

# 'Green Consumption' beyond mainstream economy: A discourse analysis

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## Abstract

In contemporary society, green consumption is a popular concept. The life styles of people and consumption behaviors are moderated in accordance to the 'green ideology'. The process of green consumption can be observed through social behaviors such as preference of bio foods, recycling, reusing, limiting the over consumption and using environmentally friendly transport systems. However, mainstream economic analyses on green consumption argued that consumer behaviors are due to the rational choice of individuality based on utility and self-preferences. The hypothesis of this paper on consumer behavior in green consumption is configured by discourses according to the discourse analysis.

**Keywords:** Green Economy, Green consumption, Consumerism, mainstream economy, Discourse analysis, Hegemony

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary society has become more aware of environmental issues than ever. The multiform concern about the environment spreads to a range of activities and social practices. 'Green consumption' and 'Green Economy' emerged as novel themes in political economy. The green consumption is one major thematic area in the discourse of consumption. Consumers' behaviors, attitudes, marketing strategies,

productions methods and business ethics have been moderated in terms of the 'green consumption'. In recent literature, 'green consumption' is the vital topics of environmental governance and ecological economies. When observing the available literature in green consumption, most of studies analyze the green consumption on the basis of rational consumption as in mainstream economy (Elkington, 1994; Pedersen, 2000; Alfredsson, 2004; Smith, 2010; Abaidoo, 2010). However, some

literature refers to the critical approach to analyze the green consumption (Andrew et al, 2005; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Turner 2010; Mansvelt and Robinson, 2011).

Literatures which theoretically based on the mainstream economic argument focuses the green consumption and consumer behavior in the glance of the rational choice theory. Consumers are identified in the mainstream economy as a rational individual based on the logic of consumption as rational decision making process. Milton Friedman (1957) explains that the consumption depends on the individuals' preferences and restrictions which are based on the assumption that each individual at every time is achieving the best option from their selection (Friedman, 1957). Reto Foellmi (2005) denotes that economic activities such as production and consumption, finally, decide on the individual needs and individual desires (Foellmi, 2005). The rational choice theory presumes that choices of buyers and sellers in market are configured by particular assumptions: consumers are aware of a set of alternative choices which can be easily moved between those preferences, consumers are independently without any exterior influence about their choices and responsive to utility function which refers the marginal utility that the marginal utility is gradually decreasing in order to consumption (Green, 2002). Mark Irving Lichbach by examining in ontology of rational choice theory explains that social outcomes are the unintended consequences of intentional human action which are driven through invisible hand of rationality. Moreover, in the anatomization of institutions and formation as society or economy, rationalistic ontology is that patterns of individual behavior on rational choice design the institutions (Lichbach, 2003). The ontology of rational choice theory is critically questioned in discourse theory.

The discourse analysis examines that consumption is also a social construction of identities by reflective discourse practices (Fairclough et al., 1997). The consumption is a divergence subject that is oriented in terms of the positional characteristics which are given by discourses. A rational person who is independence from the structure as in realist theory is refused by the structuralisms and post structuralism. Especially, the position of the post structuralism argument is that no coherent subject as well as no coherent structure exist (Wullweber and Scherrer, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the base line argument in mainstream economic that is rational individual consumer in consumption process. This study is scrutinized the green consumption as the case study by applying discourse analysis. In that analysis, it will address the research questions: "how consumers can name into nomenclature as rational individual?", "Is it green consumption a normative configuration of individual behavior?" This paper is organized as follows: the first section is dedicated to briefly examining the existing literature on green consumption. Under the theoretical framework, the second section with three subsections will present the basis of the argument by illustrating main analytical tools and logics in discourse analysis, mainly focussing on innovative contributions into discourse theory by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The discourse analysis of green consumption with critical examination of mainstream economic arguments is analyzed in the third section. The research paper concludes with a brief summary of the findings.

### 1.1 Green consumption and consumer behavior: mainstream economic argument

Green consumption has been defined with reference to the natural science phenomenon. E.C Alfredsson (2004) explains that green consumption relevance to the scientific indication which is energy usage and CO<sub>2</sub> emission. The green consumption spreads over the institutional arrangements to individual behavioral changes. Alfredsson identify four categories in the definition of green consumption. Travel, housing and food are considered the first three categories. In the fourth category called 'green scenario' is included above three categories (Alfredsson, 2004). These categories illustrate the framework of environmental friendly behavior of consumer. For instance, the 'green diet' concept, one of key theme for CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction, is promoted by Scandinavia countries as major policy implementation on national level for training environmental friendly consumers (Alfredsson, 2004). The organic farm production and bio-food consumption, and CO<sub>2</sub> emission low energy usage are illustrious consumption patterns in 'green consumption' (Pedersen, 2000).

Within the last thirty years, the concern on market and economy has dramatically changed. Ken Peattie and Martin Charter (1992) show the transformation of market outlook from 1970s to 1990s. In 1970s, there was the concern about environmental issues on the emphasis as 'environmental problems on market' with focus of local problems such as pollution. Also, the connectivity between environment and business was negative effects. After 1990s, the paradigm was changed into 'green' with boarder systematical issues such as politics, economic and legal with focus on global scale. The interrelationship between the economy, society and the environment is

designed market oriented patter in environmental protection through concept of 'green'. Moreover, Peattie and Charter allude that this transformation is a reason to change the key concepts in marketing concept with new products styles (bio products), sustainable market concept and eco-friendly auditing system (Peattie and Charter, 1992). Primarily based on the John Elkington and Julia Hailes's 'the Green Consumer Guide' (1988), the green consumerism is defined as follow:

"[the].....use of individual consumer power to promote less environmentally damaging consumption, while still satisfying consumer wants and needs" (Charter et al., 2002:10).

In other words, this quotation indicates that green consumption rely on individual consumer behaviors' on the rational decision.

The existing literatures on green consumption and consumerism approximately signify the individual consumer and social value which indicate altruism on environment in the policy framework. To John Connolly and Andrea Prothero (2008), environmentally friendly normative characteristic as the momentums in the consumer culture impacts on the environmental and economic reform in the western societies and supra-national bodies such as European Union. The concept Consumer voluntary engagement in consumer practices is identified as the core of in marketing system adjustment, academic reorientation on green consumption and political decision making mechanism (Connolly and Prothero, 2008). The main argument of the study traces out that green consumption as the continuation of green subjectivity which emphasizes the individual responsibility on environmental risk through individualization (Connolly and Prothero, 2008). If Connolly and Prothero mention about the political, social and cultural condition

which would be impact on 'green' consumer practices, based on the theories of reflective modernization, the conclusion of the argument underlines the importance of individual behavior and their norms of environmental protection and preservation which are inbuilt self consciousness (Connolly and Prothero 2008:128- 142). They assume that individual responsibilities which are examined through case studies are the real for people.

Rexford Abaidoo (2010) on his study refers to the 'go green' and rational electric consumer that indicates the adoption of process describes that consumption pattern moderation is regarding on the environmental friendly energy usage (Abaidoo, 2010). The main hypothesis is that consumers are always rational individuals who consume goods and services in order to fulfill their preferences (Abaidoo, 2010). The 'green' electric energy consumers are willing to pay for green source energy on the rationality of transitive preferences and maximization of utility. The failure of the system which cannot participate in consumers into green consumption of electricity is the lacuna of government policies. The structural adjustment of the macro economy would proceed with respect to the rational individual consumer. Just as, in reference to the electric consumption, Lene H. Pedersen describes that the behavior of consumers in green consumption based on certain social norms on energy conservation (Pedersen, 2000).

Andrew Glig et al. (2005) analyze the dichotomy of green consumption and sustainable consumption with a focus on a 'new life style' of consumers that adapt new purchasing styles. Especially, this analysis mentions the relation of language and social behavior of consumers in the transformation of 'green' to 'sustainability' (Andrew et al., 2005). In the

analytical part, by using this finding, authors connect the characteristic of individual consumer behavior with green consumption.

### **1.2 Discourse and Discourse analysis: theoretical framework**

Discourse analysis is considered as a prominent approach in post structuralism. Generally, discourse analysis is a frequent application in linguistic analyses which have been utilized to analyze the activities and subject matters in diverse linguistic disciplines such as sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic with different phases of discourse (Brown and Yule, 1991). Some scholars apply discourse analysis as a research tool in political, economic and sociological studies (Hastings, 2000; Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Burgos, 2000).

Barbara Johnstone (2002) explains why it is called discourse analysis rather than saying "discourseology" or "discourse criticism" or "discourseography". For clarifying this fundamental question, Johnstone ascribes the chemical analysis that highlights two important characteristics. Firstly, discourse analysis is a methodology that examines the explicit way. Secondly, discourse analysis based on inquiring a particular research question. Furthermore, in the explanation on different between linguistic and other discourse analysis, Johnstone points out that linguistic discourse analysis refers to the language structure, change and acquisitions. Critical Interdisciplinary research questions are the main methodology with questioning the social roles and relations, communications, identity and power relations in other discourse analysis. (Johnstone, 2002). David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis (2000) portray discourse analysis as the practice of analyzing empirical raw material and information as discursive forms. For this analysis, linguistic and non-linguistic elements are considered

(Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Philip Macnaghten (1993) alludes that discourse analysis is the process of disentanglement of the discourses which is constituted the socially constructive or constructed nature of reality by discourses (Macnaghten, 1993). In referring Laclau and Mouffe, discourse analysis is the mapping out the discourses through four basic analytical tools and logics of discourse theory.

### 1.2.1 Four basic analytical tools

In concept of identity of discourse analysis, Laclau and Mouffe's arguments are centered on four basic analytical tools. They are *elements*, *articulation*, *moments*, and *nodal points*. Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, (1985) define *articulation* as any practice which constitutes a relation among elements. This *articulation* causes to modify the identity of elements (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In other words, all identities are originated by the articulation or re articulation of signifying elements (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). On that rationality, discourse is defined as the structured totality of articulatory practices (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The intention is to indicate that discourse is not a practice intrinsically. The practices consist in a discursive setting rather than determine detaching from discourses (Andersen, 2003).

The *elements* are not discursively articulated. On the other hand, elements are called as floating signifiers which cannot articulate completely into discursive field (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The different positions which articulated in discourse are named as *moments*. Here, all signs in a discourse are called as *moments* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The meanings of *moments* are dissimilar from one another in accordance to 'positional differences'. Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips (2002) argue that the meaning of signs as

moments is decided upon the relation to other signs within discourse (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In the articulated discursive totality, '*elements* has been reduced to a moments of that totality' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). However, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the transformation of *elements* to *moments* is never accomplished completely. They explained this incapability by applying the tool *nodal points* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In referring the Jacques Derrida's view, Niels Andersen (2003) explains that every discourse has a point of reference or center of discourse that originate the positional meaning for signs as moments. This center is constantly within discourse. Laclau and Mouffe explain Derrida's idea moreover through the idea of *nodal points*. The *nodal point* is contained in the practice of articulation (Andersen, 2003). The nodal point is a privileged sign which other signs are ordered and gained meanings (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The discourse is constituted thorough this partially fixed of meaning circumference to nodal points (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). The certain nodal point in particular discursive field is impact on conversion elements into internal moments of different context (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). These analytical tools of discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe assist to analyze discourses.

### 1.2.2 Logics of discourse analysis

Laclau and Mouffe have differentiated the 'discourse' and the 'field of discursivity'. As mentioned above, discourse indicates the partial fixation of meaning. The field of discursivity means the surplus of meaning of articulated practices which are exterior to the considered discourse. Simply, all potentialities of meaning of objects which are ejected out from discourse belong to the 'field of discursivity'. This exclusion from a particular discourse is concerning to construct a 'unified system of meaning' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). For

instance, the 'bus' as an object belongs to the field of discursivity in 'literacy discourse'. The term 'order of discourse' illustrates a social space that emerges when different discourses in same realm attempt to constitute or establish the meaning. This term refers the area of discursive conflict. Laclau and Mouffe's applications of '*hegemony*' and '*antagonism*' in the discourse theory represent this area of discursive conflict – 'order of discourse' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The '*hegemony*' refers in the discourse theory the closure of the conflict through a disarticulation of the frontiers between discourses. The term '*antagonism*' in Laclau and Mouffe's analysis denotes '*the open conflict between the different discourses in a particular order of discourse*' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is the process of establishing the existence of predominance by the social class through expanding their political, intellectual, economic control and moral view through 'culture' and 'common sense' over whole society (Jacobitti 1980:66). Laclau and Mouffe advance the Gramsci's concept of hegemony by deconstructing the essentialist assumptions such as class based analysis towards dynamic of articulation (Sutherland, 2005). Laclau and Mouffe critically examine the Gramscian implication '*historic bloc*' through *historico-discursive formation* and the capability of entire articulation through widening hegemony in a field of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Laclau and Mouffe define the '*historic bloc*' as the hegemonic formation which indicates 'a social and political space relatively unified through nodal points and *tendentially* relational identities' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Joscha Wullweber and Christoph Scherrer (2010) explain that hegemony is a social relationship and also, an expanding

discourse by excluding of competing discursive elements (Wullweber and Scherrer, 2010). Laclau and Mouffe applied the concept of hegemony to figure out the political constitution of the social. The ontological assumption of their discourse theory is that the obtaining meanings are only within a specific discourse thorough articulation of elements into moments. Thus, the acquiring of a hegemonic position in the course of the articulation is the purpose of the discourses (Beverungen 2006). Thus, Laclau and Mouffe analyze the hegemonic practice in the general field of *articulatory* practices. The hegemonic articulation should achieve a considerable *articulatory* moment thorough confronting the antagonistic *articulatory* practices. Hence, the hegemonic articulation confronts antagonisms which presume the phenomena of equivalence and effect of frontiers that divide antagonistic forces. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe identify the occurrence of antagonistic forces and instability of the frontiers as two conditions for hegemonic articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). These two areas explain the hegemonic practices in the logic of hegemony (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000).

The subjects have different identities in the same social domain whereas those are not opposite each other (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Jørgensen and Phillips argues that when it happen antagonism of identities, individual discourses excluded each of them for partially fixity of meaning as the position of contingency noticeable (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Moreover, in refereeing to Laclau and Mouffe, '*hegemonic intervention*' as the process that befall in antagonistic terrain articulate the uncertainly of meaning through applying forces, antagonism will absorb (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Under those circumstances, it is clearly explained that hegemonic intervention captures the fixation of elements in

moments by break up antagonistic relations. However, if discourse and hegemony is equal in terms of the fixation of elements of moments, noticeably, the difference between discourse and hegemony is optimal, because the fixation of meaning constitutes across discourses by colliding antagonistic relations. However, it is considered that to be successful hegemonic intervention, one discourse would dominate though dissolving antagonism (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In reference to Laclau and Mouffe's example myths and social imaginaries, Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) show that myths are regarded as structural dislocations which construct new spaces of representation through the hegemonic re-articulation of dislocated elements. Thereafter, myths transferred into the social imaginary, in Laclau and Mouffe's term, '*horizon*', when it is neutralizing social dislocations and the social demands (Howarth, and Stavrakakis, 2000). Laclau applied this discourse analysis in his thesis 'Beyond Emancipation' (1992), to examine the concepts of universality which is propagated in Christian eschatology and particularity. The 'universal' has no its own content meaning as a signifier. Thus, its meaning is constructed conversely to the content of '*particular*' in terms of antagonistic relation or hegemonic operation. This is an *empty signifier* (Laclau, 1992). The logic of discursive structuration is advanced through moderating the 'concept of empty signifier' by Laclau. Laclau defines an *empty signifier* as 'a signifier without a signified' (Laclau, 1996). Furthermore, by advancing Saussure's idea of language as system of signifiers, he describes that the empty signifier as absence of totality which is unreachable because of the systemic effects of the unstable compromise between equivalence and differences (Laclau, 1996). Therefore, the meaning of empty signifiers would depend on self interpretation or self understanding of

the context, because of the plurality of significations as result of variability, non-existence or no specific. Thus, the articulation of a discourse should have to occur around an empty signifier as the nodal point. Accordingly, the emptiness of a nodal point is fundamental factor for its 'hegemonic success' (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000).

The logic of equivalence and difference is an explanation of the impact on antagonistic relations to the discursive system. The purpose of the logic equivalence is that construct 'equal identities' which stand against a particular a discursive system (Howarth, and Stavrakakis 2000: 16). Andersen describes that there is positive correlation between the potentiality of compatibility of elements and the articulation of equivalence between elements (Andersen 2003:60). Laclau and Mouffe explain that relation of equivalence avert the closure that mean 'specificity of each position should be dissolved'. Hence, logic of equivalence undermines the disparity of moments by obtaining 'the floating character of an elements'. The context is given a 'second meaning' through logic of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). If it has differential identities for elements, the hegemonic articulation could equalize the positive determinations. The process of equivalence is constructed within a particular discourse. However, Laclau and Mouffe mention the captivating of all positive determination against a specific discursive system not a construction of a 'system of positive differential position' in terms of negative relation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

On contrary to logic of equivalence which is construct the 'antagonistic poles', the logic of difference explains the process which enervate the 'antagonistic polarity'. In other words, logic of differences expand the system of differences by

integrating the 'disarticulated elements into an expanding order' (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Laclau and Mouffe allude that in logic of difference means the 'breaking the system of equivalence' through transforming objective differences by relocating the antagonism in the system (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

### 1.3 The discourse analysis on 'Green consumption'

The significance of the term 'green' is determined by the particular social context which creates and uses it. Yannis Stavrakakis (1997) argues that the 'Green ideology is the certain political project which origin in the Western politics. In reference to R. Eckersly (1992), Stavrakakis reports that the 'Green' symbolizes the new political force which opposes technocratic environmentalism that is the reliance on technology alone to address environmental degradation (Stavrakakis, 1997). John Dryzek (1997) demonstrates the environmental discourses as the deliberation of environmental policies and politics (Dryzek, 1997). Since 1970s, environmental activists turned more towards the radical sides of the environmental movements. The foundation of the 'Greenpeace movements' in 1971 was the anti-nuclear policy of the USA which was formed by a small group of activist (Greenpeace, 2011). In the context, it is clear that the 'green' is a socially constructed meaning rather than a neutral signification.

The term 'green' can also be analyzed as an empty signifier. The absence of totality in the discourse is due the equivalences and differences causing a systemic effect of uncertainty. Therefore, because of the lack of clarity and the widespread use of the term, the given meanings for 'green' are different from context to context. For example, political parties bestow the 'green' as title to the party names such as 'green party' (many countries in the Europe) or 'green democrats (Hungary).

With reference to the Carolyn Merchant study on the Green Politics (1992), Stavrakakis explains clearly that Green Parties agendas and manifestations are concerned more with grassroots democracy, social justice, non-violence, decentralization, community based economies than actual environmental topics (Stavrakakis, 1997).

There was 'order of discourse' before 1980s that refers to the social space between the green discourse and the discourse of consumption. These different discourses in the same realm attempt to constitute or establish the meaning in late 1980s. An important factor is the merging of the two discourses; green discourse and discourse of consumption. Rita Turner (2010) notes 'green' as the as the components of the discourse of consumption (Turner, 2010). In late 1980s, it was observed, in the ideology of green converts as the '*privileged empty signifier*' or the *nodal point* of the discourse of consumption. Sandy Irvine (1989) indicates that if habits of buying green foods have been a long term tradition, the green consumption was popularized after the British company 'the Body Shop' won the award as 'Company of the year 1987' (Irvine, 1989). This commercial attention on the unpopular social practice was the triggering point of the start of green consumption.

The ideology of 'green' could also be a hegemonic intervention in (the discourse of consumption). As mentioned previously, the ideology of 'green' as a political slogan, which was utilized by radical environmentalists and political parties, have transformed it into market and business discourses. Here, the 'green' was in the *field of discursivity* in relation to the discourse of consumption. If there were groups practicing green consumption, they were not noted as green consumers, nor were they



considered to be as significant as the actual green consumers in the discourse, because discourse of consumption was not a response to the 'green' ideology.

These practices could capture the new positional meaning of the social context through *hegemonic intervention* by applying market strategies and media propagation. According to the discourse analysis, the nodal point 'green' explains internal elements as internal moments in the discourse of consumption. This articulation determines meanings for the pre-existing and currently existing elements in market and economic context. The market strategies such as product, price, promotion, and distribution (Encyclopedia of Business, 2011) obtained new meaning by being applied with the *nodal point* 'green'. As the discourse theory argues, the society is never complete and the meaning of institutions, relations and subjects tend to be change. Accordingly, the consumption as the process of the identity formation and subjectivity, the human relation with commodities is restructured based on the new nodal point of that particular moment (Mansvelt and Robbins, 2011). This is can be identified as the partly fixation of meaning.

The green consumption configured as dominant material representation of a linguistic sign (Turner, 2010). Moreover, Turner argues that the term 'life style' for green consumption defines through market and political propagation. The social practices such as buying "green" products and how to be a "Green Shopper" are the new trends of the green discourse (Turner, 2010). The material representation is determined through labeling the products as a green and shops using the color 'green' to identify products and attract 'green' customers. These trends are evident in many of German supermarkets and 'bio-food' is growing in popularity amongst German

consumers which is represented clearly high demand for such products. Organic foods are classified as merit foods, which refers to the quality of production rather than the aggregate demand in market (Mann, 2003). The conceptualization of green-foods in a society, such as Germany is changing the *common sense* about consumption of the society.

The position of the consumer is directly related to green consumption. Lowering consumption, recycling, reusing, and consuming green foods are all examples of this form (Mansvelt and Robbins, 2011), and could divide and label consumers as either an environmentally friendly or not. These divisions could indirectly moderate consumer practices or consumption patterns of people who are not involved in green consumption. In the discourse of consumption, people are acquiring meaning as consumers. Though, these consumers are not homogenous groups, because of cultural practices, historical tradition and social behaviors. However, these different identities are integrated by the weakening of their internal differences, and transform into green consumers. According to the logic equivalence, this process requires hegemonic intervention. As Maarten Hajer (1995) mentions, there would be discourse coalition which consist of '*the story line*' that produces another narration and actors who reveal this to resist the existing hegemonic discourse (Hajer 1995 in Bøgelund, 2007). The mass media, social and market agents which stand for green consumption as the actor of this hegemonic intervention use media propagation and advertisements as the technology to produce the 'story line' and therefore provide the intervention which leads to change.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

According to this discourse analysis, it can be argued that rational individuals cannot be observed in the discourse of

consumption. The consumers' preferences are moderated by the hegemonic discourse. If mainstream economic literatures analyzed the rational choice theory, consumers' transitive preferences and maximization of utility do not exist outside of the discourses. The external truth cannot be existed; all meanings are acquiring meanings within the discourse. However, social agents are not stationary, nor can they be permanently fixed. The meanings of social agents are the origin of discourses. Thus, a green consumer in one discourse can be a harmful practitioner against environment in another. These internal paradoxes can be observed in green consumption through the discourse analysis. Also, voluntary engagements of consumers in consumer practices cannot be occur. In contrast, the consumer's behaviors are controlled by the hegemonic discourse. The tastes, preferences, perceptions are the socially constructed. The consumer culture, consumer ethics, and consumer values within green consumerism is configured by the discourse. In brief, the rational individual consumer, according to mainstream economic studies, does not

exist in the discourse analysis and there is no normative configuration of individual behavior in green consumption.

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