

## Sustainable Innovation 2023

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### The Role of Fictional Characters in Consumer Culture.

**Professor D Baden, University of Southampton, UK**

Governments can regulate and businesses can design greener products, but the over-consumption at the heart of our climate and biodiversity crisis is predominantly a cultural issue. Cultivation Theory proposes that sustained exposure to television can affect our attitudes, aspirations and behaviours (Gerbner, 1969). An associated phenomena is mainstreaming whereby consistent exposure by diverse groups of people to similar content can create a homogenous world view that aligns the views and aspirations of television viewers to those promoted by the television advertisers and sponsors of television (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Our culture is thus highly affected by the behaviours of fictional characters. For example, conspicuous consumption on television has been shown to affect aspirations of viewers towards a high consumption lifestyle (Cha & Kwon, 2018; Eisend & Möller, 2007; Khancheh Sepehr & Naseri, 2010; Kumar & Kumra, 2021; Voorveld, Fakkert, & van Reijmersdal, 2017).

This paper presents the research, implications for writers and initiatives to address this. For example, Albert, an offshoot of BAFTA was set up to encourage sustainability in the film and television industry, not just in terms of production but in terms of content. Their aim is to draw on marketing techniques to product place green behaviours within scripts. Albert developed a planet placement report targeted at writers where they highlight the lack of climate terminology in programmes. Much of the focus is on what *is* said, but they also suggest that *not* mentioning links between behaviours and consequences implicitly suggests there are none. For example, if a plot references a character cheating, viewers expect consequences. However they found that high carbon activities such as eating beef and flying were never associated in the script with their harmful environmental implications. Therefore writers are implicitly 'norming' the idea that these high-carbon activities are unproblematic.

This paper also reports on outcomes from a recent short video competition run by the [Green Stories Project](#) that aimed to highlight the impact of fictional role models in promoting sustainable lifestyles, and problematise writers, producers and characters that implicitly promote excessive consumption as an aspiration. In ten years, when mounting waste and climate change is impossible to ignore, we might squirm at the glorification of excessive consumption in the same way we now squirm at the casual racism and sexism in seventies sitcoms. The video competition aimed to start the conversation now on whether it still okay to write aspirational characters with high consumption lifestyles. Finally the paper will report on responses to a short story that aims to highlight this issue: ['The Award Ceremony'](#). The story is about a fictional screenwriter who is cancelled for writing aspirational characters who promote fast fashion, and who then with minor changes in plot lines promotes sharing economy approaches such as second hand clothes, and fashion swaps rather than the buy-dispose model. This forms part of an [anthology of short stories](#) based on climate solutions which link to an associated [webpage](#) so readers can follow up on any ideas that interest them.