

# Blaming the consumer?

*How political consumerism and responsibility theory are linked to each other.*



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## Abstract

Political consumerism is a recently introduced term in literature. It means changing one's individual behavior regarding one's political beliefs. It has four base actions: boycotting, buycotting, discursive political consumerism and lifestyle political consumerism. Political consumerism is described as a possibilities to take responsibility in solving global injustices. By linking political consumerism and responsibility theory, this thesis tries to answer whether it would also imply that individuals do have responsibility to change their consumer behavior. Discussing four cases of political consumerism and linking them to three theories of responsibility: collective responsibility, political responsibility and cosmopolitan responsibility, this thesis concludes that individuals indeed do bear responsibility for global structural injustices. However, this does not imply that individuals need to change their consumer behavior in order to help solving those injustices.

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## Chapter 1, Introduction

For many years, people have tried to influence big companies or institutions by changing their individual behavior. The most well-known form of this are the use of boycotts: people stop buying certain products or products from a certain company to express their criticism. An historical example is when the citizens of India stopped buying English products during the colonization of India to protest against the English rule (Micheletti, 2003). A recent example is the boycott of Adidas (Sui-Lee & Bradsher, 2021). For the production of their products, Adidas makes use of factories in the Chinese region Xinjiang, where Uighurs are being repressed. To address this repression, people are boycotting Adidas. This boycott has two main goals: influencing the company's policy but also to address the issues in Xinjiang in general.

Boycotts are a form of 'political consumerism'. This term was first introduced in scientific literature in 1990 to explain the boycott of Shell in Denmark (Micheletti, 2003). Political consumerism means that a person's consumption choices are influenced by one's political views instead of just economic considerations. It can be defined as 'market-oriented engagements emerging from societal concerns associated with production and consumption' (Boström, Micheletti & Oosterveer, 2018).

Political consumerism has four basic actions: boycotts, buycotts, discursive political consumerism and lifestyle political consumerism (Boström, Micheletti & Oosterveer, 2018). Buycotts are the opposite of the earlier explained boycotts: consciously buying certain products or products from certain companies. For example using fair trade instead of regular coffee. Discursive political consumerism means revealing the politics of a certain product (Micheletti & Stolle, 2013). Finally, lifestyle political consumerism means that a person changes its lifestyle practices out of societal concerns. This can contain buycotts, boycotts and discursive political consumerism.

Important and interesting in political consumerism is that individuals who change their consumer choices not only want to change a company's policy, but they want to make a more general point or solve a bigger problem than just a bad policy of one organization. The anti-sweatshop movement for example wants to make consumers aware about the poor working conditions in clothing factories. They call on consumers to make a conscious choice in buying their clothes and boycott certain brands who make use of sweatshops. But their goal is not only to change, for example, Nike's policy. They want to change the poor situation of the workers in sweatshop and change the structure behind the clothing industry: people living in wealthy western countries have the possibility to buy cheap clothes because the workers in the sweatshops do not get a fair wage for their work (Young, 2004).

The anti-sweatshop movement is only one example of today's political consumerism, but it shows how individuals try to solve global structural injustices by changing their individual behavior. Micheletti & Stolle (2013) argue that globalization has changed traditional political structures. States do not act on their own but are embedded in international structures by treaties and trade agreements. Also, there are some problems like climate change that need a global change instead of just states changing their policy. Therefore, using traditional political tools like voting does not work for individuals anymore to solve certain problems and they try other ways to do their part in solving global societal problems. Micheletti and Stolle call this *individualized responsibility taking*.

They do not elaborate on the concept of *individualized responsibility taking* rather than that it is an explanation for the recent rise of political consumerism. But I think that theoretically the link between political consumerism and responsibility needs some further research. Because does the fact that people have an opportunity to *take* responsibility for solving global societal problems mean that people also *have* the responsibility to do so? So the central question of this thesis is: *to what extent are political consumerism and responsibility theory linked to each other?*

In my opinion, this question is twofold. First, the question needs to be answered to what extent individuals are responsible for solving certain global structural injustices. After that, the question can be addressed if that would mean that people need to change their consumption choices to solve those structural injustices.

To answer the central question, this thesis will first dive into responsibility theory. Chapter one will explain the base of moral responsibility theory in order to have a clear idea of the different meanings the term responsibility can have. After that, chapter two will elaborate on three theories of responsibility that address the link between individuals and global structural injustices: collective responsibility, political responsibility and cosmopolitan responsibility. Chapter three explains the main ideas of political consumerism after which the link between political consumerism and responsibility theory will be made in chapter four. By using four cases of political consumerism, this thesis will try to provide an answer to the research question. The conclusion will give an overview of the findings of this thesis, and finally the discussion will reflect on the research and the shortcomings of this thesis.

## Chapter 2, Types of responsibility

Before being able to say something about the relationship between responsibility and global issues like environmental crises, it is important to first have a clear definition in mind of the meaning of responsibility. This chapter will therefore describe the different meanings of responsibility in a philosophical context.

The three most important meanings of responsibility are causal responsibility, legal responsibility and moral responsibility (Klein, 2005). Causal responsibility means that a person is responsible for a state of affairs that is directly or indirectly a result of his or her action. To be legally responsible means that a person meets the requirements for accountability under the law. Finally, moral responsibility, covers two things: 'the having of a moral obligation and the fulfilment of the criteria for deserving blame or praise (punishment or reward) for a morally significant act or omission.' (Klein, 2005).

At this point, this thesis tries to answer the question to which extent people can be held responsible for global structural injustices. This implies a notion of moral responsibility, as it is not the question whether people can legally be held responsible. It is also not just causal responsibility, although at some point it is unavoidable to also dive into the causal connection between people's individual behavior and global societal problems.

But first the concept of moral responsibility will be explained. Van de Poel (2015) defines moral responsibility as 'responsibility that is grounded in moral considerations, rather than legal or organizational considerations and rules'. He also calls it 'normative responsibility'. The opposite of this is 'descriptive responsibility' of which causal responsibility would be an example. Within normative responsibility, Van de Poel (2015) distinguishes five different meanings of responsibility, divided into two categories: forward-looking responsibility and backward-looking responsibility.

With backward looking responsibility, Van de Poel (2015) means that it is a type of responsibility that is applied to something that already has occurred. Forward responsibility means that a person is responsible for something that has not yet happened. Van de Poel (2015) describes five types of normative responsibility that all are either forward- or backward-looking. Because at this point it is not clear if the responsibility people maybe have for global structural injustices is forward-looking or backward-looking, all the five meanings of responsibility within normative responsibility will be discussed. After that, the implications of the five meanings for the relation between individuals and global societal problems will be discussed.

### *Backward-looking responsibility*

Backward-looking responsibility is a type of responsibility which is applied to something that already has occurred (Van de Poel, 2015). It means holding someone to account for something already done. Based on literature about responsibility, Van de Poel (2015) describes three different forms of backward-looking responsibility: responsibility-as-blameworthiness, responsibility-as-accountability and responsibility-as-liability.

### *Responsibility-as-blameworthiness*

The first backward-looking type of responsibility is responsibility-as-blameworthiness: “*i* is responsible-as-blameworthy for  $\phi$  implies that it is appropriate to adopt a blaming reactive attitude toward *i* in respect of  $\phi$ ” (Van de Poel, 2015, p21). Following literature on responsibility, Van de Poel describes five conditions that need to be met in order to be able to hold a person morally responsible-as-blameworthy: capacity, causality, knowledge, freedom, wrong-doing.

According to Van de Poel, capacity is closely related to moral agency. When can an agent be ascribed with the capacity to make a choice, for example. The literature around this question discusses for example the capacity of children and people with mental disorders (Van de Poel, 2015).

The second condition, causality, means that an agent can be held responsible for an outcome when (s)he is causally related to the outcome. This condition may seem straightforward, but there is a lot of discussion about how strong the causal link between an individual and the outcome should be (Van de Poel 2015).

Knowledge, which is Van de Poel’s third condition, is based on Aristotle’s ideas about responsibility. He argued that an agent cannot be held responsible if the action was performed involuntary (Van de Poel, 2015). With a voluntary action, Aristotle means that it may not have happened under coercion or ignorance. That last one is meant by Van de Poel’s condition of knowledge. As with the other conditions, also this one is not that straight-forward. According to Van de Poel (2015) it has a normative aspect: it is not only about what people know but also about what we think they should know.

The concept of ‘no coercion’ mentioned by Aristotle, is described by Van de Poel as the freedom condition. It means that people can only be held responsible for actions they performed freely. But among theorists, there is no consensus about what freedom exactly means. Some argue that freedom means that there should be alternative options or actions when people have to act or make a choice. But when looking at the example of the consequences of eating meat for the environment, it shows that it is a justified question of scholars what kind of alternatives it should be? What if the alternative is much more expensive, like biological meat in comparison to ‘ordinary’ meat? Can people who buy ‘ordinary meat’ because the alternative is too expensive still be held responsible because they made a ‘free choice’?

The last condition, wrong-doing, means that some harm has occurred or some norm has been transgressed (Van de Poel). The exact meaning of a wrong-doing, is something about which theorists think all very differently. I will later return to this question.

### *Responsibility as accountability*

The second form of backward-looking responsibility is responsibility-as-accountability: *i is responsible-as-accountable for  $\phi$  implies that i should account for (the occurrence of)  $\phi$ , in particular for i’s role in doing, or bringing about  $\phi$ , or for i’s role in failing to prevent  $\phi$  from happening* (Van de Poel 2015). According to Van de Poel, there are also conditions that need to be met in order to hold someone responsible-as-accountability. These conditions are based on the conditions mentioned above under responsibility-as-blameworthy.

Van de Poel argues that the two conditions capacity and causality also apply to responsibility-as-accountability. This means that a person can only be held responsible if the outcome is a consequence of her or his action and that the person should have the capacity to have some conceptions of consequences of outcomes. But, the conditions of knowledge and freedom do not necessarily need to be met, according to Van de Poel (2015). These conditions can be used by an agent to excuse themselves from blameworthiness. In other words, when the conditions of capacity and causality are met, but a person explains why the conditions of knowledge and freedom are not met, the person is responsible-as-accountability and not responsible-as-blameworthy. So a person that made a decision under coercion can still be held responsible-as-accountable but not responsible-as-blameworthy.

About the last condition, 'wrong-doing', Van de Poel (2015) argues that there needs to be at least a suspicion of a wrong-doing by a person. Accountability can also apply to neutral or even positive things, like winning a prize. But, when looking at accountability as a shift from blameworthiness, this means that there at least should be a suspicion of wrong-doing, according to Van de Poel (2015).

### *Responsibility as liability*

According to Van de Poel (2015) liability related to legal responsibility is often quite clear: a person is punished or needs to repay caused damage for something (s)he has caused. But liability related to moral responsibility, as is the case at this point, is much more difficult. Liability means that a person has an obligation to put right in a wrong situation (Van de Poel, 2015). But, it implies that the agent has in some way caused the harm or the wrong situation to be able to speak about moral liability. We will assume that moral liability requires moral blameworthiness. More specifically, we will assume that moral liability can be appropriately attributed to an agent if, and only if, that agent is blameworthy (Van de Poel, 2015).

"So if an agent is responsible-as-accountable, she has to give an account; if she is responsible-as-blameworthy, she has to accept blame and maybe has to feel guilty; in the case of responsibility-as-liability, compensation may be due" (Van de Poel, 2015, p27).

### *Forward-looking responsibility*

While backward-looking responsibility has something to do with things that have already happened in the past, forward-looking responsibility refers to things that are not yet the case or have not yet occurred (Van de Poel, 2015). Van de Poel distinguishes two forms of forward-looking responsibility: responsibility-as-obligation and responsibility-as-virtue.

### *Responsibility-as-obligation*

Responsibility-as-obligation means at first seems to imply that a person has an obligation to perform a certain action. But following literature about obligations and duties, Van de Poel (2015) distinguishes these two implications. According to Van de Poel, a duty implies that a person has to act in a certain way, or has to refrain from certain actions – for example 'you may not lie' is an example of a duty.

An obligation means that a person has to see for it that some action will take place, but it does not necessarily mean that the agent itself has to do this action. For example, an owner of a bar has the obligation that his bar is a place in which people feel safe. But (s)he can delegate this responsibility to a bouncer that has to watch out for any trouble or dangerous situations. Duties cannot be delegated,



as it is not enough if another person is telling the truth (Van de Poel, 2015). Van de Poel argues that the following implication applies to responsibility-as-obligation:

“i is forward-looking responsible-as-obligation for  $\phi$  implies that i should exercise her (self-) supervisory duties to see to it that  $\phi$ ” (Van de Poel, 2015, p27)

### *Responsibility-as-virtue*

Responsibility-as-virtue may be the most vague type of responsibility. It means that some needs to *be* a responsible person. Responsibility is therefore not linked to actions or behavior, but to one's character.

## Chapter 3, Responsibility and global structural injustices

Before answering the question whether people have the responsibility to change their consumption behavior in order to solve global societal problems, it is first important to dive into the relationship between individuals and global societal problems. Do individuals have the responsibility to try to solve global societal problems at all? In answering this question, I will make use of three types of responsibility: political responsibility, cosmopolitan responsibility and collective responsibility. This chapter will first give a summary of these three types of responsibility. After that, the implications of these three types for the research question will be discussed.

### Collective responsibility

In trying to find an answer to the responsibility question regarding the connection between individuals and global societal problems, there is a third type of responsibility that possibly can give an explanation: collective responsibility.

The categorization of responsibility of Van de Poel discussed in an earlier chapter, categorized the forms of individual responsibility. But besides individual responsibility there is also a form of collective responsibility. Collective responsibility associates responsibility with groups and it locates the source of moral responsibility in the collective actions taken by these groups understood as *collectives* (Smiley, 2017). There is quite a broad consensus among scholars about the principles of moral individual responsibility, but collective responsibility is a concept that is under a lot of debate (Risser, n.d.). The two main reasons why this concept is contested is that first, it is unclear what is meant by 'collective' and second, it differs what kind of responsibility scholars attach to it (Tollefsen, Bazargan-Forward, 2020). This section discusses the main principles of collective responsibility, explains the main debates about the meaning of collective responsibility and finally it discusses the relation between collective responsibility and global societal problems.

### Groups

Collective responsibility is responsibility ascribed to groups. These can be structured or unstructured groups (Miller, 2020). With structured groups, Miller means that it is a group that is in some way bound by a membership, rules or an organizational structure. Think of a corporation of which the employers form a structured collective of a band that has no formal membership but has some rules and habits that bind the band members and thereby form a structured collective.

An unstructured group is a group that has no formal organization but that can still be called a group, mostly because of an external event. An example Miller (2020) gives of an unstructured group is a group of people that coincidentally sees a house burning down and together saves a child that is inside the house. They have no formal organization, but yet they form a group by acting together.

French makes also a distinction between two types of groups: aggregates and conglomerates. Aggregates are comparable to the unstructured groups of Miller. An aggregate is a 'group of people that is nothing more than a gathering of folks' (French, 2020). French takes the example of people waiting for a bus, they are a gathering of people and therefore form a group because they are at the same place at a certain time, but they don't have anything more in common than that (French, 2020).

The structured group of Miller is called a conglomerate by French. According to French (2020), this is a group of which the identity is not exhausted by the sum of the identities of its members. This means that people bind together based on one sort of factor for some period of time. Think of people with different background that organize a demonstration against racism. They form a conglomerate because they are bound by the normative view that they are against racism, for at least until the demonstration has taken place.

### *Responsibility*

The second part of collective responsibility that causes a lot of debate is the responsibility-question. What is meant if a group or collective is held responsible? Tollefsen & Bazargan-Forward (2020) state that there are two main theories of collective responsibility: a distributive account and a non-distributive account. The first account states that collective responsibility reduces to individual responsibility, which refers to the responsibilities individuals have within a group for outcomes produced by that group (Tollefsen & Bazargan-Forward, 2020). The non-distributive account states that collective responsibility means that the responsibility lies within the group itself and with no particular individuals (Tollefsen & Bazargan-Forward, 2020).

Miller distinguishes three different types of collective responsibility: the atomistic account, the collectivist account and the relational account. The atomistic account can be compared with the distributive account, described above. Miller (2020) argues that this account states that collective responsibility is in fact an aggregate of individual responsibilities. One of the main critiques on collective responsibility is that it ascribes supra-human powers to collectives, as if an organization itself has norms and values. According to Miller (2020), the atomistic account prevents the ascribing of supra-human powers to collectives because all the responsibility lies with the individual members of the collective. But Miller (2020) states that the downside of this is that individuals can never be fully responsible for an action performed by a collective. He illustrates this with the example of a bank heist where the robbers all have different roles, like driving the car and buying the guns, but none of the individuals is fully responsible for stealing one million dollars (Miller, 2020). This implicates that the atomistic account can cause that no one can be held responsible for certain actions.

The collectivist account is similar to the non-distributive account discussed earlier. It means that the group itself is bearer of the collective responsibility (Miller, 2020). This implicates that a collective itself can be a moral agent and thus bear responsibility (Miller, 2020). According to Miller, it is a separate question to what extent the individual members of a collective have some responsibility. It is even possible that a collective is responsible for a certain outcome, while none of the individuals bear some responsibility (Miller, 2020). Miller states that the downside of this account is that it ascribes supra-human powers to collectives and even psychological states.

The third type of responsibility Miller distinguishes is joint moral responsibility. With a joint action, Miller means that an individual performs an action individually, but with the belief that others will also perform certain action and that these actions together will realize an end (Miller, 2020). This solves the problem in the distributional account of collective responsibility that individuals can be held responsible for small parts of a certain action, but that no one can be held responsible for the 'big' action. In the example of the bank robbers, each of the individuals performs a small action like driving the car. But they do so in the belief that with driving the car, they help stealing one million dollars (Miller, 2020). With Miller's joint moral responsibility, this overarching goal is taking into consideration when ascribing responsibility for collective actions. So jointly, the bank robbers are responsible for stealing the million dollars (Miller, 2020).

## Political responsibility

According to Young (2004), the liability-model of responsibility does not cover enough responsibility when looking at certain wrongs. She takes the example of bad working conditions in sweatshops. According to the liability model of responsibility, the owners of the factories are responsible for the poor working conditions of their employees because they decide the course of business in their own factory. But anti-sweatshop movements make a claim that also consumers that buy products produced in those sweatshops are (partly) responsible for the situation in the sweatshops (Young, 2004). This responsibility is not covered by the liability model: people who buy clothes produced in sweatshop do not directly decide how the factory is run. Therefore, Young tries to develop another form of responsibility that has the potential to also hold consumers responsible. She calls this new type of responsibility 'political responsibility'.

First, Young elaborates on the question to what extent people are expected to contribute to global justice. As Miller (2008) explains, justice is often related to people that have some shared background. It is often commonly accepted that people who live in the same nation-state have a responsibility towards each other to contribute to justice in that state. But with the recent trend of globalization, the question has raised to what extent people have a responsibility to contribute and try to obtain global justice. To what extent are people related to citizens of countries on the other side of the world?

To answer this question, Young makes use of Onora O'Neill's argument that a shared background is not what implies a moral obligation to others, but a shared institution or system. According to O'Neill, people have a moral obligation regard all the people that are affected by a certain action of a person. When looking at the example of buying clothes, this implies that all the people that are affected by a person buying a T-shirt in a certain store are in the same system or institution and therefore the customer has a moral obligation regarding all these people. There's a whole process behind this purchase that contains a lot of other actors: people who picked the cotton, people who produced the T-shirt, people who transported it to the Netherlands, and so forth. According to O'Neill, the actions of all those actors are conditions in order to be able to buy the T-shirt. This means that we have made moral commitments to all those people. Young and O'Neill both argue that this connection, and thus this moral obligation, exists regardless of whether people are conscious about the process behind the T-shirt.

Looking at the most well-known forms of responsibility, as described in the previous chapter, it is hard to see how Young's idea of responsibility fit in one of those types. Therefore, Young formulates a new way of thinking about responsibility: political responsibility.

According to Young, there are five main differences between the liability model of responsibility and political responsibility (Young, 2004):

- Where the liability model of responsibility tries to find persons who are responsible and by that isolates them from persons who are not responsible, the political responsible model is not about making that distinction: if one person is found to be responsible for some kind of global injustice, this does not meant that other individuals are not responsible.
- The liability model is about blaming and punishing people that act differently from the norm or the normal background. Political responsibility challenges that background itself.

- This relates to the fact that political responsibility looks forward: what do persons need to change in order to change an existing structure. The liability model looks backwards: who is to blame and to punish for actions in the past.

Young's theory of political responsibility can therefore be seen as forward-looking responsibility. This relates to Duff's ideas about responsibility. According to Duff (1998), forward-looking responsibility is a form of responsibility before a certain event has taken place. This is often tied to roles people have. For example, a parent has a forward-looking responsibility to take care of his/her child because of the role the parent has. Duff mentions that even being a human being can be a certain role that implies forward-looking responsibility. So it seems Young's forward-looking political responsibility is grounded in this idea that being a human being comes with certain responsibilities regarding other human beings.

- There is a difference between duties and responsibilities. According to Young, this differentiation lies within the differences between acts and outcomes. A duty is often a certain act that a person has to carry out, think for example of one of the most well-known duties 'you may not lie'. To follow this duty, people need to perform a certain action, in this case (always) tell the truth. Young argues that responsibility is more outcome-orientated: when it is a person's responsibility to achieve a certain outcome, that person can him/herself decide how to reach that outcome.
- Political responsibility is shared responsibility rather than collective responsibility.

This means that according to Young (2004) that it is a form of personal responsibility for outcomes, produced by a group. This idea is based on Larry May's theory about shared responsibility. His claim is that people share responsibility for harms perpetrated by, or occurring within, their communities (May, 1996).

A sensitive topic in talking about responsibility is that the implication of Young's and O'Neill's theory about responsibility means that the workers in the sweatshop themselves also bear some responsibility for the injustice, because they are also part of the system. Young does not deny this responsibility, but she therefore tries to formulate a model of responsibility that does not talk about blame. According to her the workers are not to blame for the working conditions, but they do have some responsibility for contributing to this system (Young, 2004).

### Cosmopolitan responsibility

The idea of cosmopolitan responsibility is formulated by Heilinger (2020) based on Young's ideas of global justice. Heilinger's starting point is that we live in a world that is inherently unjust and that institutions do not have the capabilities to solve that injustice. His main question is: *What should the rather well-off, conscientious citizens of the prosperous countries do about current injustices?* (Heilinger, 2020). According to Heilinger, the disadvantaged position of some people cannot be seen as isolated phenomena, but as symptoms of an underlying structural problem. Therefore, he speaks of global structural injustice – GSI (Heilinger, 2021).

Heilinger (2021) distinguishes three main features that characterize structural injustice of a potentially global scope. First, structural injustices lie within the quality of relations and interaction between

people. According to Heilinger (2021) these relations can ignore or respect the moral equal of all. When there is a structural injustice, these relations have an unequal character like domination or exploitation. Secondly, structural injustice happens within a social system that Heilinger (2021) calls a 'structure'. This implies that structural injustice is not based on one isolated action, but based on a set of actions and behaviors that fit within a structure that is characterized by certain rules and patterns that reproduce that social system. Finally, related to the second feature, structural injustice does not imply evil intent on the people involved. The actions of those people that may cause structural injustices are actions that are normal given the social background they grew up in and that form the social system. Heilinger (2021) illustrates this point by driving a car, which is seen as a quite normal way to go to work, but given the consequences it has for the climate it can be seen as an action that causes global structural injustice. However, this does not mean that people driving a car have an evil intent to consciously harm the climate.

Because Heilinger argues that institutional and political action to tackle GSI is a slow progress, if that progress is even happening, he states that it is an important question *'whether, and if yes how, the advantaged individual agents, that is, ordinary persons as well as those in positions of particular influence, bear responsibility to tackle the wrong of GSI from their individual perspective.'*

In answering the first part of the question – *whether* individual agents bear responsibility – Heilinger uses cosmopolitanism to argue that people do have a responsibility regarding other citizens. According to Heilinger (2020), cosmopolitanism implies that we are all part of a global order and are therefore 'world-citizens'. As Young does based on O'Neill, Heilinger also argues that we do not only have moral obligations to people living in the same country. But while Young bases her alternative on the system or institutions we are part of, Heilinger argues that we have moral obligations to all other citizens because we are all part of the same global order. This has three normative elements: normative individualism, egalitarianism/impartiality, and universal scope (Heilinger, 2020).

First, normative individualism, based on Pogge, means that every individual human is a unit of moral concern. According to the second element, all those individual humans are equally relevant. Third, there should be no distinction between where an individual lives or who (s)he is. Based on these principles, Heilinger argues that we all bear responsibility to help trying achieve global justice. He argues that this is an individual task, because on the one hand institutions seem not to be able to address difficult problems like global warming, and on the other hand because all institutions are formed by individuals so it is always an individual action to make a change.

Heilinger's answer to the second part of the question – *how* do individual agents have to tackle the wrong of GSI – is based on his idea of cosmopolitanism. The accounts that address individual responsibility and GSI are either too demanding in the things they ask from individuals to do, or they neglect the importance of individuals by stating that solutions need to come from bigger institutions (Heilinger, 2021). Therefore, Heilinger searches for an account of individual responsibility that 'acknowledges the nature and the limits of individual agency as well as the distinctive role and involvement of individuals in the specific problem of GSI' (Heilinger, 2021). Based on the theory of cosmopolitanism, Heilinger argues that an account is needed that addresses the root cause of the problem, namely that it seems acceptable not to consider everyone as equally deserving of moral concern, which is now deeply grounded in socially accepted norms, backgrounds and social structures (Heilinger, 2021). Therefore, Heilinger argues for an 'ethos-based approach' for individuals to respond to GSI. An ethos can be described as a basic attitude or a mindset that corresponds with certain normative commitments that makes a person feel, think, talk and act in certain ways (Heilinger, 2021). An ethos of cosmopolitan responsibility will make that individuals challenge the social system that

causes GSI in their thinking, talking and acting. This will be the appropriate response according to Heilinger because the GSI is not caused by isolated acts, so an answer to that should also not be an isolated act but a change in people's thinking and acting.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three types of responsibility that may form an answer to the question whether individuals do have a responsibility for global societal problems. Collective responsibility makes first a distinction between structured and unstructured collectives. Besides that, it distinguishes three ways of ascribing responsibility: the distributive account, the non-distributive account and the account of joint moral responsibility. Young's political responsibility is based on the idea that people within the same structure bear responsibility for each other and for maintaining that structure. Finally, cosmopolitan responsibility is based on the idea that all individuals should be treated as equal, because we are all world-citizens and therefore all related to each other.

Collective responsibility is mostly based on general responsibility theory, and tries to find a way how individual-responsibility theory fits within cases where more than just one individual has a link with a certain action or outcome. Political responsibility and cosmopolitan responsibility are mostly focused not just on cases where a group has caused a certain harm but on the question who is responsible for global harms. Although Heilinger's and Young's theories have a lot in common, there are also a lot of differences, especially in the intention of forming the theory. Young's political responsibility is based on the theoretical question raised by the anti-sweatshop movement about the responsibility of consumers for poor working conditions in clothing factories. Heilinger's cosmopolitan responsibility seems to be grounded in his ideas that something has to be done about global injustice and that waiting for institutions or states to act seems not enough. His theory is therefore more grounded in normative beliefs than in a philosophical theoretical puzzle.

## Chapter 4, Political consumerism

### Definition

Political consumerism, sometimes also called consumer activism, ethical consumerism, or socially responsible investing, means that a person's consumption choices are influenced by one's political views instead of just economic considerations. It can be defined as 'market-oriented engagements emerging from societal concerns associated with production and consumption' (Boström, Micheletti & Oosterveer, 2018).

Political consumers choose products, but also producers and services, not only based on an economic consideration, but also based on the product's politics (Micheletti, 2003). These politics are most of the time invisible, until someone makes them visible (ibid.). This can be done by for example organizing a campaign or giving labels to existing products that show the sustainability of the product. This gives consumers the opportunity to act on these labels and make a 'better' choice. According to the theory, raising awareness or organizing a campaign can be done by a range of different actors: individual citizens, non-governmental organizations or governmental institutions.

Nowadays one of the most prominent examples is considering the climatic impact of the purchase of a certain good. But there are other important issues that can matter in political consumerism: issues around political events and developments, environmental and human rights problems and worries, and the ethics of production and manufacturing practices (Boström, Micheletti, & Oosterveer, 2018). But also concerns about for example religion, ethnicity and gender relations can influence a person's consumer behavior (ibid.).

### The emergence of political consumerism

Although the term 'political consumerism' is quite new, the phenomenon has existed for quite a long time. Especially boycotts and buycotts are a well-known form of expressing a citizen's or a state's political opinion.

The term 'boycott' comes from an Irish family name around 1878 (Micheletti, 2003). Since then, boycotts have been used quite frequently as a tool for political actions. An early example of a boycott as a political tool is the movement Gandhi started during the colonization of India by England (Sreekumar & Varman, 2018). As a protest against the English rule, Gandhi encouraged Indian citizens to boycott English products and to buy locally produced clothes. By this, it was not only a boycott but also an early example of a buycott (Sreekumar & Varman, 2018). The most well-known example of a buycott was the purchase of indigenous clothes. By wearing them, the people showed that they bought their clothes locally and that they supported the protest against the English rule.

The term 'political consumerism' was first used in Denmark around 1990 to explain the boycott of shell oil (Micheletti, 2003). From 1990 until now, not only boycotts but also the other three forms of political consumerism have gained attention and have become a more common tool for political engagement. Two recent societal changes offer an explanation for the increase in popularity of political consumerism: globalization and individualization.

The trend of globalization has caused a rise in attention for political consumerism in several ways. Firstly, globalization means that people are more connected with people all over the world. Traveling has become easier, so citizens can visit other places and get to know other countries. Also the internet has played an important part in how people feel more connected to people all over the world. This means that issues like the global environment or global human rights gain more attention (Boström, Micheletti & Oosterveer, 2018). This means that people are more likely to participate in solving



problems around these issues. Secondly, politics itself has become more global. States are dependent on each other and work together in organizations like the European Union or the World Trade Organization. This means that the influence of individual countries has decreased. They cannot decide for themselves to boycott products from certain countries or companies, they are bound by international treaties. This causes so-called governance gaps (Gulbrandsen, 2018): governments are limited in what they can do to address concerns about societal issues. Therefore, individual citizens try to express these concerns by using political consumerism.

Also individualization plays an important part in the rise of political consumerism. Nowadays, politics isn't just about political parties and interests groups. This scope has broadened to the private lives of citizens (Micheletti, 2003). People now take their own responsibility to solve problems. This relates to the way the political landscape has changed over the years. The ways citizens can participate in politics aren't laid out by the government anymore (Micheletti, 2003). People create their own way of political participation and engagement. This implies that political consumerism is a form of engagement for people who didn't use to have the opportunity to engage in politics (Micheletti, 2003). In the history of the United States, a lot of boycotts were started by housewives who usually didn't have a lot of political power. But prompted by family concerns they organized bigger movements, for example around the nutrition prices. Which gave them a way to influence governmental policy (Micheletti, 2003).

### The four types of political consumerism

Political consumerism has four types of actions that together form the scope of political consumerism, namely boycotts, buycotts, discursive political consumerism and lifestyle political consumerism (Boström, Micheletti & Oosterveer, 2018).

A boycott means that a person does not buy a certain product based on certain societal concerns. A recent example is the boycott of Adidas (Sui-Lee & Bradsher, 2021). Adidas has factories in the Chinese region Xinjiang, where Uighurs are repressed. To address this repression, people are boycotting Adidas and by that trying to on the one hand influence the company's policy but also to address the issues in Xinjiang in general.

A buycott, the opposite of a boycott, means buying certain products for societal reasons. An example can be to buy coffee with a fair trade label to make sure that in the production process of the coffee, the farmers get a fair price for their work.

Discursive political consumerism, a less known concept, means revealing the politics of a product. A recent development is using existing platforms like social media to express critique on certain products or big organizations (Micheletti & Stolle, 2013). Most of the time, this is done in a creative way by for example photoshopping the logo of a brand, or renaming the slogan and by that revealing the politics behind the products. An example of this is the 'Nike Email Exchange': a student who ordered customized shoes at Nike with the text 'sweatshop', referring to the alleged production process of Nike. He published his e-mail exchange with the brand online to gain attention for the way Nike handled his order (Micheletti, Stolle & Nishikawa, 2005).

Finally, lifestyle political consumerism, means that a person changes lifestyle practices out of societal concerns. Boycotts and buycotts can be an important part of this. A boycott related to stopping climate change can mean that a person decides only to buy biological produced meat. But when a person decides to become a vegetarian, or a vegan, it is an example of a change in lifestyle and thus an example of lifestyle political consumerism.

## Chapter 5, Political consumerism and responsibility theory

This chapter will discuss four cases of political consumerism, linked to the four types of political consumerism, and the link they have with collective responsibility, political responsibility and cosmopolitan responsibility.

### Boycotts – illegal drugs

As discussed earlier, a boycott means that people stop buying certain products or products from a certain brand. This section will discuss the case of boycotting illegal drugs in The Netherlands.

In April 2018, Erik Akerboom, head of the Dutch National police, gave a speech at an international police congress about drugs criminality (NOS, 2018). In this speech, he did not only address the drugs dealers but also the users of illegal drugs. According to him, users of illegal drugs should be more aware of the consequences of their drugs use. He argued that the users help maintaining an illegal system of criminality and violence (NOS, 2018). By using the term ‘cocaine yogi’ he especially addressed people who live a healthy and conscious life, but still use drugs in the weekends. The term ‘cocaine yogi’ was first used by the British lifestyle journalist Kate Spicer (Spicer, 2005). It is used to refer to people that are very aware of the impact their life has on for example the climate. This means for example that they eat vegetarian, only buy organic clothes and fair-trade coffee and try to avoid driving a car (Bouma & De Zwaan, 2019). However, in the weekends, they use drugs like cocaine or ecstasy. Akerboom is not the only one who addresses the users of illegal drugs as partly responsible for the criminal activity caused by drugs trade. In an interview in the Dutch newspaper Het Parool, Sofyan Mbarki, councilor in Amsterdam, addresses the users directly: ‘We worry about the unsafety in the city causes by illegal drugs trade, but one of the causes is our own demand for drugs’ (Vugts, 2019).

It might be argued that there is no such thing as boycotting something that is already an illegal product. But in The Netherlands, legislation about drugs is not that straight forward. Production, trade and possession of drugs is forbidden by law (Drugsinfo, n.d.). The law makes a distinction between soft drugs (like marihuana) and hard drugs (like ecstasy or cocaine). But although the production, trade and possession of drugs are not allowed, the use of drugs is not forbidden by law (Drugsinfo). One of the main reasons for this policy is that the Dutch government wants to give users the possibility to go to the hospital when in need due to drugs use. According to a Dutch scientist specialized in the Dutch drugs culture, the government has helped normalizing drugs use (Bouma & De Zwaan, 2019). Not only by the policy of ‘toleration’ but also by allowing people to legally test their illegal drugs for free (Bouma & De Zwaan, 2019). Therefore, I would argue that although drugs is already an illegal product in The Netherlands, the use of illegal drugs is normalized to such extent that boycotting would make sense because it would lower the demand and could therefore also lower the supply. The remainder of this section will focus on ecstasy, which is the most used party drug in The Netherlands, besides marihuana (Trimbos Instituut, n.d.).

Proponents of a boycott of illegal drugs have two main arguments: the illegal drugs trade causes dumping of chemical drugs waste and criminal activities (Möhle, n.d.). Ecstasy is a synthetic drug for which chemicals are needed. After the production of ecstasy, chemical waste is left which is often dumped illegally in Dutch nature reserves. Because the production of ecstasy is forbidden by law, the

producers have to dump it illegally instead of bringing it to a recycling center (Trimbos Instituut, n.d.). The second argument of proponents of an illegal drugs boycott is that it causes criminality and violence. In The Netherlands, the magnitude of the amount of violence caused by illegal drugs trade came to light when Ridouan Taghi was arrested. He is seen as one of the biggest actors in the Dutch illegal drugs network (NOS, 2019). In June 2022 the criminal trial against him started, in which he is the key suspect of six murders committed by his criminal organization.

#### *Illegal drugs & collective responsibility*

In discussing the implication of collective responsibility for the responsibility of individual drugs users, it is first important to clarify what kind of collective drugs users form. Ecstasy is according to Trimbos Instituut (n.d.) the most used party drug in The Netherlands (besides cannabis, which is legally sold). 3.1% of the Dutch adults has used ecstasy in 2020, while of people between 16-35 years old that has visited a party or a club in 2020, 44% has used ecstasy (Trimbos Instituut, n.d.). This implies that ecstasy is a type of drugs that is mostly used in groups. The emergence of ecstasy as a party drug is related to the introduction of house music in The Netherlands (Zandstra & Pottjewijd, 2020). Nowadays, the use of ecstasy is often linked to techno parties. This could imply that ecstasy users form a conglomerate, they share the identity that they like techno music and want to use drugs while attending a techno party. However, I would argue that the purchase of the ecstasy is an individual act and therefore the buyers of illegal drugs cannot be seen as a structured group or conglomerate. The people attending a party while using drugs could also be seen as an unstructured group, because they share an event at a certain place and time. But, the same argument against drugs users forming a collective applies here, namely that the buying itself is an individual act. This means that collective responsibility cannot be applied to boycotting illegal drugs.

#### *Illegal drugs & political responsibility*

As discussed earlier, Young's political responsibility argues that a direct link between an action and a cause is not enough to address structural injustices. Therefore, she developed the theory of political responsibility that argues that people have moral obligations regarding every other person that operates within the same structure, and therefore people have moral obligations regarding those others. When trying to connect illegal drugs use to harms caused by illegal drugs trade, it seems that political responsibility can be applied to individuals buying illegal drugs. When ordering ecstasy by a so called 'drug courier', an individual becomes part of a bigger structure. The courier has got the ecstasy pills from a bigger dealer, who has probably bought it from an even bigger member of the network. Besides that, there are also the people who produce the ecstasy. According to Young's theory, buying the pills helps maintaining that structure, and it would mean that the buyer has some responsibility for criminal activities that take place within that structure, think of threats and murder.

Following O'Neill, Young argues that it does not matter to what extent people are aware of the implications of their action in order to bear responsibility for others in the same structure. This would imply that people who do not know if their illegal drugs use are partly the cause of criminal activities, are still responsible for the consequences of their purchase and thus bear responsibility for the structural injustices of illegal drugs trade.

It can be questioned if based on Young's arguments, a boycott is the right response to structural injustice. Young's main argument is that sharing a structure implies having moral obligations regarding other members of that structure. Boycotting drugs means that a person withdraws him/herself from that structure, which would imply that that person has no moral obligations anymore. However, it can

be argued that it is morally wrong when a person has used drugs for years and was a part of a structure for years, and as a way of bearing responsibility for the consequences stops buying drugs and therefore has no moral obligations to the actors in that structure anymore.

Young does not discuss the relation between individuals and former structures they were part of, but it seems as if there is a tendency between backward-looking responsibility and forward-looking responsibility when trying to apply Young's political responsibility to boycotts. Young argues that her theory is forward-looking because it states how people should act in order to change an unjust structure. But when a person withdraws him/herself from a structure and therefore argues that (s)he has no moral obligation regarding the other actors in that structure, it could be argued that backward-looking responsibility would apply.

### *Illegal drugs & cosmopolitan responsibility*

Heilinger's idea of responsibility is based on the cosmopolitan theory that all people are related to each other because they are all world-citizens. Arguing from the equal approach theory, this means that people should treat all persons equal and therefore people have moral obligations to all other citizens. This responsibility should be carried out in an 'ethos-based' approach, which means that Heilinger does not prescribe certain actions or behavior that people should follow, but a cosmopolitan ethos means that people should challenge unfair global structure in their thinking, talking and acting.

First, I will discuss the three main characters of a structural injustice Heilinger identifies: unequal relations between people, it happens within a social system - not based on a isolated action and an evil intent of the actor causing a harm is not necessary. Although there is a lot of criminal activity within the drugs trade, it seems as if there is no unequal relationship between the buyers of ecstasy, and the people providing it. Supply and demand meet each other in a situation where people who want the ecstasy pay the amount of money asks by the dealer, and the dealer provides ecstasy of good quality because (s)he does not want to ruin their reputation. Instead, the second feature does apply to the case of illegal drugs. As discussed earlier, in The Netherlands there is a policy in which the trade and purchasing of illegal drugs is forbidden by law, but the use of drugs is tolerated. Also testing illegal drugs is legally possible at institutions provided by the government. This has caused a social system in which using illegal drugs like ecstasy is normalized, especially at parties and in night clubs. This implies that people buying illegal drugs are not acting against the norms of the existing social structure in The Netherlands, which means that the consequences of buying illegal drugs can be seen as a structural injustice and not as an isolated act that causes harm. Evil intent, the last feature, is hard to prove or disprove. From research among drugs users, Trimbos Instituut (Goossens, De Kort, Van Gelder, 2019) found that about 80% is aware of the criminal activity that happens within drugs trade. But using drugs has also an advantage for the users themselves, they buy drugs to have a good time at a party. I would argue that this means that people might ignore the possible consequences their drugs use has, but not that they buy drugs out of an evil intent to harm other people that are connected to drugs trade. In conclusion, although the relation between the buyers and the other actors is not inherently unequal, I would argue that the consequences of buying illegal drugs can be seen as a structural injustice, especially because the social system in which it takes place is so embedded within Dutch (nightlife) culture.

Secondly, this section will try to answer whether a boycott can be seen as a cosmopolitan ethos-based response to structural injustice. Among many other examples, Heilinger argues that one example of responsibility based on a cosmopolitan ethos is 'abstaining from buying or consuming certain products and discussing about it' (Heilinger, 2021). This would imply a solution for the tendency in Young's

theory between backward-looking responsibility and forward-looking responsibility. Within Young's theory, withdrawing from the structure seemed as a too easy way to tackle structural injustice, Heilinger argues that only abstaining from buying certain products is not enough, but that it is also necessary to discuss about it. In the case of ecstasy, this would mean that just quit buying it is not enough to fulfill the moral obligation one has for the other actors. I have to point out that Heilinger is quite unclear in the exact meaning of an 'ethos' especially when he gives the examples of possible actions. There are so many examples of what an ethos implies, that it is hard to come to a clear answer on how people 'should act' and how they should carry out their responsibilities. I would argue that it is hard to give a concrete answer to the question whether people who buy drugs indeed do have a responsibility for the harms that occur in the process of producing and selling the drugs. Especially because Heilinger's theory is so broad that it would be possible to argue that people can never do enough, so that the 'cocaine yogi's' discussed in the section before, are trying their best to have a cosmopolitan ethos during most of the times and can be excused that in their weekends they let go of this ethos by using drugs. But I would argue that when deciding to boycott drugs, Heilinger's argument that a person need not only to act morally just but also think and talk fits well in this case, especially compared to Young's theory. The idea that just quitting is not enough to help solving structure injustice is in my opinion an argument for Heilinger's theory.

### Buycotts – secondhand clothing

A buycott means consciously buying a certain product or only products from a certain brand. Think of only buying fair trade chocolate because you think that farmers involved in the production process should get a fair price for their work and their cacao. Buycotts are often related to boycotts: only buying fair trade chocolate implies a boycott of chocolate that does not have the fair-trade label. Therefore, I use the example of buying secondhand clothes as an example of a buycott. Buying 'as much as possible' second hand, does not imply that new clothes are completely boycotted. It is also possible to only buy certain clothes second handed, but things like underwear or sport clothing new.

In April 2013, the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed which caused the death of at least 1132 people (International Labour Organization, n.d.). This is seen as one of the world's worst industrial disasters. This disaster caused many media attention not only for the poor working conditions in clothing factory, but also for the role of consumers who want to buy their clothes as cheap as possible (Clothes Campaign, n.d.). According to Nathan Fitch (2014), this disaster forces us to ask an uncomfortable question about how the collapsing of the Rana Plaza relates to our own lives. Although there are many other examples of harms caused by the fashion industry, mostly due to the climatic impact of the production of clothes, this section will only focus on the consequences for workers in sweatshops.

### Buycotts & collective responsibility

At first sight, it seems that connecting collective responsibility to buycotts will face the same issues discussed before, where it was hard to identify a collective in the case of boycotting illegal drugs. Can all consumers together form a collective? This section focusses on the fashion industry, and I would argue that in that case, there is a way to see buyers of clothes as a collective. The buyers do not have an organizational structure, or rules that need to be followed to become a member of the group. Which means that it is not a structured group according to Miller's definition. But in my point of view, there are some cases in which buyers of clothes can be seen as an unstructured group. According to Miller (2020), an unstructured group is a group that has no formal organization but can still be called

a group, often due to an external event. Miller uses the example of people seeing a house burning and form a group that tries to save a child. I would argue that the Rana Plaza disaster can be seen as an external event that makes people 'watching' a group. Although in Miller's argument the house burning is a more direct way of watching it burn in real life, I think that nowadays with the many possibilities social media provides us to see live footage and read personal stories of people who were there, this can be seen as an external event that made people watching a collective.

It may be hard to argue that *all* people who have seen the footage form a collective. Therefore, I would argue that a distinction should be made between who were watching based on their connection with the disaster. Young states in her theory of political responsibility that it seems a bit unfair to also hold the workers in sweatshops responsible for their own harm, just because they are also part of the structure behind the fashion industry (Young, 2004). In this case the same difficulty rises when also the workers themselves are part of the collective because they are watching the collapsing of their factory. Not when it is about the concrete disaster and about helping saving lives and extinguishing the fire, but when it is about the structural injustice behind the clothing industry. Therefore, I argue that people who have bought clothes brands that used the Rana Plaza factory to produce their clothes and who have watched the footage, are part of the collective that might be held responsible. This means that the collective exists of people who bought products from brands like Benetton, Mango and Primark and saw the footage of Rana Plaza.

Because the group of people who have watched the footage of the Rana Plaza and who have bought clothes of brands that use that factory to produce their products is so diverse, I argue that it is hard to ascribe a non-distributive account of responsibility to it. The group has no common organization, no (unwritten) rules and the members of the group do not even know each other. Ascribing non-distributive responsibility to such a loose bound group faces the problem described by Miller that that would mean that supra-human powers are ascribed to a collective that has no form of organization. The joint moral responsibility account of Miller does also not apply to this case, because people do not buy their clothes with the belief that others do too, or with the idea to contribute to a bigger goal. Therefore, I argue that only a distributive account of responsibility can be ascribed to the members of the collective. This means that in this case, collective responsibility means that it is an aggregate of individual responsibilities. Because every product is produced in more or less the same way, in my point of view every person can be held responsible for the harm that his/her T-shirt has caused. The problem of the distributive account is according to Miller that individuals can never be held fully responsible for certain actions performed by a collective. I would argue that this concern does not apply to a distributive account of collective responsibility. Every individual action contributes to a bigger problem, but there is no collective goal behind it. Although the collapsing of the Rana Plaza building is such a big disaster that it is difficult to ascribe responsibility for, the responsibility for the whole fashion industry behind it can be ascribed to all individual buyers of clothes because every piece of clothes contributes to that industry.

### *Boycotts & political responsibility*

Young's theory of political responsibility is based on the fashion industry and the relation with the poor working conditions in sweatshops. Young argues that consumers do bear responsibility for the poor working conditions in those sweatshops, based on the argument that it is a structure people are a part of. This means that the remainder of this section will only dive into the question whether a boycott would be a correct response according to Young's theory.

When linking boycotting second hand clothes to political responsibility, at first sight it seems as if this faces the same problems when linking political responsibility to boycotting illegal drugs. Boycotting



second hand clothes implies that a person withdraws him/herself from the structure of the clothing industry and therefore escapes from having moral obligations regarding the other actors. But in my opinion, boycotting in this case does not inherently mean boycotting. Regarding clothing, people buy clothes from a many different brands. Buying a T-shirt of Adidas does not mean that one cannot buy Nike shoes. Therefore, boycotting second hand clothes does not necessarily mean that a person is not part of the structure of the fashion industry anymore. It can mean that people try to buy as much as possible second hand, or only certain things. I can imagine for example that buying underwear second hand is not very desirable. I argue that boycotting second hand clothes can be seen as a way of taking political responsibility, because people try to challenge a background from within the structure.

### *Boycotts & cosmopolitan responsibility*

Heilinger's first character of a structural injustice is that there should be an unequal relation between people. In the case of the fashion industry, I would argue that there is an unequal relation between the consumers and the producers of clothes. Consumers want to buy their clothes as cheap as possible, which means that the costs of the production process should be as low as possible. This implies among other things that workers in sweatshop get a very low wage for their work, and that the factory owners cut down on the costs of maintenance of the factory. This relation is unequal because while the consumers do not have to pay a fair price for their clothes, the workers in the sweatshops depend on their job and do not have the possibility to change their circumstances. According to Heilinger, this would be an example of exploitation. Secondly, the injustice of the fashion industry cannot be seen as an individual act but as an unfair structure. It is a system in which people are used to be able to pay low prices for their clothes. Finally, people do not have an evil intent to harm others, but they operate within a system of which they are not always aware of the implications it might have for other people. And the same applies with the purchase of illegal drugs, people gain something, in this case new clothes, which implies that there is no intent just to harm the factory workers. In conclusion would Heilinger state that the harms behind the fashion industry can be seen as a structural injustice. Because Heilinger's main point is that people do have moral obligations to all other citizens, I would argue that from the cosmopolitan responsibility point of view consumers do bear responsibility for the harms that occur within the fashion industry.

I would also argue that boycotting second hand clothing can be seen as a form of a cosmopolitan ethos. Boycotting second hand clothing means that a person has to think about what kind of fashion does not have an impact on the lives of other citizens and act on it by visiting second hand shops, or buy second hand clothes via platforms as Vinted. Although boycotting second hand clothes does not inherently mean that it is besides thinking and acting also talking about it, I think that in this case acting on it also implies talking about it. A person's clothes are seen as such a big part of someone's identity that it is unavoidable to talk about it at some point. It is a very common situation to get a compliment for a certain piece of clothes, or get the question where it was bought. This opens the conversation about second hand clothing and would therefore be part of the cosmopolitan ethos Heilinger argues for.

### *Discursive political consumerism – influencers*

Discursive political consumerism, revealing the background of products, might be a bit of a misfit compared to the other three forms of political consumerism. While boycotts, boycotts and lifestyle political consumerism are about changing consumer behavior, the main point of discursive political consumerism is that a person needs to actively perform a certain action. In theory could all people perform discursive political consumerism, but I would argue that in order to have a successful discursive political action, people need to have some form of power or influence. Therefore, this

section focusses on the responsibility of influencers who have often many followers on different social media platforms and use that reach to earn money by advertising for all kinds of brands. This section discusses the question how responsibility theory would apply to people who would have the possibility to do discursive political consumerism.

The word influencer used to be used as a term to refer to inspiring people in a person's personal life, think of a parent, a teacher or even a popstar (Morgan, 2018). Nowadays, an influencer is a celebrity or online personality that stimulates people to buy certain products (Morgan, 2018). Often, influencers get money from brands to advertise their products. Denisova (2021) addresses the issues of the fashion industry and the consequences for the climate by stating that influencers are in the strong position to advocate a more sustainable way of shopping. The following of this section will discuss how the power of influencers fits within responsibility theory.

#### *Discursive political consumerism & collective responsibility*

At first sight it might seem that influencers have in common that they all have the same profession, and therefore they could be called a group or collective. But being an influencer is a solely job, they do not share an office, or an organization. Sometimes influencers are connected to an agency, which they share with other influencers, but I would argue that that is not enough to be able to consider influencers as a collective. Not as a structured collective, but also not as an unstructured collective: there is not shared place and/or time based on which all influencers can be considered as a group. Therefore, ascribing collective responsibility to influencers is not possible.

#### *Discursive political consumerism & political responsibility*

Denisova (2021) argues that influencers help maintaining a system that encourages people to buy clothes while change is needed in our consumer behavior in order to prevent climatic change due to the fashion industry. The idea that influencers have the power to motivate people to buy certain things, and by that help the fashion industry making money suggests that influencers are not only part of the system but they shape the system. Young states that everyone who is part of a structure has moral obligations regarding other actors that are part of that structure. Influencers are part of the structure behind, in this case, the fashion industry and would therefore have moral obligations to other people that are part of that structure.

However, Young does not make a distinction between the power of actors within the structure, or the role they play in maintaining the system. She mentions that it is hard to ascribe responsibility to the workers who are a victim of poor working conditions for their own harm (Young, 2004), but she does not discuss the role of people with more power than others within a structure.

While I argue that to perform actions that can be seen as forms of discursive political consumerism, people need to have some power or some influence to reach others, and therefore influencers would be in the right position to do so, this does not fit within Young's political responsibility because this theory does not differentiate between people with more or less power within a structure. Therefore, it is hard to ascribe responsibility to influencers for the injustices within structures like the fashion industry, other than the responsibilities regular consumers would have. This also implies that discursive political consumerism cannot be considered as a way to take responsibility for structural global injustices.



### *Discursive political consumerism & cosmopolitan responsibility*

While Young ignores the differences in power between actors within a structure, Heilinger's main question is how advantaged individual agents, ordinary persons as well as *those in positions of particular influence* bear responsibility to tackle the wrong of GSI from their own individual perspective. However, while Heilinger addresses people in positions of particular influence in his main question, he does not specify his answer to people in positions of particular influence. This implies that his theory that people need a cosmopolitan ethos in response to GSI also applies to people in a powerful position as it does to regular citizens, and to influencers in this case.

However, I would argue that it is hard to apply Heilinger's theory of a cosmopolitan ethos to influencers. As discussed before, the term influencer refers to people making money by advertising for brands. When influencers would change their ethos and stop advertising, this would mean that they are not influencers anymore. They would be activists that use their platform to motivate people to make different choices. It could be argued that influencers could make different choices in the brands they advertise for. But according to Dinisova (2021), this often leads to 'greenwashing' of brands that are not ethical but use certain products to change their image to a more sustainable one. Also, it can be questioned if advertising a certain product can be seen as 'revealing the politics behind a product' and thus as discursive political consumerism.

### *Lifestyle political consumerism – minimalism*

As discussed earlier, the last form of political consumerism is 'lifestyle political consumerism'. This means that people change their lifestyle practices out of societal concerns. It can involve boycotts or buycotts, but it goes further than just that. For example not eating a certain type of meat because you know that those animals were not treated well is just a boycott. But deciding to stop eating meat at all and become a vegetarian is a form of lifestyle political consumerism. It changes important patterns in a person's life. This section will discuss minimalism as a form of lifestyle political consumerism and the implications it might have for the question whether people have the responsibility to change their lifestyle.

Minimalism can be defined as a lifestyle that is characterized by 'anti-consumerist attitudes and behaviors, including a conscious decision to live with fewer possessions (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020). This means that people try to avoid excessive consumption. Minimalism rejects the ideas of maximizing consumption and argues that we live in a world of 'too much' (Meissner, 2019). It is often seen as a way to help solving climate change or other related ecological problems. This is called pro-ecological behavior (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020). Besides that, there is another reason for people to adopt a minimalistic lifestyle, which is that it is seen as a way to live a happier, more meaningful life (Lloyd & Pennington). Since the past twenty years, minimalism has grown in popularity due to increased awareness for climate change (Meissner, 2019). Meissner sees a growth in critiques on people's individual lifestyle on micro-level and she sees a growth in the 'minimalistic lifestyle narratives' such as blogs, books and documentaries about minimalism.

### *Minimalism & collective responsibility*

In searching how minimalism would fit in collective responsibility, it is first important to determine what kind of collective we are talking about. In my opinion, there is a difference between the people with the possibility to start living a minimalistic life, which are almost all consumers, and people who

are already living a (partly) minimalistic life. The first group is hard to determine as a collective, it is a broad group that has no formal organization, but also not a shared event to be able to be identified as an unstructured group. But people who already do live a minimalist life can in my view sometimes be seen as a collective. For example, the 'van life community' consists of people who sold their house and most of their stuff and decided instead to live in a van and travel the world (Bowles, 2020). They share their stories, experiences and tips in blogs and books. They share certain norms and values about their way of living. Therefore, I would argue that they can be seen as a conglomerate according to French (2020). They share an identity and a normative view on the world, at least for the period of their travelling.

The difference between 'regular' consumers that would have the possibility to live a minimalist life, and the people who already do so, causes an issue when ascribing responsibility. Regular consumers cannot be seen as a collective, so there is no point in trying to ascribe collective responsibility to them. But ascribing responsibility to minimalists, who do form a collective, seems in my opinion a bit odd because they already changed their lifestyle by trying to live a minimalistic life. Therefore, I argue that ascribing collective responsibility in relation to a minimalistic lifestyle is not possible.

#### *Minimalism & political responsibility*

Lifestyle political consumerism implies that people try to adjust their whole lifestyle by trying to consume as less as possible and to produce as less waste as possible. This means that people change many of habits on many different fronts. Think of producing your own vegetables, not living in a big house with a lot of furniture and buying as less clothes as possible. Within Young's theory of bearing responsibility regarding other actors that are part of the same structure, this means that people change their habits within a lot of different structures: within the food-chain and within the clothing industry for example. I could be argued that minimalism is a too broad concept for Young's theory of political responsibility, but when looked at the different aspects of a minimalistic lifestyle, I think Young's theory could apply. Especially when looking at the five main differences Young describes between the liability model of responsibility and political responsibility, I would argue that minimalism fits within Young's ideas. Minimalism is forward-looking: it changes behavior to 'do better' in the future. It also challenges the background itself: people challenge the nowadays focus on consuming and the capitalist idea of making and spending money, and therefore they try to find another way of living.

The downside of applying Young's theory to minimalism is that there is a fine line between bearing responsibility for other actors in a structure, and withdrawing oneself from that same structure and by that escaping from any responsibility. As discussed in the section about political responsibility and boycotting drugs, boycotting cannot be seen as a form of political responsibility. In this case, I would argue that some parts of the minimalistic lifestyle cannot be seen as political responsibility because it is still a form of withdrawing from a structure. As Micheletti (2003) argues, boycotts can be part of lifestyle political consumerism. This means that Young's theory would not apply to that part. But other parts, think of changing eating habits, can be seen as a way of bearing responsibility for actors in the food-chain without completely withdrawing oneself from that structure by not eating at all.

#### *Minimalism & cosmopolitan responsibility*

Heilinger's idea that we all have moral obligations to all other people because we are all world citizens that live in the same global order, seems applicable to minimalism as a form of lifestyle political consumerism. Where the previous section showed a discrepancy in the application of Young's theory because minimalism means changing habits within many different structures, cosmopolitan responsibility seems applicable to lifestyle political consumerism because it argues that people need

to have a cosmopolitan ethos, which means that they should act, think and talk according to certain norms and values. Changing a whole lifestyle is a way of changing one's ethos: it is not just an isolated action but a whole set of different habits.

Because minimalism is seen as a trend that can have different meanings and that can emerge in different forms, it can be argued that it is not about just changing behavior. It is also about talking about it, inspiring others to do the same and sharing experiences. This connects with Heilinger's idea that people should take responsibility not by just isolated actions but by changing a way of living.

## Conclusion

This chapter will first give a summary and conclusion for every form of political consumerism. After that, a general conclusion will be given in which I will return to the research question presented in the introduction.

### *Boycotts*

By using the example of boycotting drugs, this thesis has tried to look at the relationship between boycotts and responsibility theory. Because it is hard to argue that all buyers of illegal drugs form a collective, ascribing collective responsibility to consumers for the consequences of illegal drugs use is not possible. Although there are a lot of different forms of boycotting, I think that in most of the cases, identifying a collective, structured or unstructured, is hard in the case of individual consumers.

Young's political responsibility does apply on the case of illegal drugs, because in The Netherlands the use of drugs can be seen as a system or structure embedded in the culture. The toleration of drugs use by the government has caused a normalization of using illegal drugs. This means that according to Young, the illegal drugs users do bear responsibility for the consequences of their drugs use, because they operate within a system. However, it can be questioned if according to Young a boycott is the right answer to a structural injustice. Boycotting means withdrawing oneself from a structure which would excuse a person for having moral obligations towards others. Therefore, from a political responsibility view, boycotting is not the right way to respond to structural injustices. Based on that, I would argue that people do not have the responsibility to boycott certain products when the purchase of it causes injustices.

Finally, Heilinger's cosmopolitan responsibility was applied to this case. Because using illegal drugs is tolerated and by that normalized in The Netherlands, it has caused a social system in which people who do drugs are not seen as acting differently from the existing norms and values. This combined with the harms occurring in the network surrounding illegal drugs trade, makes that according to Heilinger, the harms caused by illegal drugs can be seen as structural injustices. Applying Heilinger's ideas of a response to this structural injustices is a bit more difficult. Heilinger argues that people need a 'cosmopolitan ethos' in order to solve structural injustices. But this ethos implies so many changes in a person's life that it is not possible to act completely according to this ethos. Heilinger himself also admits that it is not possible to act completely morally right. I would argue that although boycotting illegal drugs is a form of a cosmopolitan ethos, Heilinger's theory leaves some space for the 'cocaine yogi's' that do most of the time what's right for the planet, but regarding drugs they let loose of their beliefs.

In sum, both Young's and Heilinger's theory imply that people do bear responsibility for the consequences of their drugs use. But according to both theories, it is hard to argue that a boycott is the right answer to structural injustices.

### *Buycotts*

While boycotting means consciously not buying certain products or products from a certain brand, buycotting is the opposite. This thesis has used the example of buying second hand clothing to examine the relationship between buycotting and responsibility. Although collective responsibility is

hard to apply to individual consumers, I have argued that Miller's account of an unstructured group could apply to consumers when there is an external event, in this case the collapsing of the Rana Plaza building. This makes people watching, either live or online, a member of a collective, only if they are also related to the disaster by having clothes that were produced over there. However, ascribing responsibility to members of an unstructured group is difficult because there is not even the slightest form of organizations or rules that bind the collective. Therefore, I argue that only the distributive account can ascribe responsibility to individuals for the consequences of their consumption. Two things are important to take into account. First, there is definitely not in all cases an external event that makes a group of consumers a collective, so collective responsibility theory does not always apply. Second, collective responsibility theory does not discuss how individuals should act when they bear responsibility. So it cannot be argued whether a boycott is the right response.

According to the theory of political responsibility, people do bear responsibility for the harms occurring in the fashion industry. Consumers are part of the structure by buying clothes that were produced under poor working conditions, and therefore have moral obligations regarding the workers that are also part of that structure. I argued that boycotting would fit within Young's idea of taking responsibility for those harms, because it does not necessarily mean that individuals withdraw themselves from the structure.

Also within Heilinger's theory of cosmopolitan responsibility, individual consumers would bear responsibility for the poor working conditions in the sweatshops. The workers in the sweatshops are members of the same world order, and therefore we do have to treat them equally. The harms occurring to them can be considered as a global structural injustice, when taking into account Heilinger's three main features. I argued that boycotting can be a part of a cosmopolitan ethos, especially because it is not only an action, but it is also a way of thinking and talking about it.

### *Discursive political consumerism*

In comparison to the other three forms of political consumerism, discursive political consumerism is a different take on taking responsibility for injustices. It does not require a change of behavior, but undertaking a certain action. Because in my point of view, people need a form of power to be able to succeed in revealing the politics of a product and reach many people, I used the case of the responsibility of influencers. Because influencers work solely, it is hard to ascribe a form of collective responsibility to them.

Although political theory seems a perfect fit with the responsibility of influencers, Young does not differentiate between people that are member of a structure and the responsibility that membership contains. She does not discuss the different forms of power or opportunities people have to change a certain structure. Therefore, it cannot be stated that according to political responsibility influencers have any moral obligations regarding other actors in a structure besides the obligations that every actor has.

Heilinger does mention people in a powerful position in his question whether people bear responsibility for global structural injustices. But, he does not specify his cosmopolitan ethos approach to people with more power than others. This implies that his idea of people needing to change their ethos applies to all people, unless the powerful position they might have. I have argued that Heilinger's

theory does not apply to influencers, because changing their ethos would mean that they would change their profession, and thus not be influencers anymore.

### *Lifestyle political consumerism*

By using the example of the recent trend of minimalism, the relation between lifestyle political consumerism and responsibility is discussed. Because in theory all people could change their lifestyle, it is hard to ascribe responsibility to individuals via collective responsibility. There is no way in which all consumers can be regarded as member of a group or collective. Young's political responsibility theory however can ascribe responsibility regarding people who did not change their lifestyle. They are part of a structure that causes injustices, in the case of minimalism by keep buying products. Minimalism can be seen as a way of taking responsibility for that injustices, although I would argue that Young's theory can be difficult to apply to all cases, because when talking about a person's lifestyle means considering many different structures a person is part of. Also, boycotting is often a form of lifestyle political consumerism and I argued before that boycotting is not a way of taking responsibility according to Young's theory. This means that political responsibility could apply to lifestyle political consumerism at some points, but not to all parts of it. Meanwhile I would argue that lifestyle political consumerism is the perfect example of Heilinger's cosmopolitan responsibility. By changing a whole lifestyle, people are taking all possible ways of involvement with structural injustice into account. Minimalism relates to Heilinger's idea of having a cosmopolitan ethos which is more than just an isolated action, it is a new way of living.

Although there are some rare situation in which an external event takes place, I would argue that collective responsibility is not the right theory in order to interpret political consumerism. All people are (possible) consumers, and therefore it is hard to argue that they are a collective that has the possible to bear responsibility. In all four cases, political responsibility could apply, because consuming always implies that there is some structure the consumer is part of. Regarding the research question, this means that individuals do bear responsibility for global structural injustices that are the result of their consuming behavior. However, I argue that this does not always imply that people do need to change their consuming behavior. Especially regarding boycotting, Young's theory would not always apply because it is a way of stop being part of a structure, which does not mean that one takes responsibility to change that structure. Cosmopolitan responsibility seem to apply to all four cases. Heilinger's idea that people bear responsibilities regarding all other citizens makes it a quite easy answer whether people do indeed have those responsibilities in the four cases discussed. However, it should be taken into account that Heilinger's theory is a quite normative theory formulated from his idea that change is needed in order to prevent climate change. Therefore, it is not very remarkable that in all four cases, Heilinger's theory does argue that people do have the responsibility to contribute to solving structural injustices. Whether Heilinger's theory does also imply that people need to change their consumer behavior is not that straight forward. His idea of a cosmopolitan ethos is so broad that it could mean that people need to change their consumer behavior, but at the same time it could also imply that a person can never do enough so that (s)he can be excused from changing consumer behavior when (s)he is already doing other things from the idea of a cosmopolitan ethos. Regarding the research question, I argue that individuals do often have (some) responsibility for global structural injustices, but this does not inherently mean that people need to change there consumer behavior.

## Discussion

This thesis has discussed the relation between political consumerism and responsibility theory. Although at first, it seems as if this topic has more societal relevance: people nowadays on the one hand feel the responsibility to change their individual behavior, but on the other hand there is a lot of debate whether this is indeed the responsibility of individual citizens. However, also scientifically there is a discrepancy between political consumerism and responsibility theory. Political consumerism is described by theorists as a way of *taking* responsibility, but the question whether individuals *do have* the responsibility to change their consumer behavior was unsolved. This thesis has tried to answer that question by using four cases of political consumerism. I have to point out that only discussing four cases may provide a beginning to answering the research question, but in order to come to a more complete answer, more research is needed. Especially regarding the question to what extent my answer is dependent on the context of the cases. Political consumerism can apply to many different kind of boycotts, buycotts, etcetera. Therefore further research could look at different cases and by that explore to what extent *having* the responsibility to change consumer behavior is dependent of context. Besides that, I think also further research is needed in the roots of responsibility theory. This thesis has used collective responsibility, political responsibility and cosmopolitan responsibility to see how responsibility theory would work in the four cases. These are all quite recent theories of responsibility. Further research should taking some older ideas about responsibility into account in order to also test the cases regarding the roots of responsibility theory.

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