



Exploring Consumer Preferences for Sustainable Practices

The case of purchasing fish products

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Abstract

Growing environmental sustainability concerns have raised consumer interest in food, particularly seafood, that is supplied responsibly. However, there often exists a gap between customers' positive impressions of sustainability and their actual purchasing habits. A wide range of people, including university students and other residents in Uppsala, Sweden, were the subjects of this study, which investigated the social factors influencing sustainable fish consumption. The study used a qualitative case study technique based on 30 semi-structured interviews and Social Practice Theory (SPT) as the primary analytical perspective to investigate how routines, social norms, competencies, and contextual factors influence fish purchasing decisions.

The findings show that sustainable consumption is not just motivated by personal values but also rooted in broader social norms. Purchase decisions were significantly influenced by influence from peers, habitual behavior, eco-label awareness, and product accessibility. Despite their theoretical support for sustainability, many participants mentioned obstacles such as high prices, a lack of knowledge about eco-labels, and habit-driven purchasing behaviors. Social interactions, confidence in recommendation, and obvious price reductions were all positive motivators.

By illustrating how SPT supports the explanation of consumer behavior within a particular sample, this work enhances the field of sustainability research. The results provide useful information for policymakers, retailers, and advocacy groups striving to encourage sustainable seafood consumption through social and structural initiatives, even though they are not representative of the broader Swedish population.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, Sustainable consumption, Eco-labels, Price sensitivity, Social Practice Theory, Sustainability communication, Sustainable seafood, Sweden

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Abbreviations

ASC	Aquaculture Stewardship Council
BA	Behavioral Analysis
CFP	Common Fisheries Policy
MSC	Marine Stewardship Council
OBS	Observations
SPT	Social Practice Theory

1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the background, problem statement, aim, and research questions of the study, exhibiting the context for exploring sustainable fish consumption in Sweden.

With an impact on sectors ranging from agriculture to fisheries, sustainability has emerged as a crucial component of international economic, social, and environmental policy. Sustainable products are those that maintain social and economic justice while being produced and consumed with minimal negative impact on the environment. (2006) Verbeke and Vermeir. Growing environmental consciousness and customer preferences for items supplied ethically have led to a large increase in the global market for sustainable products (Gleim et al., 2013). Concerns about carbon emissions, resource depletion, and ethical sourcing have made sustainability a top priority, particularly in the food industry. Since overfishing, illicit fishing, and habitat destruction endanger marine biodiversity and the long-term health of fish populations, seafood sustainability is an essential part of this larger movement (FAO, 2020).

Concerns about climate change, environmental degradation, and ethical manufacturing practices have raised demand for sustainable products globally. Companies and consumers are being encouraged to adopt more sustainable practices by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which have made responsible production and consumption a primary priority (United Nations, 2021). To help consumers make more sustainable decisions, the food sector has implemented certifications like Fair Trade, organic, and eco-labels including Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification (Willer and Lernoud, 2019). These patterns show a move toward sustainability-driven consumption, in which moral and ecological factors influence consumer choices.

With laws and policies that support ethical production and consumption, Europe has been leading the way in the promotion of sustainable products (European Commission, 2022). Reducing environmental consequences and ensuring sustainability across supply chains are the goals of the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy. To safeguard marine ecosystems, the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) governs fishing quotas and uses sustainable fishing methods in the seafood industry (EC, 2021). A growing awareness of sustainability issues in the food industry has led to a preference for eco-labeled seafood among European customers (Jacquet et al., 2019).

Sweden has emerged as a leader in sustainable consumption, with a strong policy framework and consumer preference in eco-friendly products (The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2020). The Swedish government has taken a number of steps to encourage sustainability, such as strict laws governing fishing and seafood imports to guarantee environmental responsibility. The availability of organic and eco-labeled items at large retail establishments demonstrates the high level of awareness among Swedish consumers about sustainable food choices (Sundström et al., 2021). Furthermore, support for sustainably harvested and locally obtained fish has grown as a result of Sweden's commitment to lowering carbon footprints in food production (Schlag and Ystgaard, 2013).

Practices that stop overfishing, save marine biodiversity, and help fishermen's livelihoods are all part of seafood sustainability (FAO, 2020). Concerns about sustainability are having an increasing impact on consumer choices for seafood, and many consumers are looking for eco-certified goods like those marked by the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) and MSC (Roheim et al., 2018). Although consumers may express interest in sustainable seafood, their actual purchasing decisions are frequently influenced by variables including cost, accessibility, and certification credibility (Johnston et al., 2001).

Despite growing interest and knowledge, a number of obstacles prevent sustainable seafood from being widely adopted. Given that sustainable seafood is frequently more expensive than alternatives sourced conventionally, price sensitivity is still a major consideration (Asche et al., 2015). Furthermore, consumers are left feeling uneasy due to disinformation and ignorance regarding sustainability labels (Thøgersen, 2009). Accessibility and availability are also crucial, since seafood that is acquired responsibly could not always be easily found in traditional retail locations (Brécard et al., 2009). By removing these obstacles through regulatory incentives, clear labeling, and education, consumers may be more inclined to choose sustainable seafood.

Sustainable seafood consumption is an essential part of broader sustainability activities, in keeping with global ethical and environmental concerns. Consumer interest in sustainable seafood is growing, but in order to boost adoption rates, problems with affordability, accessibility, and awareness must be fixed. Understanding consumer preferences and the factors influencing purchasing decisions is essential to promoting sustainable seafood consumption and ensuring the long-term viability of marine resources.

1.1 Background

As consumers grow more conscious of environmental, social, and ethical factors, sustainable food consumption has attracted a lot of attention globally (FAO, 2020; United Nations, 2021). Because of overfishing, habitat degradation, and the effects of climate change, the seafood industry in particular has been at the forefront of sustainability discussions (Jacquet et al., 2019). In addition to highlighting the importance of the global seafood trade in maintaining food security, Asche et al. (2015) also draw attention to the negative economic and environmental effects of unsustainable fishing methods. A number of variables, such as consumer awareness, accessibility, and certification tactics, affect the demand for sustainable seafood (Brécard et al., 2009; Schlag & Ystgaard, 2013).

Promoting responsible food production and consumption is the goal of sustainability initiatives like the European Green Deal in Europe (European Commission, 2022). Studies show that although consumers in the area are growing more conscious of eco-labels and sustainable sourcing, they still only buy a small percentage of ecolabeled seafood (Roheim, Asche and Santos, 2018). Through legislative actions and consumer education initiatives, Sweden, a country renowned for its robust environmental regulations, has aggressively promoted sustainable seafood options (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2020; Sundström, Hjelm & Bergström, 2021). Nevertheless, in Sweden's seafood industry, there is still a disconnect between sustainable ideas and buying habits (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

1.2 Problem Statement

While sustainable seafood consumption is a key component of responsible food systems, various barriers hinder its widespread adoption among consumers (Gleim et al., 2013). Consumers may show a desire for sustainable seafood but often do not translate these attitudes into purchasing behavior due to price concerns, lack of trust in labels, and limited availability (Johnston et al., 2001; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). In addition, socio-economic factors, personal values, and market conditions further complicate the conversion to more sustainable purchasing habits (Thøgersen, 2009).

The seafood industry in Sweden offers a compelling example for examining these issues. Despite the fact that Swedish consumers are generally ecologically concerned, their preferences for sustainability are not necessarily reflected in the seafood they buy (Sundström, Hjelm & Bergström, 2021). To determine the main forces and obstacles influencing Sweden's sustainable seafood consumption, especially in light of larger European and worldwide trends, more research is

required. Designing effective policies and interventions that promote more sustainable seafood purchasing decisions requires addressing these concerns (Willer and Lernoud, 2019).

1.3 Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to explore the factors influencing consumers' decisions to purchase fish products, focusing on the role of social norms and daily routines in shaping choices particularly regarding sustainably farmed seafood. It seeks to identify the elements that encourage or hinder sustainable fish consumption and propose practical solutions to promote environmentally responsible consumer behavior. By analyzing real shopping behavior rather than stated preferences, this research provides valuable insights for retailers, policymakers, and researchers working to support sustainable seafood consumption and develop strategies that align consumer practices with ecological and sustainability goals.

Research questions focusing on how interest rates influence social practices related to purchasing food, are presented below as a main question and two sub questions.

1. How do social practices influence consumer behavior toward sustainable fish product purchases?
This question examines how consumer routines (competences), peer influences (meanings), and environmental factors (materials) shape sustainable and non-sustainable fish purchasing habits. Understanding these elements will reveal ways to normalize sustainable fish consumption.
2. What key factors influence consumer participation in sustainable seafood consumption practices, considering materials, competences, and meanings?
This question investigates the barriers (e.g., lack of materials, financial constraints) and drivers (e.g., knowledge, trust in eco-labels, social norms) that impact sustainable fish purchasing decisions. The goal is to propose solutions for stakeholders.
3. .In what ways do consumers integrate sustainable fish practices into their daily routines, considering the interaction between materials, competences, and meanings?
This question explores how sustainable fish consumption habits are embedded into daily life through access to resources (materials), learned behaviors (competences), and societal values (meanings). It also looks at how social support influences these practices.

1.4 Delimitations and project outline

Delimitations were made in empirical, methodological and theoretical dimensions.

This research focused on sustainable fish food purchasing and consumption habits, excluding other aspects of sustainability such as the environmental impacts of food production or waste management at the industrial level.

Demographic delimitation was made with respondent age in mind. The project focused on adult consumers (ages 18–55), particularly those who actively engage in food shopping. It excludes children, seniors, and individuals who do not regularly purchase food.

The study has not explored the sustainability of food production processes or the role of policy and regulations in driving sustainable consumption. Additionally, while attitudes and awareness of sustainability are key factors, the focus was primarily placed on actual behaviours and decision-making during the food purchasing process.

Methodological delimitations were made based on geographical and time delimitations. The research was conducted in Sweden, specifically targeting university students in Uppsala (Uppsala University and SLU university). The findings may not be directly applicable to rural areas or other countries, where consumer behaviours and sustainability practices may differ significantly.

The data collection was carried out in 2025, capturing current consumer behaviours and attitudes during this period. Changes in consumer behaviours over time or due to future events may not be addressed within this study.

Theoretical delimitations were also made. This study employed Social Practice Theory (SPT) and Behavioral Analysis (BA) as its primary theoretical lenses. By focusing on these frameworks, the study emphasized the role of routines, competences, materials, and social meanings, as well as external reinforcements such as pricing and policies. Other theories of consumer behavior such as the Theory of Planned Behavior, Value-Belief-Norm Theory, or Rational Choice Theory were not applied, meaning the psychological or cognitive dimensions of individual decision-making are less central in this analysis. This theoretical focus enables a deeper understanding of sustainable consumption as a socially and structurally embedded practice, rather than a purely individual or rational act.

The logical flow from theoretical foundation to empirical findings is illustrated in this framework, which also shows how each chapter in Figure 1 helps to answer the study purpose and questions.

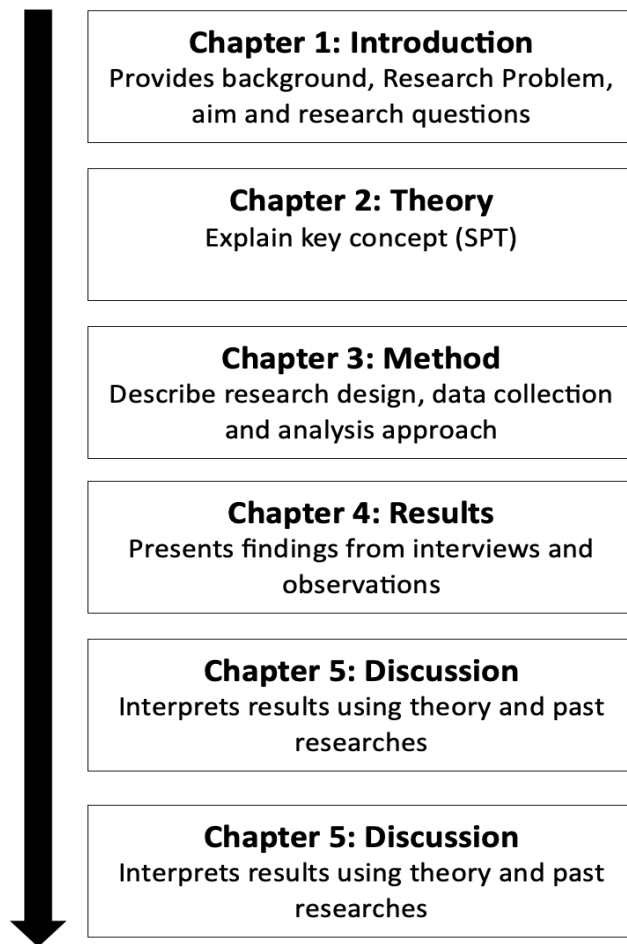


Figure 1: Outline of the thesis structure and chapter connections.

A graphic summary of the chapter organization is provided below to help the reader navigate the structure of this thesis (Figure 1).

2 Theory

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations of the study, focusing on Social Practice Theory and Behavioral Analysis to explain the factors influencing consumer behavior.

This chapter provides a comprehensive review on sustainable food consumption, especially in relation to buying fish products, thorough analysis of the body of research on consumer behavior and sustainability. It explores the various elements that impact consumer choices on sustainable buying, such as market-related, psychological, social, and economic factors. In order to comprehend the fundamental mechanisms of sustainable consumer behavior, the chapter also presents Social Practice Theory (SPT).

2.1 Introduction to Consumer Behavior and Sustainability

With an emphasis on Social Practice Theory, this part examines the theoretical underpinnings and earlier research on sustainable consumption. It highlights obstacles including price sensitivity and mistrust of eco-labels in its discussion of the attitude-behavior gap in sustainable shopping. It also emphasizes how consumer behavior is influenced by societal norms, certification credibility, and sustainability labels.

2.1.1 Theoretical Foundation and Previous Studies

A number of theoretical frameworks, Social Practice Theory (SPT) Theory, serve as the foundation for research on sustainable consumption. This theory offers a thorough comprehension of the ways in which customs, conventions, and structural elements affect consumer behavior (Janssen et al., 2021).

2.1.2 Sustainable Consumption and the Attitude-Behavior Gap

The material now in publication demonstrates a recurring discrepancy between consumers' stated support for sustainability and their real spending patterns. Research indicates that although consumers recognize the value of sustainable seafood, adoption is hampered by factors such as availability, price sensitivity, and attitude toward eco-labels (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Roheim et al., 2018). The importance of post-purchase decision-making in promoting sustainable consumption habits is further shown by Spanish research (Camanzi et al., 2020).

2.1.3 Social Practices and Consumer Behavior

According to social practice theory, sustainable consumption is a product of social settings rather than just personal choices. Research on European consumers shows that the uptake of sustainable seafood is strongly influenced by social norms and certification trust (Vitale et al., 2021; Bronnmann & Asche, 2017). Furthermore, studies on Italian consumers have revealed that sustainability labels are important when making judgments about what to buy, although there are still gaps in understanding regarding these certifications (Caputo et al., 2018).

2.2 Barriers to Sustainable Consumption

Since many eco-certified fish items are more costly than their conventional counterparts, price continues to be a major barrier to the consumption of sustainable seafood (Asche et al., 2015). Consumer reluctance is sometimes influenced by false information and ignorance about sustainability labeling (Thøgersen, 2009). Price sensitivity is still a major consideration, according to a UK study on consumer preferences, even though consumers who care about sustainability are prepared to spend more (Uchida et al., 2014).

2.2.1 Factors influencing in Sustainable Purchasing

When buying sustainable fish products, consumers' decisions were greatly influenced by price and income levels. While price-sensitive consumers frequently chose traditional, less expensive alternatives, consumers with greater disposable incomes were more likely to place a higher priority on sustainability (Huang et al., 2022). Customers were turned off by the price of certified sustainable fish products, so affordability is a key component in generating demand (Bray et al., 2021).

Consumer behavior was significantly shaped by social and psychological elements, including peer pressure, personal beliefs, and environmental concerns (White et al., 2019). Customers were more likely to buy environmentally friendly fish items if they believed that sustainability was a moral requirement. Purchase decisions were also influenced by social norms and peer pressure since people were more inclined to adopt sustainable practices when they observed others doing so (Thøgersen, 2021).

Furthermore, Livsmedel i Fokus (2025) demonstrated that Swedish consumers placed a high value on locally produced goods and animal welfare. Only a small percentage of consumers were willing to pay more for products with smaller environmental and climate footprints, even if they strongly preferred Swedish-made

goods because they trusted local sustainability standards. This demonstrated the conflict between consumers' price sensitivity and their desire for sustainability.

Consumer decisions are influenced by government rules, certification labels, and availability. Consumer trust was bolstered by certifications like the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which gave sustainable fish products legitimacy (Gutierrez & Thornton, 2022). However, sustainable purchasing was hampered by market obstacles such as the scarcity of certified fish and false information regarding labeling (Asche et al., 2022).

2.3 Cross-Cultural and Contextual Factors

Perceptions of sustainability differ throughout cultures and geographical areas. Although Swedish consumers are typically environmentally concerned, sustainability values are not always reflected in their real shopping behavior (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2020). According to comparative research, consumer education and governmental initiatives can close this disparity (Jacquet et al., 2019). Effective market communication techniques can raise customer awareness and have a favorable impact on purchase decisions, according to German research (Vanhonacker et al., 2013).

2.4 Integration with Current Study

Building on these discoveries, this study intends to investigate the ways in which consuming fish sustainably fits into everyday activities, addressing both enablers and obstacles. Prior research has highlighted how crucial traceability information is when buying seafood and how it helps consumers trust sustainable fish products (Fernqvist & Ekelund, 2014).

2.5 A Conceptual Framework

The integrated conceptual framework used in this study, which is social practice theory to explain the main elements influencing consumer behavior toward sustainable fish purchases, is depicted in the following figure.

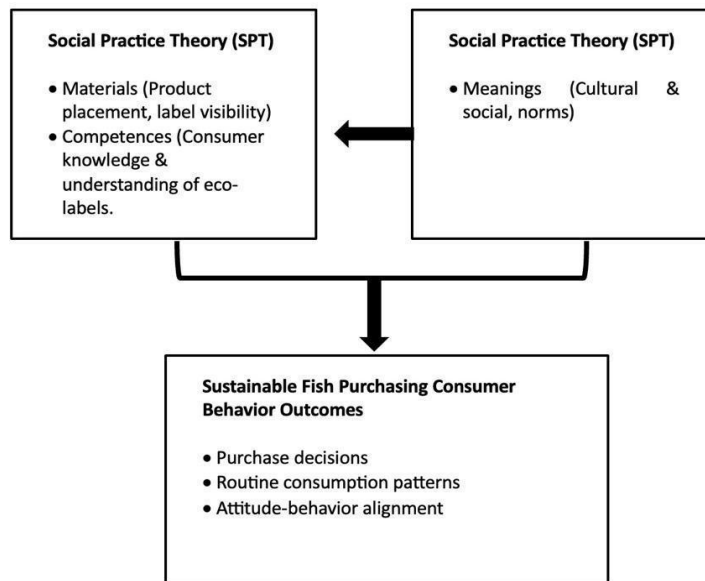


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Integrating Social Practice Theory (SPT) in Sustainable Fish Purchasing with inspiration from Shove et al. (2012) and Skinner (1953).

This figure (2) clearly explains that the Social Practice Theory (SPT) provides a framework for understanding behavior as a component of collective social practices rather than only as individual decisions. It focuses on how three essential components materials (resources, tools, infrastructure), competences (knowledge and skills), and meanings (cultural and social norms) interact to influence people's behavior. In the context of consumption, SPT explains how social influences, everyday routines, and habits affect decisions like purchasing sustainable food through broader social structures and practices as well as individual attitudes (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012).

2.5.1 Social Practice Theory

The way that materials, competencies, and meanings interact within Social Practice Theory to influence sustainable fish buying behavior is depicted in Figure 3.

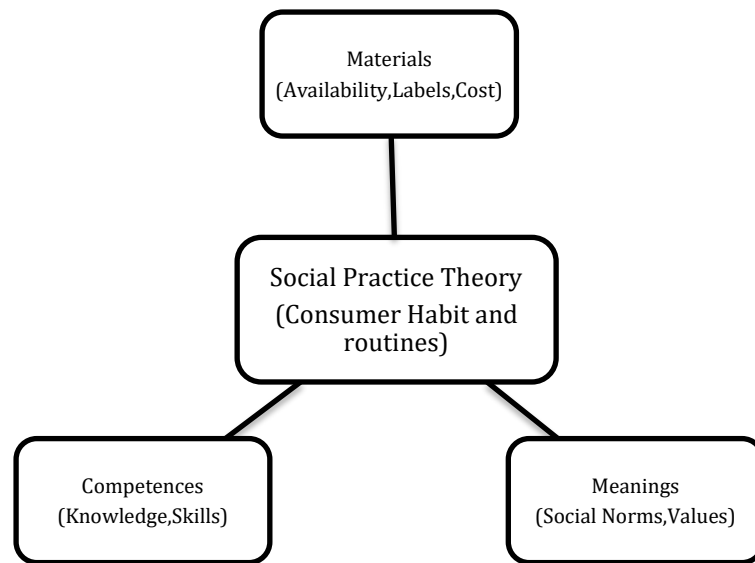


Figure 3. Two Key Elements of Social Practice Theory in Sustainable Fish Purchasing.

According to Social Practice Theory (**SPT**), consumers' competences (the knowledge and skills they process about sustainability and eco-label), meanings (the social and cultural significance attached to sustainable consumption), and materials (the availability of sustainable fish packaging) interact to shape their consumption patterns (Shove et al., 2012; Evans, 2019). This study examines how these elements affect the buying patterns of Swedish consumers.

3 Method

This chapter outlines the research design and data collection methods, including interviews and observations, and explains how the data were analyzed.

3.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to explore consumer preferences in relation to sustainable fish consumption. Qualitative research is appropriate for understanding complex social phenomena and capturing in-depth perspectives of individuals within their lived contexts (Bryman, 2016). We conducted semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to express their views while ensuring that key themes were covered across interviews.

3.2 Participant Selection and Sampling

A total of 30 participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The selection aimed to ensure variation in food habits, dividing participants into three main groups: environmentally conscious, health-oriented, and convenience-driven consumers. These groups were identified based on preliminary screening questions regarding dietary priorities. Participants were recruited through university mailing lists, local community boards, and social media platforms.

3.2.1 Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were conducted in-person or via video conferencing, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide that included open-ended questions on purchasing habits, sustainability perceptions, and fish consumption practices. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.2.2 Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with open coding to identify meaningful units of information, which were then grouped into broader categories and themes. The coding was carried out manually using spreadsheets to track recurring patterns across the interviews.

Rather than quantifying participant responses, we focused on the depth and context of each perspective. This interpretive approach aligns with the epistemological foundations of qualitative research (Silverman, 2013), allowing for a nuanced understanding of consumer reasoning and behavior. Representative quotations are included in the results section to illustrate each theme and highlight the variation of perspectives across the three consumer groups.

Table 1 Data collection through interviews

Interview	Date	Duration	Validation
1	12/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
2	12/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
3	15/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
4	15/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
5	15/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
6	15/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
7	15/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
8	15/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
9	15/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
10	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
11	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
12	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
13	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
14	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
15	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
16	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
17	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
18	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
19	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
20	16/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
21	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
22	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
23	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
24	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
25	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
26	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
27	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
28	17/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
29	19/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes
30	26/03/2025	Approx. 30–45 mins	Yes

Respondents in Table 1 were selected in a convenience sampling method. Because they are more likely to be aware of sustainability challenges, the study focuses on Uppsala residents between the ages of 18 and 55, including those from Uppsala University and SLU University. To guarantee data saturation, about 30 participants were chosen. Social media, student organizations, and university email lists were used to recruit participants (Table 1). Depending on participant availability, interviews were either conducted in-person or online. Each interview lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes, and with the participants' permission, it was recorded for transcription and analysis later.

3.2.3 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. All participants provided informed consent before participating and were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was ensured by assigning codes to transcripts and omitting any personally identifying information in the reporting.

3.4 Quality Assurance

To maintain ethical integrity and the reliability of the research, this study adhered to accepted quality assurance procedures. Before any data was collected, ethical approval was acquired. The goal of the study was explained to the participants, and they provided their informed consent. Observations were carried out in public places in a discrete manner without identifying specific people, and anonymity and secrecy were upheld.

Both interviews and observations were used to gather data in order to increase credibility and lessen bias. Dependability was guaranteed by a consistent and open research method, while transferability was reinforced by giving contextual information about the study environment. These procedures are in line with suggested methods for high-quality qualitative research (Vlasov, 2015).

3.5 Data Analysis

To methodically find recurrent themes in consumer interviews, such as reasons for buying sustainable fish, adoption barriers, and opinions on sustainability labeling, the study used thematic coding as a qualitative analysis technique (Braun & Clarke,

2021). Two researchers carried out the analysis to increase its legitimacy and dependability, enabling cross-validation and guaranteeing quality control throughout the analytical procedure. In order to investigate how social practices and outside reinforcements impact consumer behavior, the coding procedure was in line with the theoretical frameworks of behavioural social practice theory (SPT).

4 Empirical Background

The empirical basis is presented in this chapter using information gathered from observational studies and interviews. These two approaches provide complementary insights into the attitudes and actions of consumers regarding the purchase of sustainable seafood.

Key findings from the observational study, such as customer interactions with marine items, attention to sustainability labeling, and obvious variables like pricing and peer interaction, are summarized in the accompanying table (Table 3).

Table 3. Comprehensive overview of previous research studies

	Study Focus	Methodology	Key Findings
Brugere et al. (2021)	Consumer purchasing behavior towards fish and seafood products	Review of international studies on seafood purchasing	Identified key factors influencing seafood purchasing decisions, including sustainability labels and price sensitivity
Busch et al. (2020)	Sustainable aquaculture products and consumer preferences in Germany	Consumer survey and market analysis	Found that consumer awareness significantly impacts purchasing behavior, with strong preferences for eco-labeled seafood
Claret et al. (2014)	The role of consumer purchase and post-purchase decision-making in sustainable seafood consumption (Spain)	Case study and carbon footprint analysis	Demonstrated that consumers often have an attitude-behavior gap, where stated sustainability preferences do not always align with purchasing decisions
Vecchio & Annunziata (2011)	How Italian consumers value sustainable certifications on fish	Experimental choice modeling	Found that certification labels significantly influence Italian consumer preferences, but trust in labels varies
Honkanen et al. (2010)	Consumer preferences for farmed seafood in Italy	Survey-based study	Consumers show higher preference for wild-caught seafood, but sustainability certifications can influence choices
Ankamah-Yeboah et al. (2018)	European consumers' intention to buy sustainable aquaculture products	Survey and behavioral analysis	Concluded that price, knowledge, and trust in certifications shape sustainable seafood consumption
Asche et al. (2015)	The role of credence attributes in consumer choices of sustainable fish products	Literature review	Highlighted the significance of eco-labels, quality perception, and trust in sustainability claims
Mariani et al. (2021)	Exploring consumer preferences for local seafood in Costa Brava, Spain	Observational and survey-based study	Found strong consumer preference for locally sourced fish over imported products
Risius et al. (2017)	Consumer willingness to pay for fish products with health and environmental labels in five European countries	Discrete choice experiments	Consumers are willing to pay a premium for eco-labeled seafood, but preferences vary by country
Verbeke et al. (2007)	Consumer choices for quality and sustainability-labeled seafood in the UK	Survey-based study	Demonstrated that sustainability labels positively impact purchase decisions but are not the sole determinant
Carlucci et al. (2015)	Role of seafood sustainability knowledge in purchase decisions	Consumer survey	Found that knowledge about sustainability enhances purchase intentions, but misinformation creates uncertainty
Roheim et al. (2018)	Consumer preferences and rewards for sustainably certified fisheries	Market study and survey analysis	Consumers are more likely to purchase certified seafood if the certification is well-recognized and trusted
Zander & Feucht (2018)	Consumer choice for quality and sustainability in seafood products in the UK	Empirical survey and behavioral analysis	Price remains a key barrier to sustainable seafood adoption despite consumer interest
Jin et al. (2020)	Consumer preferences for the traceability information of seafood safety	Experimental study with traceability labels	Consumers prefer seafood with transparent traceability information, improving trust in sustainability claims

Key empirical research on consumer behavior in relation to sustainable seafood is summarized in Table 3. These studies draw attention to crucial elements that affect consumer choices, including price sensitivity, product origin, eco-label trust, and the discrepancy between customer beliefs and behavior. When combined, they offer a useful basis for comprehending how consumer decisions are influenced in various European contexts. The interpretation of the interview and observational data in this study is supported by these ideas, which also assist place the current research within a wider scope of knowledge.

5 Results

This chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews, open-ended survey responses, and observational studies. Themes are analyzed using the Social Practice Theory (SPT) framework, which views consumer behavior as shaped by the interaction of materials (e.g., product availability and price), competences (e.g., knowledge and skills), and meanings (e.g., values, social norms) (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). Quotes from participants are used to support each theme.

5.1 Influence of Social Norms and Peer Practices (Meanings)

A strong theme across interviews and survey responses was the influence of peers, family, and social expectations. Many respondents reported that their choices were shaped by what those around them considered important or acceptable.

“I never really thought about eco-labels until my roommate started talking about them. Now I try to check for them too.” (Interviewee 6)

“If I cook with friends who care about sustainability, I feel more responsible and try to buy the right product.” (Survey response)

These social interactions reflect how **meanings** are collectively shaped through practices and influence what is seen as “normal” or “good” behavior (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012)

5.2 Routines and Habitual Purchasing Patterns (Competences and Meanings)

Consumers often rely on habit when choosing fish products. Some participants noted that their purchases are made out of routine, not active consideration of sustainability.

“To be honest, I just grab the same brand each time. I don’t really think about it much.” (Interviewee 12)

“Old habits die hard , I still go for frozen salmon from the same shelf, even though I know there are better options.” (Survey response)

This finding was echoed in interviews, where a young male said that he quickly picked a product without checking for sustainability labels. These habits may reflect

a **lack of competence (understanding)** or simply **the power of routine**, limiting the opportunity for sustainability to influence choices (Thøgersen, 2009)

5.3 Barriers to Sustainable Fish Consumption

5.3.1 Price and Availability (Materials)

Cost was repeatedly identified as a major barrier. Many participants noted that sustainably labeled fish products are more expensive, making them less attractive.

“I want to buy sustainable fish , but it’s always more expensive, and I’m on a student budget.” (Interviewee 3)

“Most of the time, I can’t even find the labeled fish in my local store.” (Survey response)

These comments, with shoppers often skipping eco-labeled fish or choosing cheaper alternatives when prices differed significantly. Brécard et al. (2009) also note that availability is a crucial determinant in eco-label demand, especially for seafood.

5.3.2 Lack of Awareness and Label Confusion (Competences)

Many participants expressed uncertainty about what sustainability labels actually mean.

“I don’t really know what the MSC label stands for, so I just ignore it.” (Interviewee 10)

“There are too many labels, and it’s confusing. I’m not sure which ones are trustworthy.” (Survey response)

This suggests a need to strengthen consumer competence through better education and communication of label meaning (Sundström, Hjelm and Bergström, 2021).

5.4 Motivators for Sustainable Purchasing

Participants described several conditions that made them more likely to choose sustainable fish.

5.4.1 Social Encouragement and Peer Validation (Meanings)

“My boyfriend is very aware about the ocean, so I try to match his expectations when I buy fish.” (Survey response)

“When I know others are watching, I’m more likely to do the ‘right’ thing.” (Interviewee 7)

This again highlights the role of social meanings in motivating sustainability-aligned behaviors, consistent with findings from Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) and Jacquet et al. (2019), who stress the influence of perceived norms on seafood choices.

5.4.2 Discounts and Incentives (Materials)

Several participants said they would choose sustainable products if they were more affordable or offered rewards. This supports arguments made by Gleim et al. (2013), who found that incentives reduce resistance to green consumption.

“I bought ASC-labeled salmon once because it was on discount. Otherwise, I probably wouldn’t have.” (Interviewee 8)

“If stores gave loyalty points for sustainable choices, I’d be more motivated.” (Survey response)

This suggests that external reinforcements interact with material structures to enable sustainable practices (Cooper, Heron and Heward, 2020).

5.4.3 Education and Label Clarity (Competences)

“I only started caring after reading an article on ocean pollution. It made me think twice.” (Survey response)

Participants who had received prior education through media or formal campaigns expressed more confidence in their choices, suggesting that increasing competence through targeted education could empower more sustainable practices (Bryman, 2016; FAO, 2020; Garnett, 2013).

6 Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework, discussing the implications of social norms, routines, and structural barriers for sustainable consumption.

The aim of this research was to explore how social practices, routines, and other factors influence consumer behavior toward sustainable fish product purchases. Based on the analysis of both interview and observational data, this chapter discusses the key findings and provides an interpretation of how social practices, material constraints, and competence barriers interact to shape consumer behavior.

The findings from both the interviews and observational data reveal that social influence is a significant determinant of consumer behavior toward sustainable fish purchases. According to Social Practice Theory, behaviors are shaped not only by individual intentions but also by social norms, routines, and the surrounding environment (Shove et al., 2012). This study identifies social influences as a key theme across both types of data collection.

6.1 Peer Influence and Social Norms

The findings demonstrate how peer pressure frequently influences customers' decisions to buy. According to interview data, when choosing sustainable items, a number of interviewees (Interviewee 3) stated that they frequently relied on peer or family recommendations. This implies that social behaviors, such as talking to friends or family about what to buy, are crucial in influencing consumer choices (Cunningham, 2009).

Implications for Stakeholders: Retailers, the legislature, and brands could leverage social influence to support peer-led campaigns, recommendation systems, or influencer marketing techniques that emphasize sustainability in order to promote sustainable fish consumption.

6.2. Habitual and Routine Behaviors

Consumer routines are also influenced by social factors. According to the data, a lot of consumers, especially younger ones, tend to choose fish products more for convenience than for sustainability. A common trend in interview data is familiarity with particular brands and product categories. Customers are less likely to look for

sustainability labels if they are already familiar with a particular product. These ingrained buying habits are influenced by societal norms and historical practices, which can either support or undermine sustainable consumption (Shove et al., 2012). Implications for Stakeholders: It is essential to make sustainable solutions more accessible to customers by clearly labelling items and strategically placing sustainable fish products in stores to break the habit of making non-sustainable choices.

6.3. Barriers to Sustainable Fish Consumption: Material Constraints and Competence Barriers

Examining the obstacles that affect consumers' engagement in sustainable seafood consumption was the aim of the second study question. The biggest obstacles were determined to be cost and accessibility, as well as a lack of awareness about sustainability and eco-labels.

6.3.1 Price Sensitivity as a Barrier

Price is often the most important factor for many buyers when buying fish, according to interviews. Consumers chose the less priced fish products over those with sustainability labeling that sustainable solutions are frequently more expensive than conventional products (e.g., Interviewee 10). This behavior is consistent with findings from earlier research showing that price is still a significant determinant of food choices, especially when consumers' financial constraints are taken into consideration (Garnett, 2013).

Implications for Stakeholders: To make sustainable solutions more affordable, retailers and legislators could think about tackling price sensitivity by providing loyalty programs or discounts. Subsidies or collaborations with eco-labelling groups may also lessen the financial strain on customers.

6.3.2 Limited Knowledge of Sustainability Labels

The lack of understanding of eco-labels and sustainable fishing methods was another significant obstacle found. Most interviewees said they were unfamiliar with sustainability designations like Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). This pattern implies that the decision-making process is greatly impacted by competency, or the capacity to identify and comprehend sustainability requirements.

Implications for Stakeholders: More educational initiatives emphasizing the value of sustainability labeling are required to raise consumer awareness. To help

customers make educated decisions, retailers might also implement visual aids or condensed information about sustainability certifications.

6.4 Drivers for Sustainable Consumption: Motivation, Social Influence, and Knowledge

The elements that motivate consumers to incorporate sustainable fish practices into their everyday routines were investigated in the last study question. According to the findings, a number of factors, including knowledge, incentives, and social influence, can have a favorable effect on sustainable consumption practices.

6.4.1 Social Influence as a Driver

As previously mentioned, social influence became both a motor and a barrier. According to several interviewees (including Interviewee 4), receiving encouragement from friends or family increased their likelihood of selecting sustainable products. As pro-environmental behaviors are influenced by social norms and peer support (Thøgersen, 2009), developing community-based incentives may be a useful tactic to promote sustainable habits.

6.4.2 Discounts and Educational Campaigns

Additionally, the data showed that loyalty awards and discounts were powerful motivators. If there were discounts or promotions, interviewees said they would be more likely to buy sustainable fish. Furthermore, educational outreach and social media efforts may be very important in raising knowledge of sustainability concerns related to fish consumption (e.g., Interviewee 13). This is in line with earlier studies that show financial rewards and information sharing are effective motivators for sustainable consumption patterns (Smith, 2019).

Stakeholder Implications: For sustainable items, retailers may offer discounts, packages, or loyalty schemes. Concurrently, educational initiatives via social media or in-store resources would aid in addressing the consumer population's knowledge gaps.

1. **Economic Considerations (Materials):** Price consciousness was a dominant theme, with several participants explicitly checking price tags and comparing options. This suggests financial constraints may act as a barrier to choosing sustainably labelled products.
2. **Knowledge and Skill (Competences):** Consumers who were familiar with label meanings and who spent more time browsing appeared more confident

in selecting sustainable options. This highlights the importance of competence having the knowledge and skills to recognize and trust eco-labels.

3. Social Norms and Influence (Meanings): Conversations and nonverbal cues suggested that shared meanings, encouragement, or validation influenced their choices. This supports the role of social norms and collective behavior in shaping sustainable fish consumption. These findings point to a dynamic interplay between accessible product information (materials), consumer knowledge (competence), and social or cultural meanings associated with sustainable purchasing.

7 Conclusions

The key findings are outlined in this chapter along with their applicability to stakeholders and suggestions for promoting sustainable seafood buying.

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate how consumer behavior toward sustainable fish consumption is influenced by social practices, material limitations, and competence-related hurdles. The findings showed that daily routines, information availability, and social context all have a significant influence on purchasing decisions, which are not just the product of personal knowledge or environmental concerns. Consumer behavior was significantly shaped by social influence, especially from friends and family. Numerous participants said that discussions on sustainability had a direct influence on their purchases, underscoring the influence of societal norms and values on routine shopping decisions.

The biggest obstacle to sustainable fish intake was found to be price sensitivity. Many consumers nevertheless placed a higher priority on affordability even in the face of expanding environmental concerns, frequently choosing less expensive options over those with eco-labels. The survey also found that customers' capacity to make educated judgments is hampered by a general lack of knowledge and uncertainty regarding sustainability labels like MSC and ASC. Behavior was also impacted by material limitations, such as the shelf positioning and visibility of sustainable seafood in retail environments. Customers tended to rely on habit and convenience when eco-labeled products were harder to find or poorly displayed. The need for more transparent labeling and consumer education was highlighted by competence-related issues that also emerged, as many participants lacked the skills or self-assurance to recognize eco-labels.

7.2 Contribution to Research Aim

In summary, our study shows that sustainable fish consumption is a socially embedded practice influenced by the interplay of meanings, materials, and competencies rather than a solitary act of choosing. The study advances our knowledge of how these factors interact to either support or undermine sustainable consumer behavior. The intricacy of these relationships has been effectively captured by the application of Social Practice Theory in this situation, which also shows why awareness is insufficient to encourage sustainable buying practices.

7.3 Implications for Sustainable Food Systems

For those concerned in sustainable food systems, the findings have a number of ramifications. Effective interventions must address both individual knowledge and the social and material context in which decisions are formed if they are to effectively promote sustainable fish consumption. Peer-led education and community-based campaigns are two examples of strategies that use social influence to help change norms and promote more environmentally friendly decision-making. Furthermore, expanding the availability of sustainable solutions may be facilitated by removing price-related obstacles through approachable pricing schemes that incorporate loyalty rewards and discounts. Increasing consumer competency, particularly with regard to eco-labels and their environmental significance, should be the main goal of educational initiatives. Last but not least, changes to retail procedures, such as bettering product positioning and label visibility, can assist mainstream sustainable options and promote long-term changes in habitual behavior.

7.4 Suggestions for Future Research

A limited sample size and the possibility of bias in self-reported data are two of this study's shortcomings, despite the fact that it provides insightful information. By incorporating a wider range of groups and investigating behavior in various cultural or geographical situations, future studies could build on these findings. Furthermore, experimental studies could investigate how well-targeted interventions like digital prompts, pricing schemes, or visual labeling techniques work to change customer behavior. It would also be beneficial to do studies that look into how social norms change over time and how peer pressure can be used both in-person and online. These paths may provide additional methods for integrating sustainability into consumers' daily lives and for creating more resilient and inclusive sustainable food systems.

In conclusion, this thesis addresses a significant problem in sustainable food systems and is of excellent quality and thoughtfulness. With the use of suitable techniques and lucid presentation, it demonstrates a solid integration of nutritional and environmental viewpoints. The work provides valuable insights for the creation of future food products, and the discussion is both critical and helpful. The emphasis on cutting-edge food items caught my attention especially since it exemplifies the kind of real-world transformation that sustainable research may facilitate. The authors deserve praise for their hard work and high caliber of output.

7.5 Research Contribution

By combining empirical consumer behavior analysis with social practice approaches, this work advances the discipline. The results will give retailers, legislators, and advocacy organizations practical suggestions for encouraging sustainable seafood consumption.

Growing environmental sustainability concerns have raised consumer interest in food, particularly seafood, that is supplied responsibly. However, there often exists a gap between customers' positive impressions of sustainability and their actual purchasing habits. A wide range of people, including university students and other residents in Uppsala, Sweden, are the subjects of this study, which investigates the social factors influencing sustainable fish consumption. The study used a qualitative case study technique based on 30 semi-structured interviews and Social Practice Theory (SPT) as the primary analytical perspective to investigate how routines, social norms, competencies, and contextual factors influence fish purchasing decisions.

The findings show that sustainable consumption is not just motivated by personal values but also rooted in broader social norms. Purchase decisions were significantly influenced by influence from peers, habitual behavior, eco-label awareness, and product accessibility. Despite their theoretical support for sustainability, many participants mentioned obstacles such as high prices, a lack of knowledge about eco-labels, and habit-driven purchasing behaviors. Social interactions, confidence in recommendation, and obvious price reductions were all positive motivators.

By illustrating how SPT supports the explanation of consumer behavior within a particular sample, this work enhances the field of sustainability research. The results provide useful information for policymakers, retailers, and advocacy groups striving to encourage sustainable seafood consumption through social and structural initiatives, even though they are not representative of the broader Swedish population.

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Popular science summary

Even when they say they are concerned about the environment, many consumers continue to avoid purchasing sustainable fish products despite growing knowledge of environmental issues. Using customer observations and interviews conducted in Uppsala, Sweden, this study explores the reasons for the gap.

To learn how habits, peer pressure, product knowledge, and price affect fish-buying decisions, researchers conducted interviews with 30 participants and observed their purchasing behavior. The findings demonstrated that people frequently base their decisions more on what is typical in their social circles than on their own particular values. People are more inclined to pursue sustainability if their friends or family care about it

But obstacles exist for even the most driven consumers. Fish with an eco-label are frequently more costly and more difficult to locate. The meanings of labels like MSC and ASC are also unclear to many customers. On the other hand, peer support, transparent labeling, and discounts can promote sustainable choices. In summary, social acceptance, cost, and ease of use are equally as important as morality.

The study makes use of a theory known as Social Practice Theory, which examines how knowledge, social norms, and accessible resources influence daily activities like shopping. It implies that the secret to long-term transformation is to make sustainable behavior simpler and more "natural" in people's everyday lives.

In summary, sustainable decisions are communal as well as personal. We need more than awareness to change our behavior. Better store design, price incentives, education, and community impact are all necessary. For retailers, legislators, and sustainability activists who wish to bridge the gap between caring and doing, this research provides useful insights.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 : The shared questionnaire google document

Exploring Consumer Preferences for Sustainable Practices : The Case of Purchasing Fish Products

Master's Thesis Research Questionnaire

We are master's students at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) conducting research on consumer behavior and sustainable consumption in the context of fish products. This questionnaire aims to explore consumer preferences, decision-making factors, and challenges related to sustainable purchasing practices. Your responses will remain anonymous and will be used solely for academic purposes. We appreciate your time and valuable input.

Section 1 : General Information

1. What is your age? (Years)

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2. What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Non-binary / Prefer not to say

3. What is your highest level of education?

☐ High school

☐ Bachelor's degree

☐ Master's degree

☐ PhD

☐ Other (please specify)

4. What is your occupation?

☐ Student

☐ Employed (full-time)

☐ Employed (part-time)

☐ Self-employed

☐ Unemployed

☐ Retired

Section 2: Everyday Consumption Behavior

5. How often do you purchase fish products?

☐ Daily

☐ Weekly

☐ Monthly

- o Rarely
- o Never

6. What factors influence your decision to purchase fish products? (Select all that apply)

- o Price
- o Brand reputation
- o Availability
- o Sustainability labels (e.g., MSC, ASC, organic)
- o Where the fish is caught
- o Fishing methods
- o Recommendations from family/friends
- o Advertising and marketing
- o Other

7. How do people around you(e.g., family, peers, workplace, media) influence your purchasing decisions?

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8. Have you made any recent changes in your purchasing habits related to sustainability? If yes, what influenced these changes?

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9. What challenges do you face in making more sustainable purchasing decisions?

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10. Have you ever changed your purchasing behavior due to sustainability concerns?

- ☐ Environmental impact
- ☐ Ethical concerns (e.g., fair wages, animal welfare)
- ☐ Health reasons
- ☐ Influence of marketing and advertising
- ☐ Peer or family influence
- ☐ Government regulations and policies
- ☐ Local employment in the food production system
- ☐ Other

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- ☐ Price discounts on sustainable products
- ☐ Government subsidies or tax benefits
- ☐ Loyalty programs or rewards for eco-friendly choices
- ☐ Increased awareness and education
- ☐ More availability of sustainable options

[illegible]

☐ Yes

☐ No

46

☐ Yes

☐ No

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix 2: The permission letter for observation



Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Department of Forest Economics

To whom it may concern

As part of a master's program, Sustainable Food Systems, students are asked to conduct a research project, a thesis project. It takes a semester to do it, and in this case it is two students that collaborate in a project that investigates motives for consumers to buy fish products (fresh as well as frozen).

The two students Rambukkana Gamaralalage **Imeshi** Pavithra Dewmini and Dilini **Tharaka** Hithami Mudiyanse are devoted to their task. They are asking for permission to interview consumers, after receiving an informed consent, about their practices related to purchasing fish.

If you want to know more about the project, please don't hesitate to contact me (Cecilia Mark-Herbert) as I take the supervisory role for their project.

Som en del av ett mastersprogram, Hållbar utveckling inom livsmedelssystem, på Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet gör studenter ett examensarbete. Det tar en termin i anspråk i tid, och i det här fallet är det två livsmedelsintresserade studenter som gör ett projekt om hur konsumenter köper fisk (färs och frusen).

Studenterna, Imeshi och Tharaka, är ambitiösa och genuint intresserade av sitt projekt. Jag är glad att få vara handledare för deras projekt. Vi vore mycket tacksamma om de, efter informerat samtycke, får fråga om de får göra en kort intervju med några av Era kunder. Om Ni vill veta mer om projektet är Ni varmt välkomna att kontakta mig.

Uppsala 17 mars, 2025

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads 'Cecilia Mark-Herbert'.

Cecilia Mark-Herbert
Associate Professor, PhD

This letter was used to attain permission to conduct empirical studies in the premises of the food store.

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Approved students' theses at SLU are published electronically. As a student, you have the copyright to your own work and need to approve the electronic publishing. If you check the box for YES, the full text (pdf file) and metadata will be visible and searchable online. If you check the box for NO, only the metadata and the abstract will be visible and searchable online. Nevertheless, when the document is uploaded it will still be archived as a digital file. If you are more than one author, the checked box will be applied to all authors. You will find a link to SLU's publishing agreement here:

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