis of how human beings interpret different situations and act accordingly”* (Hallgren 2017:67). In this way, the theory proposes meta-reflection levels for this study to be attentive to interpretations, dynamics, changes of opinions and sense-making by environmental activists through particular communicative praxis.

3.2. Interactionist view on shaming

The background section has already presented a set of scientific accounts on shame. However, this data does not allow a deeper focus for the interactionist study. That is to say, the background section is to demonstrate awareness of the different conceptualisations of shame across fields. This section, instead, is a description of the interactionist framework for shame manifestations to develop analytical sensitivity to the empirical data.

In this regard, studies of interactionists propose a set of shame perspectives and its influence on meaning-making processes. Distinctly, the works by Cooley (1992) and Goffman (1959; 1997) describe sociological interpretations of shame. By doing so, Cooley (1992) introduces the concept of the ‘looking-glass self’, which recounts the process whereby individuals base their understanding of selves on how they view others perceiving them. Using interaction as a mirror, an individual transforms external evaluations to measure his or her worth. This process involves the experience of pride and shame:

“A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person: the imagination of his [her]⁴ judgement of that appearance;

⁴ It is important to note that the cited work was written in English originally in a time when sociology’s culture inherently assumed that humans were men and men only. In other words, there is no [her] in the

and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking-glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgement, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this imagination upon another's mind" (Cooley 1902:184-185 in McCall 2013:9).

Cooley's perspective on shame has been criticised by sociologists for many decades due to strong emphasis on the role of empathy along with the focus on primary groups, peers and family members (ibid.). At the same time, the scholar builds on the idea that an individual follows a self-regulation process, and it is being developed through involvement in society. This perspective echoes the role-taking process, explained by Turner (Gibson 2003). People appear in interpersonal encounters with past experience and expectations for particular social categories, i.e. roles (Gibson 2003; McCall 2013). If these expectations are met, people feel good about themselves and attributes of roles put by others (ibid.). On the contrary, negative emotions, e.g. anger or shame, caused by not meeting one's own and others' expectations about encounters, are seeding defensive mechanisms and pitfalls for further communication. The latter is already a well-studied premise within psychological research (Lewis 1989; Gilbert 1997).

Relatively similar application to shame is traced in the impression management theory by Goffman (1959; 1997). The theory proposes that the mere expectation of 'embarrassment' mobilizes, while the latter is described beyond just an individual reaction. Embarrassment is understood as confusion due to clashes between coherent self-presentation and others' attributions (ibid.). Besides, both embarrassment and avoiding anticipated embarrassment is mutual in interactions. Gardner and Gronfein (2005:176-177) vividly elaborate on this: "*For Goffman, shame can also be imposed by superordinate alters on subordinate egos, and shame can affect not just individual interactants but the occasions in which the interaction is situated as well*". Although Goffman did not define shame itself, his theories might contribute to the analysis of disruptive incidents and defensive reactions to shame.

In conclusion, drawing on Cooley, Goffman and Lewis, American sociologist Tomas Scheff (2003) states that the dichotomy of pride and shame characterizes any interaction, whereby an individual is integrated into the social order with its norms (ibid.). It means that shame is always present and manifests itself differently within the spectrum: from 'embarrassment', i.e. transient, to 'humiliation', i.e. long-lasting pain. In this way, it is possible to propose that shame and its manifestations are not roots of emotional discomfort. Confusion is

original text, and it is contextually justified. However, I am adding [her] here in order to change the meaning of the original quote to better correspond to this study.

mainly caused by calls for norms' adherence, and shame is an identifier for this process (Jacquet 2016).

3.3. Social field

The study includes one additional theoretical concept of 'social field'. It is important to stress that this section appeared in the study after gathering the empirical data; hence, it does not provide a specific demand on data collection but suggests certain interpretations.

The concept was extensively developed in the theories by Bourdieu (1990), along with the concept of 'habitus'. Particularly, Bourdieu states that the world comprises social fields, i.e. socially constructed institutions and arenas for interactions. He describes social fields to have implicit and reduplicated rules (ibid.). Since operating within these fields requires a specific understanding of their ordinances, some people benefit from a social field more than others (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe 2009). In this way, a 'social field' is a set of possibilities, and a 'habitus' is an individual way a person enters it (Bourdieu 1989; 1990). For example, in the situation of an open and transparent application to a university, i.e. to enter an educational system as a 'social field', is not yet an equal process for people from different cities, or even classes within one town, because these people might have different 'habitus': different levels of self-esteem, confidence, reactions and choices, embodied from the outer world.

In regard, an interactionist Goffman (2008), for instance, also introduced concepts of 'sense of one's place' and 'public space', and states that an individual's behaviour can be completely unconscious. At first glance, these conceptualisations of agency-structure interplay is similar to the described in the previous passage. However, in relation to the structural level, most traditional interactionists, including dramaturgist Goffman (ibid.), emphasize that the very situation determines an interaction between actors. In this way, applying SI, a person is reflexive or programmed - and none of these is a priori assumption, which is never a disadvantage but has its own specifics to interpret data. Bourdieu, instead, specifically focuses on how the body itself is human social relations and how power structures are embodied in it. In this way, introducing the 'social field' by Bourdieu and not 'public space' by Goffman into the interpretation of the data, this study assumes and highlights the impact of structural level more explicitly.

4. Methodology

The mentioned theoretical frame is applied in an abductive manner, i.e. a researcher has an incomplete standpoint over the studied subject and pre-existing understanding, which are tested and challenged within the fieldwork. The applied methods include literature study, focus groups and further content analysis with interactionist lenses.

4.1. Data collection

The methods to gather data include a literature review and online discussions with five focus groups from Kazakhstan. Literature provides a summary of existing research on eco-shaming across fields, including qualitative and quantitative studies. Focus groups are chosen to unpack the sense-making about eco-shaming among participants through their interaction.

The choice of focus groups as a method is justified by a possibility to study how people engage in collective understanding; i.e. *“how views are constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified in the context of discussion and debate with others”* (Wibeck, Dahlgren & Öberg 2007:249). As Nexø and Strandell (2020:4) explain, focus groups increase chances *“to filter out socially normative interpretative schemes while suppressing idiosyncratic individual schemas”*. In other words, the method allows people to talk less about their covert ideas and more about highly normative ones, as members of a group and structures, which correlates with the research's aim more.

The choice of size and number of focus groups has nuances. Regarding relevant numbers of participants, scholars mention the range from five to eight to get a fruitful discussion (Krueger & Casey 2009; Creswell & Creswell 2018). Additionally, the sufficient quantity of focus groups is tested within the statistical research by Guest, Namey and McKenna (2017). The study provides evidence that ninety percent of data coded from forty focus groups are discoverable within three-six focus groups (ibid.). Accordingly, this research includes data from five

focus groups with the amount of participants from three to six. Overall, there are twenty-one participants.

Moving to selection criteria and recruitment of participants, there are also various suggestions on group's heterogeneity regarding age, background or even prior relationships. On the one hand, the advantage of homogeneous groups is the so-called 'common ground', which provides easement to speak up and nourishes interactions among participants (Bryman 2016; Morgan 2019). On the other hand, the dependency between socioeconomic or demographic variables and research outputs is still questionable and, indeed, is highly dependent on the discussion (ibid.; Wibeck, Dahlgren & Öberg 2007). Therefore, there is no well-justified reason to strive for homogeneity of focus groups in this study.

Therefore, the study uses purposive sampling (Patton 2002; Bryman 2016). As Bryman (2016:418) sets out: *"The researcher does not seek to sample research participants on a random basis. The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed"*. Stemming from this explanation, this study focuses on environmental activists and people, who do not necessarily self-identify themselves as such but are actively involved in public discourse on the ecological agenda in Kazakhstan. As it is mentioned, this criterion is assigned due to the fact that local activists are vastly involved in democratic norms' transmission and creation of new meanings in Kazakhstan, while their main resource is still public reputation and the support of like-minded people (Beysembayev, Gusarova & Kabatova 2020). Moreover, the sampling was designed to include participants, interested in various environmental issues to cover different backgrounds of the local ecological agenda (see *Table 1*). In this process, participants were also scheduled for the focus groups with consideration of the language of expression. They were recruited via Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram profiles by transparently describing the purpose of the study.

Table 1. Selection criteria and variables for focus groups' participants

#	criteria	explanation	significative
1	Language	As language, sense-making and definitions are among units for the analysis, language is considered as an important criteria to take into account. Comfort in expression of thoughts should be provided.	Kazakh ⁵ Russian
2	City of main activities	Places of birth are not taken into account. The study focuses on the main place of activism.	Aksu Aktau Almaty Atyrau Kostanay Nur-Sultan Petrovavlovsk Temirtau Uralsk
3	Diversity of environmental issues.	The research strives to include participants with concerns on different environmental topics. Diversification is reached not through its presence in each particular group, but rather through consideration of the whole number of participants.	Climate change Pollution Biodiversity Waste management Water scarcity Natural parks protection
4	Active involvement in activism practicalities	Participants should be noticed as active supporters of environmental movements or campaign creators and publications authors, or participants in demonstrations, or creators of awareness media artifacts.	Participation in the environmental movement. Participation in demonstrations. Creation of awareness media artifacts. Public support of the local environmental agenda.

⁵ The Kazakh language was considered and included in the selection process. It was considered with the help of translators for the researcher. However, no discussions in Kazakh were conducted in the end.

Moving to the procedure, the setting covered three stages to reveal two dimensions of communication: transmission and reception (see *Appendix*). As Morgan (2019:28) warns: *“The most problematic aspect of interaction in focus groups occurs when the discussion degenerates into serial interviewing rather than active exchanges among the participants [...] Hence, the more desirable goal is to generate a self-sustaining flow of interaction across the table”*. It is done by assigning to participants both the role of receivers (watching campaigns) and creators (generating an environmental message) along with questions for the final group discussion to contribute to their knowledge-exchange. In this fashion, relying on eco-shaming definitions suggested in the literature, participants firstly were asked to reflect on components for environmental messages in two suggested scenarios: **(a)** to motivate individuals for a certain behavioral change; **(b)** to make a certain institution accountable for its action. The second round of discussion consisted of displaying artifacts, representing different mediums, i.e. posters and video campaigns. The gradient of blaming was followed: explicit and hidden: **(1)** explicit (somebody or something is named and blamed directly in the message); **(2)** hidden (a problem is presented and distribution of responsibilities, directed to a receiver, is ambiguous or open to multiple interpretations). This gradient was defined prior to focus groups and was not directly articulated to participants, i.e. they were observing artifacts per se. The demonstration of artifacts one by one was followed by the researcher's questions such as: *What do you think is the main message? What do you feel about this message? What do you think about the effectiveness of this message to influence behavior and the way it is transmitted? Would you add/exclude something here?* In the end, participants were invited to a final group discussion to share their personal understanding of eco-shaming, its values and drawbacks along with personal experiences.

4.2. Data analysis

As Creswell and Creswell (2018) propose, a systematising approach of literature study was followed by creating mind maps and categorising studies into groups. In this manner, the researcher identified and then collected academic artifacts on five major themes, outlined in relation to research questions: **(1)** eco-shaming and its efficiency for behavioral change; **(2)** eco-shaming and ethical concerns; **(3)** eco-shaming and eco-guilt; **(4)** norms violation and sanctions; **(5)** environmental activism in Kazakhstan. In this way, the background section provides a set of several existing examples of eco-shaming along with perspectives on its definition.

This overview is also used to compare with empirical data and backlight where contemporary research correlates with experience in Kazakhstan and contradicts it.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Further, two analytical frameworks were applied, i.e. ‘constant comparative’ and ‘critical incidents’ (Krueger & Casey 2009). The chosen approaches are driven by the research questions, which aim to identify both discourse on eco-shaming and the manner of its appearance through interactions.

The first framework is chosen to address **RQ1** and **RQ3**, i.e. to summarise how activists understand eco-shaming practicalities and their effectiveness. The latter is done by colour-coding recurring patterns, such as logics, assumptions, eco-shaming articulations within the transcripts and cross-group comparison. This framework proposes to compare different segments of empirical data to identify similarities and differences and outline dominant and hidden ideas about eco-shaming. The second framework, in turn, proposes to switch attention to rationalities of participants, i.e. *“discover important and critical events that have shaped later decisions or actions as well as logic and emotional forces that surround the incident”* (ibid.:125). It is done by re-watching recordings of focus groups to observe changes of opinions, meeting of contradictions in one room and spontaneous reactions within group discussions. These interactive units for analysis helped to address **RQ2**, i.e. to unpack tendencies, which activists follow as receivers and creators of eco-shaming campaigns.

Additionally, it is important to highlight that no assessment of artifacts is demonstrated in this paper.

4.3. Limitations

Among the limitations for this research is sensitivity of the theme of activism in Kazakhstan, because of present persecutions (Crude Accountability, FracTracker Alliance & Ecoforum 2019). To achieve truthfulness and validity, the study relies on peer-reviews, supervision and clarifications of bias.

It is also important to mention the constraint to perform focus groups online due to COVID-19 outbreak. As Bryman (2016:519) warns: *“the balance of evidence tends to show that face-to-face focus groups yield data of superior quality compared to online ones”*. At the same time, a strong advantage of the circumstances is an ability to gather participants from different cities in one discussion room in a short period of time of the master thesis research.

4.4. Ethical remarks

As an ethical remark, consent forms were created and signed by all participants. By doing so, they agreed on voluntary and anonymous participation, storage of focus group recordings and citing without specifying their names. Besides, the consent form included the notion that no participant can publicly mention other's names and participation without their common pre-agreement.

The participants were provided with information on the research by prior correspondence, including the aim of the research, a description of the master programme and their contribution to the study. This might have influenced the discussions, hence the participants were approached with curiosity, active listening and focus on sense-making sequences within interactions to level the mentioned possible impact down.

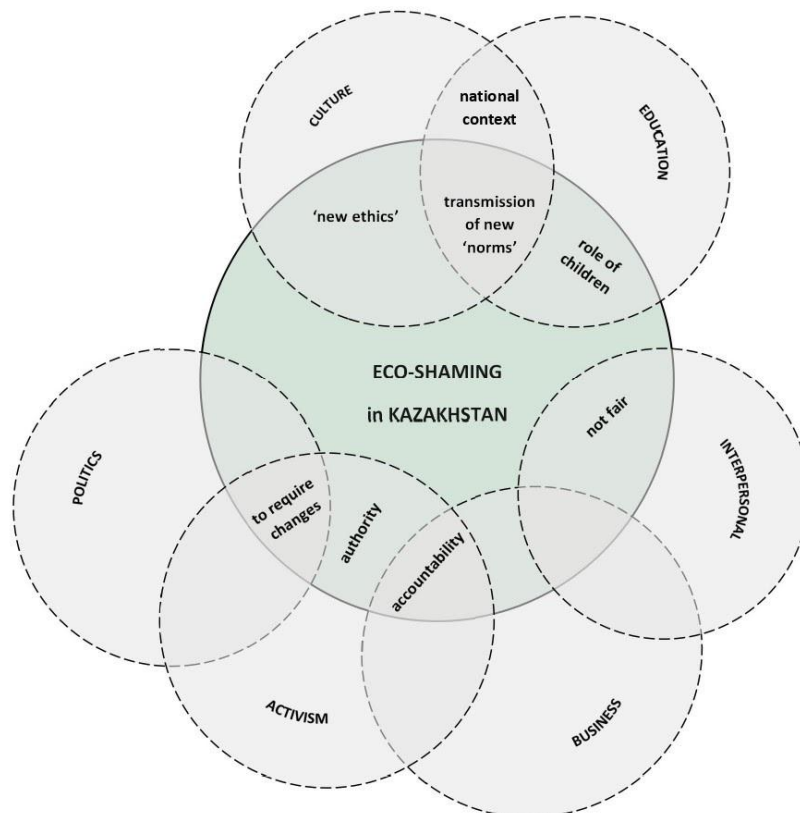
4.5. Contribution

Although there have been many studies on how receivers of eco-shaming artifacts react to them, there is a gap in how environmental communication campaign producers use the knowledge about eco-shaming and what language they elaborate on and think about eco-shaming. This study will allow a better understanding of what environmental communication practitioners need in terms of assessment and reflection in order to consider when and how to use eco-shaming artifacts to strive for changes and when not.

5. Results

In this section, the findings are elaborated, distilled from the empirical data, exemplified by quotes. Overall, participants refer to eco-shaming as to **(i)** an approach to reach accountability of the government and business structures; **(ii)** an interpersonal appeal to be ashamed because of non-ecological behaviour; **(iii)** an act of shaming of activists themselves for environmentally conscious activities; **(iv)** an experience of self-shame. Besides, they related these understandings to a particular social field within the discussions, i.e. education, culture, politics, activism, business (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Illustration of interrelations between social fields emerged within the discussions and eco-shaming phenomena



These interrelations are elaborated further, divided into three main themes. They are the following: **(5.1)** making sense of eco-shaming as accountability of powerful actors; **(5.2)** making sense of eco-shaming as a conversational feature in interpersonal communication; **(5.3)** alternatives to eco-shaming. By this separation, the different actualisations are presented to demonstrate what are dominant and contradicted opinions that coexisted within the group discussions. Everything summarised below are the statements made by participants along with the researcher's descriptions of particular reactions and communicative accidents, happened during certain discussions.

5.1. Making sense of eco-shaming as accountability of powerful actors

The weakness of institutions, trust and distrust in the government in Kazakhstan was extensively discussed. Most participants expressed that blaming praxis is a relevant way to make public institutions accountable. The participants emphasised that an accusation, in this case, must be well-founded in factual arguments and widely supported by the public. There was a tendency to justify the latter by a desire to be protected from state prosecutions.

While the reliance on 'facts' was highlighted as a necessity, there were also different interpretations of what facts are. On the one hand, some participants referred to 'facts' as the availability of photo and video artifacts of violations. On the other, some used the word 'facts', referring to available statistics:

"It seems that the numbers speak for themselves. If you give the numbers and then say how they affect health, people will already understand everything. It is challenging for structures to confront specific facts. We need to collect facts, and at the same time, conduct a public campaign," **one of the participants stated.**

Moreover, the participants often argued for their strive for 'fact-fullness' by the existence of past campaigns in Kazakhstan, which has blamed organisations built on 'poor fact control', e.g. dissemination of outdated videos. The following quote demonstrates how one of the participants see a 'right' and 'trustworthy' sequence of actions to build a blaming-campaign when a hypothetical factory pollutes a nearby reservoir:

"It is necessary to take samples of water, hand them over to a laboratory, get results, and only then, with documents in hand we can contact the state bodies and extensively involve social networks."

It appeared that the participants spoke about eco-shaming campaigns as a way of communicating with someone about the legitimacy of someone else. Rarely respondents mentioned reaching out directly to a ‘culprit’, a business or a state institution, as the first step of accusations or requests to deal with a particular problem, i.e. they mentioned it either as an act in a parallel or not a priority. Additionally, participants stated that there is always a demand for many people, who express support of messages in blaming campaigns:

“Those who depend on people accept our criticism: the akimat [local name for the municipality] depends, the business depends. And if it were only one eco-activist, then there would be no solutions. If a large mass of people supports criticism, then it works,” **one participant said.**

Consequently, eco-shaming was often articulated as the public and NGO response to malfunctioning deliberative democracy. Four participants explicitly expressed a need for participatory democracy within the country. In this regard, whereas part of the discussions included recognition of eco-shaming as a tactic of activists against powerful institutions, general public participation in political discourses is highlighted as an urgency because of the passive or restrained public involvement in policy-making up to date:

“It seems to me that maybe another active generation is needed, democracy is needed. We will not have democracy until our voice is important in politics, that we still cannot choose who and what we want,” **one of the respondents warned.**

However, four participants out of twenty-one noted that eco-shaming of state institutions and businesses might be developed as a dangerous tendency or questionable approach. It is explained by relocation of responsibility from each individual to a specific institution, e.g. within discussions on climate change or waste management. These respondents suggested that eco-shaming campaigns become collectively predefined opinions towards organisations and that such semi-finished products prevent individuals from thinking and making up their mind themselves. Besides, it was expressed that people instead of projecting shame on companies, should rather think about their own behaviour and make sure that they act and consume responsibly:

“If a person will not get the right message, he [or she]⁶ will go to blame the states, oil companies; but not himself [or herself]. Perhaps, a person will not think of personal involvement and role. ‘Humanity, which impacts climate, is one thing but I am sitting at home. I am different and I am another thing’,” **argued one of the participants.**

⁶ Here and after, adding [she] into quotes of the participants is justified by a translation between different languages and negotiating grammar rules with clarity.

Lastly, but not least, the interrelation between power and eco-shaming practicalities is inlaid within assumptions on authority and reputation. The importance of who is expressing the accusation and what position in the community these actors have, was extensively discussed within two groups. Accordingly, elders, opinion leaders and media figures were listed as actors who have the resources and power to disseminate social norms and hold institutions' accountability.

5.2. Making sense of eco-shaming as conversational feature in interpersonal communication

In the discussions, eco-shaming also appeared as a feature that is used in interpersonal conversations. The participants were telling about experiences of both projecting shame on someone else and of being shamed. They talked about that both when attributing shame and when being attributed shame, can be an emotional experience, but also that shaming can leave the receiver ignorant towards environmental issues.

In this regard, most participants recognised eco-shaming as interpersonal blaming, characterising it as an 'unfair' and 'tiring' practice, especially in Kazakhstan. This contextual reference was supported by the opinion that the country has limitations in infrastructures on the range of socioeconomic issues: from waste disposal to public participation. Consequently, the participants stated that environmental activists are often told that ecology is not high on the population's priority list. As one of the respondents added, people in his hometown do not care much about ecology because they do not understand why they should care if there are other "more important" issues that exist in their lives. The participant suggested replacing eco-shaming with thorough explanations to change this type of opinion:

"No, we will not succeed in such tactics, such as eco-shaming. I belong to the 'gray mass', I am from it. We discuss a lot in chats about what we can do, but people do not understand it at all. If ecological information is conveyed, that should go together with a very long explanation why they should care," **the respondent said.**

The increase of social tensions due to the pandemic in 2019-2021 was also highlighted within the discussions of efficiency and appropriateness to eco-shaming towards individuals:

"I am categorically against eco-shaming, because it only causes rejection. Especially taking into account this year of terrible quarantine, there is so much negativity around and

additional pressure. Eco-shaming will not bring any results: either ignoring or there is a fundamental "I do not care"," **a worker from an environmental NGO said.**

At the same time, some of the participants think that eco-shaming is assessed and motivated on the one hand based on its strategic usefulness and, on the other hand, due to its moral justification. There are a few participants, who underlined the inefficiency of eco-shaming towards individuals to change behaviour, yet still practise it daily within their circle of influence, e.g. among family or colleagues. It tends to be justified by the assumptions that there are certain 'immutable truths'. This perspective is exemplified by the following quotes from two participants from the different focus groups:

(1) "When you come across and face indifference, sometimes misunderstanding, you think: we walk on the same land, breathe the same air, and drink the same water. Why don't they share my views?"

(2) "Well, there are some stable rules of conduct. They should be there anyway."

In regard, each group has at least one participant, who experiences derogation of her or his environmental public actions or even stigmatisation of their identities. These respondents define eco-shaming primarily as an attack against them in the first place. Some shared that they were named 'eco-Taliban' or 'eco-psychos'. Most of respondents encounter misunderstanding or alienation among friends or relatives:

"You understand that many people consider your attempts to preserve animals, or, I don't know, the environment in general, not like your simple job, but view you as an eco-psychopath, who runs around. And it discredits you dramatically as a person who helps at least with something," **shared one of the participants.**

There are also a range of accidents to highlight. Firstly, there is no traced shaming if people shared polarised standpoints in one room. In fact, when conflicting worldviews encountered in the same group, within a lively dialogue, people avoided the vocabulary of open shaming and tried to explain their perspective, and do not refute the opponent's position. Moreover, when the direct shaming happened during watching a video advertisement against the oil industry [*one of the participants works for an oil company, which is directly named and blamed in the mentioned artifact*], and this person shared the feeling of guilt, everyone in the group started to defend her, criticising the statement in the advertisement. Secondly, respondents reacted positively to statements and advertisements that resonate with their beliefs, and, on the contrary, criticized those, which do not correspond to them. For instance, a vegan, who stands against the demonstration of violent pictures, expressed sympathy on the artifact about fur trade with a

direct eco-shaming message and blood exposure. Besides, there were different emotional and body responses to environmental campaigns within each group. The explicit difference is traced towards reciprocity to pictures of animals in environmental campaigns. The traced reactions within different groups are tears, scepticism or deep sympathy to animals. While one person was crying after seeing artifacts in one group, the members of another group stated that it is hard to be emotionally involved when animals are pictured.

In regard to interactions, there were no verbally articulated changes of opinions during discussions even though different perspectives met in one room quite often. The tendency was to build upon each other's statements, adding new points to consider as co-construction of a meaning of the situation and the phenomena itself. Each participant was involved in discussions and participated in each exercise of focus groups.

5.3. Alternatives to eco-shaming

The third way of sense-making of eco-shaming is done by provision of alternatives to eco-shaming practicalities, e.g. general education and strategic approach to communication. For instance, the suggestion that it is important to work with children, and transmission of new norms from kids to their parents were highlighted at least once in each group. As one of the participants stated:

“If, for example, an ecologist comes to children and says, figuratively speaking, a package decomposes this way, a child will clearly see it and he [or she] will bring this idea home. It is the children who break all established laws and habits in the house.”

In addition, several participants shared their opinion that informational work, shaming or education on ecological issues is not efficient without extra stimulus of economic sanction, e.g. fees and deposit-system:

“It is always important to motivate people, and institutions for changes, but also financially. We see, both in terms of technical inspection and how enterprises behave, that if there is no financial component, then it is difficult to achieve changes with these calls 'You must sort it out',” **said one of the participants.**

At the same time, the understanding of how informational work on ecological issues, in general, must be performed meets contradictions. While one camp of participants believes in the constant raising of awareness, i.e. extension of information, others share cautiousness about limits of public attention, i.e. well-planned environmental communication is needed. The latter includes the usage of

local images, which are easier to relate to, long-term plan and understanding of the goal of communication. These suggestions are articulated along with the following: ‘intrigue’, ‘constancy’, ‘propaganda of rationality’, ‘alternatives’, ‘navigation’. As one participant stressed:

“It’s a matter of how people feel themselves in this communication, how confident they are, whether they can be those who will take my hand and lead so that I receive (a) relief, and (b) necessary information that will come in handy, and not just as a big pile of facts. A call to some specific action must still be accompanied by the educational context. You need to stretch, play a little with people, and show different points of view.”

One person stressed that the environmental movement is generally seen as an international, eurocentric or neocolonial agenda. He suggested that environmental activism should develop as a patriotic thought and understanding of what should be done for the local sake as a priority (‘we will preserve our nature, our home, etc.’), and not as an invasive practice, including shaming about what is right to do. The participant from another group expressed a very similar idea:

“Based on our mentality, you probably need to push more on issues of disrespecting your own culture [...] Probably we need such eco-shaming which states: if you don’t follow these special actions, you destroy the whole history and culture of your people.”

In conclusion, ‘mentality’ tends to be mentioned as a unique set of inherited norms. For example, one participant directly connects particular non-ecological behaviour with the widespread tradition to demonstrate a specific status, e.g. by having cars or fur coats: *“Our culture, after all, is built on the dust in our eyes to demonstrate welfare and status.”*

6. Discussion

In this section, the findings are analysed. In what follows, the discussion on the participants' eco-shaming sense-making as an appropriate and inappropriate phenomena. This study does not argue strongly for whether eco-shaming is or is not appropriate, rather unpacks how environmental activists deal with and reflect on the tension between appropriate and inappropriate, and that it can be both. The section ends with the hidden ideas for future research.

6.1. Eco-shaming as an appropriate sanction

As the findings show, most participants do understand eco-shaming as a valid tactic or a natural reaction towards institutions in power. In this sense-making, the experience of the sole emotions of a human, e.g. shame and guilt, is not the same as the experience of reputational risks for a structure. Eco-shaming is co-discussed as an available form of communicating disagreements, where the legal mechanisms are lacking performance and transparency. The latter is well-described and echoed by Ganesh and Zoller (2013). In particular, their study focuses on cooperation in relation to social changes and activism. The scholars argue that there is a dominant tendency to perceive activism as a destructive occurrence to be avoided by consensus-seeking (*ibid.*). Yet, 'exchanges around the table' might still reproduce existing power patterns within a particular social field (*ibid.*). Hence, civil disobedience, including eco-shaming campaigns by activists, creates a new forum to express democratic deficit.

At the same time, the literature review backlights two problematic issues within this perspective. Essentially, there are people behind structures anyhow. This research argues that citizens' shaming attacks of institutional acts or environmental political decisions in public discourse have a high possibility to transform into the blaming of people in charge. This transition, in turn, increases social polarisation and intractability of conflicts appearing. As a researcher of law, Massaro (1997), warns, a crowd of people who disagree, specifically on the Internet, expresses disgust at violators at ease, instead of condemning violations

as such. In this way, the intention of holding accountability by eco-shaming has a slippery path to become a mocking process with poor facilitation.

Since participants did relate eco-shaming to accountability, there are rules for shaming, both for people in power and public institutions, found in the literature review. Particularly, Jacquet (2016) defines the following principles: **(1)** The fact that a particular violation is a significant concern to the public must be present; **(2)** There is no solid legal mechanism to make a shame subject accountable, thus the shamer must be excluded from formal decision process; **(3)** Shaming must be performed from a respected initiator; **(4)** Shame should be aimed at the maximum final gain, e.g. when targeting catching sharks in China, do not attack fishers, but the Chinese elite, which creates demand; **(5)** Besides, the public should not stoop to excessive punishment, defined within a particular community; **(6)** It is essential to give the disgraced person or institution a chance to regain social affiliation and save reputation (ibid.).

Stemming from the above, the following question appears - *What is 'an excessive punishment'?*. Since this research embraces concerns on public condemnation of individuals, including those behind the institutional decisions, there are qualitative studies to contribute to reflection. In the global research *Perception of appropriate response to norm violation in 57 societies*, Eriksson et al. (2021) analysed answers of more than twenty-two thousand respondents from fifty-seven countries to unpack when and what is perceived as an excessive sanction. The variation of punishments takes in *social ostracism* (active avoidance of someone); *physical* or *verbal confrontation* and *gossiping* (ibid.). The authors stress that while open confrontation likely makes a person aware of her or his violation, it is gossip to strengthen and spread a certain norm among the group (ibid.). However, there are “*variations in cultural values and norms; for instance, more individualistic values and loose norms give individuals more leeway in violating norms without getting punished, while greater power distance may raise the acceptance of individuals asserting authority by punishing norm violations*” (ibid.: 6). This result delineates why the importance of reputation for a shamer are highlighted within discussions of the focus groups. Indeed, Hofstede Insights' model (n.d.) shows that Kazakhstan is a country with high social power distance: “*People in this society accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place, and which needs no further justification*”. In regards, Eriksson et al. (2021) conclude that these kinds of metanorms are possible to change. Chiefly, metanorms relate to the local specificities for social coordination, which, in turn, are shifting with the improvement of political management.

6.2. Eco-shaming as an inappropriate sanction

Another finding is that some participants do articulate eco-shaming as unfair or still practised, if applied to an individual. This study suggests that the mentioned way of sense-making relates to role-taking processes, stigmatisation and impacts of 'ideals', proposed by structural level.

In regard, the interactionist perspective highlights that role-taking happens in each human encounter (McCall 2013). This research builds on this statement and argues that different roles of one person, e.g. the role of activist, mother, citizen, consumer, etc., are merged to provide a unique mix of expectations from each of them. Hence, the sense-making of a particular role might differ from others' because of its connection to its own individual spectrum. In this way, various role spectrums, met in one room, might enrich or challenge one's understanding of the particular role. This argument is supported by the empirical data, i.e. participants, chosen to be environmental activists, identify themselves and manifest their roles in discussions differently by expressing goals, approaches and sense-making of eco-shaming.

The idea of role-spectrum and sense-making of roles included in it, also explains why there are participants who meet negative stigmatisation, e.g. 'eco-psycho'. It is what David Graeber (2020) termed as 'moral envy'. As he explains:

"I am referring here to feelings of envy and resentment directed at another person, not because that person is wealthy or lucky, but because his or her behaviour is seen as upholding a higher moral standard than an envier's. The basic sentiment seems to be "How dare that person claim to be better than me (by acting in a way that I do indeed acknowledge is better than me)?" (ibid.: 488-489).

That is to say, in a community, anyone who embodies specific values by taking a particular role is often perceived as a threat and a moral challenge (ibid.). To support this statement there are also the experiments by Minson and Monin (2012) on 'do-gooder derogation'. In their study, it has appeared that people overall tend to put down morally motivated others (ibid.). They studied the reactions of meat-eaters to vegetarians and found out that forty-seven percent of respondents freely attribute negative terms to vegetarians (ibid.). It also depends on how much meat-eaters expected others to see themselves as morally superior (ibid.). Extrapolating these results on the current study it is suggested that, even though environmental activists might not express judgement about the lifestyles of others, their role and others' expectations about this role per se tend to evoke the feeling of being morally judged hence external defensive derogation.

At the same time, stigmatisation of environmental activists also appears as a defensive response if interpersonal eco-shaming is present as a condemnation of someone's identity. This statement is justified, relying on Retzinger's methodology of identifying shame and anger (1995) and Scheff's conceptualisations of the inevitable presence of shame. That is to say, shame in all forms of interpersonal communication has the power to decrease trust and threaten a social bond (ibid.). Direct shaming of identity only increases the intensity of these processes (ibid.). As the empirical data suggests, forms of eco-shaming include emotional appeals, direct naming and condemnation, the humiliation of an identity, exclamations both in oral and written artifacts. This paper does not suggest any ethical evaluation of the mentioned verbal sequences but stresses existing risks, highlighted in the literature, to push away an individual from stronger involvement in the environmental agenda.

Digging deeper, the negative stigmatisation of activists and eco-blaming from activists might have a similar nature, if related to the projection of 'shadows' as it is described by psychologist Erich Neumann (2008). It is a complex idea about how one struggles with its own 'dark' side, which does not correspond to the ideal image (ibid.). As Neumann explains it, a human always has 'a shadow', i.e. what he or she assumes as inner evils; whereas there are also always specific images of ideals, towards which he or she strives. However, the ideal is often a contradiction to reality, hence a person undergoes a certain level of sacrifice for an ideal, including what he or she might want to do but cannot, or must hide from others (ibid.). As a notable addition, this inner struggle happens not only with broadly accepted as socially destructive or actual criminal intentions but also randomly, e.g. within food preferences or humour in public. For instance, in Europe, at less secularised times, people relied on descriptions of appropriate moral ideals in religious books. With the spread of liberalism, ideals have also changed but the fact of their presence stayed. As Neumann argues, people still project their 'shadows' and sacrifices for their own ideals onto others therefore harshly judge them (ibid.).

This study proposes a connection in how problems with eco-shaming of individuals, articulated by the participants, can be easier to deal with when acknowledging the aspect of one's shadow. In this regard, Neumann vividly argues that humanity needs a new form of ethics that will allow one to come to terms with one's shadow, accept responsibility for one's negative qualities and actions, and become more tolerant towards others (ibid.). Although the scholar did not describe any new phenomenon, and rather stated the necessity of its

occurrence, he, somehow, predicted it. Now, ‘new ethics’⁷ sets standards over what is to be perceived as normal, and what does not deserve to be tolerated, including within the environmental agenda (Magun 2021). The images of an ideal human being shifting respectively (ibid.) It is important to note that the prefix ‘new’ itself says that we do not fully understand what we are dealing with - it just means separation from the previous phenomenon in the first place. Simultaneously, the listed Neumann's ideas on ‘inner shadows’ does not mean that accountability issues in the environmental discussions nor personal mistakes should be tolerated or treated in a certain way. However, it does suggest a ground for thinking over tools to deal with clashes of ideals within the eco-shaming occurrence.

6.3. Covert discourses for new research

During discussions, the participants listed a range of alternatives to eco-shaming. Most of the suggestions fall into changes within education systems and strategy of communications, as stated in the results. However, there are also several hidden perspectives to backlight.

Firstly, there is a recommendation to pay attention to the meaning of eco-shaming when the participants identified other means for generating change. Indeed, there are the theories of Bourdieu to conceptualise eco-shaming as domination through complex structures and symbols hence eco-shaming is a highly questionable approach from an ethical standpoint. The latter refers to ‘symbolic violence’ by Bourdieu. It is a situation when a group of actors dominates another or even the rest of society (Inglis 2018). The main point here is that it is not necessarily a physical process, but ideological dominance. This study argues that it correlates with the very idea of blaming, i.e. eco-shaming includes ideas about environmentally appropriate behaviour as ideological power to influence, change and govern people. Hence, a search for ‘ethical’ alternatives seems to appear naturally within the discussions.

However, while the eco-shaming of an individual appeared as ‘unfair’, there are philosophical considerations with the participants’ proposed alternatives as well. Together with manipulating children to make them influence their parents, there is a ground for a new forum to why eco-shaming of individuals is seen by the participants as the dark side of change, and enlightenment as the fair side. As Foucault (1979) vividly expresses in *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the*

⁷ The term was coined by Helene Stöcker in *Neue Ethik*. However, she elaborated mainly on the issues of sexuality and the emancipation of women, while here and after, the study uses it, dealing with accountability and awareness of each other's differences.

prison, the disciplinarity of body and soul through prisons and education is an efficient governance strategy for an individual. Yet, shame, sanctions and education constrain the freedom of an actor to think their own independent thoughts (ibid.). Hence, the mentioning of Foucault and Bourdieu backlights a spot for ethical consideration of alternatives to eco-shaming in the same manner as for eco-shaming itself.

Secondly, the accident with the eco-shaming campaign targeted to an oil company is analysed. Particularly, it is the moment when one of the participants, who works for the mentioned company, shared the feeling of guilt, and the group started to criticise the advertisement. On the one hand, this study argues that open sharing of the feelings eases social tensions, caused by eco-shaming. The statement is supported with the non-violent communication's approach by Rosenberg (2004). Despite the fact that these principles are aligned to resolve conflicts, they are applicable in any communicative praxis. For instance, nonviolent communication includes "*expressing one's own needs*" and "*providing the empathy people need*" (ibid.:2). Hence, genuine cooperation, which was the setting for the focus groups, might make the group re-focus their attention from the validity of the statement in the advertisement to meeting the needs of acceptance of a colleague. On the other hand, the accident can also be described by the group identity, both by being a part of a focus group and being an environmental activist in Kazakhstan. As Brendan Nyhan (2021:2), a Dartmouth College political scientist, states: "*Research conducted to date suggests cognitive and memory limitations, directional motivations to defend or support some group identity or existing belief*". Consequently, it raises that question - *Is belonging stronger than facts?*, including in the mentioned accident (ibid.). It also explains why respondents reacted to advertisements that resonate with their beliefs more positively and vice versa. Regarding these statements, the power of belonging within environmental discourses in Kazakhstan is suggested for further research.

The third implicit idea about eco-shaming relates to the post-Soviet context of the country. Indeed, Kazakhstan was a part of extensive modernization back in the USSR times (Weinthal & Watters 2010). In this way, changes in the lifestyle of locals, including ideas about what is 'civilising' and 'right' to do, were present. As one participant from the focus groups noted, after gaining independence, Kazakhstan inherited not only a certain level of economic development but also ecological problems, caused by this period, hence a certain level of mistrust towards recommendations of what and how should be done. It is challenging to support this argument by the existing studies, however, relying on the empirical data, this hidden idea remains important to state, i.e. environmental movements

might be perceived as an external neocolonial agenda unrelated to reality in Kazakhstan and the national context, and it is advised to be aware of this phenomenon.

7. In lieu of concluding remarks

This study contributes to the academic discussion on environmental communication in Kazakhstan. It is done by analysing the sense-making of eco-shaming phenomena by people actively involved in the ecological agenda.

It has appeared that understanding of eco-shaming praxis by focus groups participants meet both similarities and differences. The dominant narratives are inefficiency of blaming individuals to impact their behaviour and support of blaming practicalities towards state and business institutions. Besides, alternatives to eco-shaming were present in each group, e.g. environmental education, financial sanctions and strategic planning of informational campaigns. Consequently, among the hidden ideas to propose for further research are ethical accords on individual behavioral manipulations, sense-making of international environmental movements in Kazakhstan and power of group belonging. Additional finding is that often participants relate to eco-shaming as a shame towards themselves as external derogation of their life choices.

In this regard, combining the literature review, theory and the empirical data, it is possible to suggest that eco-shaming practicalities involve high risks to push an individual away from the interests towards environmental agenda, involving a high probability for stigmatisation of identities to appear, both working for blamed institutions or those who do not generally support pro-environmental choices. Regarding stigmatisation of individuals, the study's recommendation is to acknowledge the essential role of shame in threatening cooperation. As Scheff (2002) echoes, there is a need for communicative initiatives to restore the dignity of violators through active participation in society instead of social exclusion by shaming. Besides, the paper proposes that environmental communicators should consider the country's context by rebuilding the connection of individuals with ecological problems in Kazakhstan. The latter might be done by: **(i)** backlighting the locus of control for the public (Jurin, Roush & Danter 2010); **(ii)** by showing how a particular issue affects local life (the empirical data); but most significantly **(iii)** by transparently navigating an individual in the most coherent way about what can be done after the level of awareness is raised (ibid.). Indeed, the profits and advantages of solutions to ecological problems are not widespread narratives

about environmental issues within the empirical data. It is presented as not a priority or as a process, which requires certain sacrifices. The latter is essential since not considering it increases anxiety and defensive reactions for receivers of environmental messages. As some participants added, tiredness and loss of interest to the local ecological agenda are present both among activists and the public by unsystematic dramatically-framed information about environmental issues without proper navigation of what might be done.

Along that line, if eco-shaming does not necessarily create changes as such, it might be considered as a relevant way of raising one's voice in the absence of access to deliberative forums. At the same time, the acknowledgement of personal differences as well as group differences among activists might contribute to the reflection on one's own role and 'shadows' to find interrelations in missions if a particular environmental campaign is being planned.

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Appendix

Focus Group Guide

(i) Participants

- ✓ 3-6 participants per group
- ✓ Common language of expression

(ii) Format

- ✓ Zoom-conference
- ✓ 1.5 - 2.5 hours
- ✓ Participants signed a letter of consent
- ✓ Participants received information on procedure prior the meeting
- ✓ The data is anonymised
- ✓ Videos are recorded and transcribed

(iii) Guide for a moderator

- ✓ Maximally avoid closed-ended questions, and those to make presumptions on behalf of participants
- ✓ Active listening, mirroring and extending questions

(iv) Procedure and schedule

1. Briefing, including introduction, purpose of the research
2. Briefing on the reglament of discussion, recording of video and reminder on consent.
3. Self-presentation of the participants.

Task 1: Creation

Participants are asked to reflect on components of a strong motivational environmental message, in two presented scenarios: **(a)** to motivate individuals for a certain behavioral change; **(b)** to make a certain institution accountable for its action.

(a) Imagine the situation that you, as a team of environmentally active people, have to create a street banner to motivate people to recycle plastic in your city.

Please, discuss the following *(the questions are asked one by one)*:

1. What do you think is important to consider in the first place when preparing such a message?
2. What emotions would you like people to experience when viewing the banner?
3. What should be included? What should be avoided?

(b) Imagine that a private company violates the quality of water in a certain area by dumping waste into a nearby body of water.

Please, discuss the following *(the questions are asked one by one)*:

1. Who should be involved in this issue?
2. [if public appears in the discussion] When and how do you think the public should be involved in this issue? What kind of public reaction would you hope to receive in this case?

Task 2: Reception

Demonstration of *four artifacts*, representing different mediums. The gradient, i.e explicit blaming and hidden blaming is followed: (1) explicit (somebody/ something is named and blamed directly in the message); (2) hidden (a problem is presented and distribution of responsibilities, directed to a receiver, is ambiguous or open to multiple interpretations)

After each displaying, the moderator asks to reflect on the following:

1. What do you think is the main message?
2. What do you feel about?

2.1. explicit (somebody\ something is named and blamed directly in the message)

2.1.1. Video (Greenpeace International 2014).

2.1.2. Poster (Bailey 1986-1987).



2.2. hidden (a problem is presented and distribution of responsibilities, directed to a receiver, is ambiguous or open to multiple interpretations)

2.2.1. Video (ABRAMOWV 2013).

Context for a reader: It is a social advertisement, created for one of the municipalities in Kazakhstan, where a boy threw out a plastic bag and then died in a traffic accident. In the end, you see the text of the question: *"Who is guilty?"*.

2.2.2. Poster (Draftfcb+Idb 2004).



Task 3: Final discussion

Participants are asked to reflect on the following:

1. How would you describe eco-shaming ?
2. Have you experienced eco-shaming yourself? (Why did you choose this story?)
3. What are the main values of eco-shaming from your point of view? Do you see any problems with that approach?
4. Is there anything that you would like to comment on, that you haven't already had the opportunity to say?

[END]